HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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

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§ Members of the Government listed under more than one Department

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

Monday 14 November 2016

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

GCSE Pass Rate (Northamptonshire)

1. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What the GCSE A to C pass rate was in Northamptonshire in (a) 2010 and (b) 2016.

Justine Greening: In 2016, 53% of pupils at the end of key stage 4 in Northamptonshire achieved five or more A* to C grades, including English and maths GCSEs. This is an increase of 1.1 percentage points from 51.9% in 2010.

Mr Hollobone: Although the figures are going in the right direction, educational attainment and performance in Northamptonshire are still below the national average. Through the Secretary of State, I thank the Schools Minister for meeting a delegation of county MPs last month and for agreeing to see us again next April. What are the main things that the Secretary of State thinks local schools need to do to get the figures to much improve over the years ahead?

Justine Greening: As my hon. Friend recognises, as a Department we have worked very hard with his local authority to try steadily to increase and improve results. In addition to the work that is already under way, we want to see stronger school improvement via schools collaborating more effectively and by ensuring that more of the UK or England-wide programmes, such as Mathematics Mastery, are properly rolled out in his local area.

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): One way to improve GCSE attainment in schools in Northamptonshire is through school libraries. Is the Secretary of State as disturbed as I am by the report from the School Library Association about the collapse in the number of librarians and library facilities in our schools, and will she ask Ofsted to make school library provision one of the inspection criteria?

Justine Greening: Of course, this Government have spent much time and resources on improving reading and literacy in our schools. We have protected the core schools budget across the course of this Parliament and it is up to schools where they want to spend that money, but we certainly want to see continued improvement in literacy and reading results across England.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Getting it right early is crucial to securing future success for our young people in Northamptonshire, so will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Woodnewton learning community on winning the Marjorie Boxall quality mark award for its brilliant nurture group and send her best wishes to Ellen Wallace, the headteacher, and her brilliant team?

Justine Greening: Yes, I congratulate Ellen Wallace and the team at the school that my hon. Friend talks about. They have done a fantastic job in achieving that award, showing that strong leadership in a school alongside collaboration between schools is a key way for schools to improve.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): The Secretary of State might have us believe that results in Northamptonshire have improved under this Government, but the fact is that the pass rate peaked immediately after the end of the previous Labour Government and...
has been falling since 2012. Nationally, this year saw the largest fall in GCSE results on record. If the Secretary of State had given us a breakdown of the data, it would have shown that those from disadvantaged backgrounds lost out the most. Last week, the Sutton Trust showed that people from white working class backgrounds face particular barriers at GCSE. Will the Secretary of State tell us which, if any, of the trust’s recommendations she will accept?

**Joseph Johnson:** The hon. Gentleman and I have discussed this issue many times in Bill Committee in recent weeks. I point him to my earlier answer, which is that Scottish institutions continue to see year-on-year growth in the number of overseas applicants, which has increased by 10% since 2010, and we continue to look for opportunities to support them in recruiting genuine students.

**George Kerevan:** The Universities Minister is known for his affinity with India. When the post-study work visas were removed in Scotland, the number of Indian students at Scottish universities fell by two thirds. Would the Minister please consider including a Scottish university in the pilot scheme for the new post-study work visa?

**Joseph Johnson:** Yes, it was a successful visit by the Prime Minister to India last week, during which we were able to reiterate the long-standing Government policy that there is no limit to the number of genuine international students who are welcome to come and study at our world-class universities, and no limit to the number who can switch into work with a graduate job once they have finished their studies.

**Mr Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): The perception is that we are not encouraging students from abroad to come here to study and then to work. I am encouraged by what my hon. Friend has said about switching visas. We do not want to turn our backs on the bright young people from China, India and all over the world who would come to study and then, hopefully, work for a period. Who knows, when my hon. Friend gets to talk to his opposite number in the new Trump Administration, he might talk about encouraging young American students to come here to study and work.

**Joseph Johnson:** We certainly are not turning our back on genuine international students. We welcome them warmly. There are no limits on the number who can come here and no limit on the number who can switch into work after they finish their studies. We want to see more in the years ahead and we look forward to supporting our high quality institutions in recruiting successfully in countries such as the ones my hon. Friend mentioned.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister must know what is going on in the universities. They are in turmoil about the future of demand from foreign students to come here. Has he seen what the vice-chancellor of Sheffield University said about the Prime Minister’s visit to India? Why are students still classed as immigrants when they come here merely to study?

**Joseph Johnson:** I advise hon. Members to send out a positive message about how welcoming we are in this country. When we look at the statistics, we see that international students are still coming here in record numbers. Visa applications from non-EU international students to study at British universities are up by 14% since 2010, so let us not paint a completely misleading picture of what is going on. The hon. Gentleman mentioned Sheffield, which is a Russell Group institution. Numbers are up 39% at Russell Group institutions since 2010.
Carol Monaghan: The Minister is somewhat missing the point, which is that we want these international students to stay afterwards so that they can provide economic levers. We watched with interest when the pilot of the post-study work visa was introduced at four institutions in England. I have written to the Minister about extending that pilot to Scotland, but I have yet to get a response. Perhaps he can tell me now when we can expect to see the pilot of the post-study work visa extended to Scotland.

Joseph Johnson: The Home Office is conducting a successful pilot. It is under way with four institutions—Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial College London and Bath. This is a Home Office responsibility and I encourage the hon. Lady to direct her questions there.

Carol Monaghan: The Home Secretary told the Conservative party conference that a consultation would look “at whether our student immigration rules should be tailored to the quality of the course and the quality of the educational institution”. Edinburgh University is currently ranked 27th in the Times Higher Education world rankings and Glasgow 88th, both significantly higher than Bath, which, although 200 places lower, was included in the pilot. Perhaps the Minister can explain to the Scottish higher education sector why it has been deliberately snubbed.

Joseph Johnson: The Home Secretary has announced that there will be a consultation that will look into non-EU work and study immigration routes. This will include consideration of what more we can do to strengthen the system so that institutions that stick to the rules can do more to attract the best talent.

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to point out that maintained nursery schools provide some good and outstanding care in the vast majority of their settings and in some of the most deprived parts of the country. That is why we have said that we are going to protect their funding for at least the next two years. We will say more about that funding shortly when we respond to the early years national funding formula consultation.

Helen Hayes: Some 99% of maintained nursery schools are rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, and 65% of them are in the 30 most deprived areas of the country, including in my constituency. Yet, across the early years sector, experts are warning that proposed changes to the funding formula will place many of these nurseries at risk of closure after the two years of supplementary funding run out. Will the Minister commit to a sustainable level of funding to enable maintained nurseries to continue their important work of providing the best possible start in life and addressing disadvantage?

Caroline Dinenage: I challenge all the things the hon. Lady said. We are not stripping funding from nursery schools; the supplementary funding of £55 million a year is part of the record investment in childcare of £6 billion a year by 2020. That is more than any Government have ever spent.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): With respect, I think the Minister is missing the point. This is not simply a question of childcare; it is a question of quality early education, and that is about narrowing the gap between the most disadvantaged and the rest. Could she go further and tell the House what maintained nursery schools, which employ teachers and other staff who want to carry on working for them, will do after this two-year period? Is it no good schools knowing that they have security for two years—they need more than that.

Caroline Dinenage: I would say that we have made 6 billion points about how important we regard the sector to be. The hon. Lady is right that it does need to know about its future, but it does not make sense to make decisions about the future funding of maintained nursery schools before we have consulted on what that future should be. We will be consulting on that future, and we will make an announcement shortly.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): Maintained nursery schools are a small but very important part of the childcare market, and they do have costs that other providers do not, which is why we are providing £55 million a year in supplementary funding while we consult on how to ensure their future sustainability. The way in which we fund children’s centres gives local authorities the freedom to decide what services are appropriate to meet local need.

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Nursery Schools

5. Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): What long-term funding plans has her Department for maintained nursery schools.

Chi Onwurah: The British Chambers of Commerce survey concluded that childcare should be considered part of our national infrastructure for keeping people in work. Nursery schools provide that service in some of our most deprived areas, while promoting social mobility, so why on earth are the Government stripping their resources away at this critical time? In two years’ time, we will still face the same challenges in terms of social mobility and education, and we will need nursery schools to be properly funded.

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Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): What long-term funding plans has her Department for maintained nursery schools.

17. Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): What progress her Department has made on its planned consultation on the future of maintained nursery schools after the two-year supplementary funding arrangement.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): With your permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to link Question 5 with Question 15. Maintained nursery schools make a very important contribution to social mobility. We want
them to be sustainable in the long term. We have already committed £55 million a year of supplementary funding for maintained nursery schools for at least the next two years, and we will shortly be consulting them on how to do this further.

Mr Speaker: Forgive me, but I think the grouping is with Question 17 rather than Question 15—not that I wish to be pedantic; I just wish to be precise. [Interruption.] I think I have the advantage of being correct in this case, incredibly though the hon. Lady may judge that to be.

Andrew Stephenson: I met Jan Holmes, the headteacher of Walton Lane Nursery, and many other Pendle nursery headteachers recently. Further to many of the points that have already been made, will my hon. Friend commit to extending the funding for maintained nursery schools beyond the two years indicated in the consultation, as nursery schools really do make a difference to some of the poorest children in my constituency?

Caroline Dinenage: Mr Speaker, I would never, ever accuse you of being wrong about anything. My hon. Friend is right: maintained nursery schools play a vital role in tackling disadvantage. As I said, the £55 million commitment is for at least two years. We will say more about the funding of maintained nursery schools shortly, when we respond to our consultation on the early years national funding formula.

Heidi Allen: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for preserving my Question 17. I am so pleased to hear that the Minister understands the real difference that local authority-funded nursery schools provide, and that a plan to fund them sustainably beyond two years is imminent. May I add my calls on behalf of Homerton Children’s Centre in my constituency? That announcement cannot come too soon. These children are vulnerable and they need a secure future.

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is right to say that maintained nursery schools often offer very high-value education, with 98% of them rated good or outstanding and 80% of them in areas of deprivation. As I have said, we will say more about their funding very shortly when we respond to our consultation on the early years national funding formula.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): The early years funding formula will detrimentally affect maintained nursery schools. There is a fantastic maintained nursery school in my constituency called Balham Nursery School that supports so many vulnerable families, and the thought that it needs to close in two years is absolutely unacceptable. There are three such schools in Wandsworth facing that fate. Will the Secretary of State meet me and these nursery schools to discuss securing their continued existence?

Caroline Dinenage: First, we have consulted on the early years funding formula. We have not yet released the findings of that consultation, but they will be released shortly. In addition, we have said that we will support maintained nursery schools with an additional £55 million for at least the next two years. That is not saying that any maintained nursery schools are going to be shutting. I am more than happy to meet any nursery schools, and I have met a number from up and down the country—

Dr Allin-Khan: Will the Secretary of State meet mine?

Caroline Dinenage: Of course I will meet them. I will reassure them that we value the amazing work that they do. They are very small in number, but they do outstanding work and we want to help them to do so.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I have two maintained nursery schools in my constituency: Ellergreen and East Prescot Road, both of them rated outstanding by Ofsted. May I urge the Minister to listen to Members on both sides of the House today? This uncertainty is very damaging for the nursery school sector, and I urge her to reach a decision for long-term, sustainable funding for nursery schools as quickly as possible.

Caroline Dinenage: As I have already said, I am more than happy to do so, but I want to consult the maintained nursery sector before I do that. There is no point in Government taking a high-handed approach and thinking that they know best. We need to consult the sector and plot the best possible way forward to maintain its outstanding future.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The cuts currently planned by the Government will be crushing in the nursery sector. Does the Minister not realise that the current level of nursery provision will be unsustainable if these cuts are implemented?

Caroline Dinenage: There are no cuts. The cuts are a figment of the hon. Gentleman’s imagination. We are putting an extra £6 billion of funding into this scheme by 2020. It is more than any Government have ever spent on early years childcare.

Social Mobility

6. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve the social mobility of children and young people. [907226]

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): We are driving up social mobility by levelling up opportunity. That is why it is so vital to drive up standards in education, in terms of both academic routes and technical education. Opportunity areas are also in the vanguard of our approach.

Mr Cunningham: I am interested in the Secretary of State’s answer to that question. Further education, which produced lots of apprentices and highly skilled people in industry—particularly in manufacturing—has been cut by 28%. How can the Secretary of State say that she is doing a lot for highly skilled education?

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman will be aware—or perhaps he has missed it—that we are bringing the Technical and Further Education Bill before Parliament on Second Reading later today. It matches the fact that we have aspirations to drive up standards in further education in the same way as we have done in academic education routes.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that lifting the ban on selective schools can create greater opportunity for the least advantaged,
and that doing so would enable more children in Telford to realise their full potential and enter top professions such as medicine and law?

**Justine Greening:** I do, and what we should not do is to allow ideology to get in the way of giving parents greater choice. The reality is that boys on free school meal provision who go to grammars have got three times more chance of getting into Russell Group universities than their other counterparts.

**Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): Nurseries and childcare providers in Wakefield are at breaking point, and over 50 have closed their doors since 2010. Will the Secretary of State set out how she will meet her manifesto commitment to provide 30 hours of free childcare a week for three and four-year-olds, given that the average increase for childcare providers next year will be just 21p an hour?

**Justine Greening:** I am sure that the hon. Lady welcomes the Government’s ambition to double the amount of childcare from 15 to 30 hours during this Parliament, which is why we are putting in more funding. We have consulted on that, and we will respond to the consultation shortly.

**Mrs Flick Drummond** (Portsmouth South) (Con): One of the social mobility issues is about encouraging teachers to get pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to apply to Russell Group universities. What are the Government doing to encourage young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to apply to the top universities?

**Justine Greening:** I met the vice-chancellor of Exeter University only last week to talk about some of the work that he and, indeed, the broader Russell Group are doing. It is important that we push this even more in the future than we have in the past. Alongside the proposals on selective education, some of the work we are doing in specific areas, such as on areas of opportunity, will make a massive difference over time.

**Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): If the Government were serious about improving social mobility, they would have a plan to reduce child poverty. With 3.9 million children living in poverty and the Institute for Fiscal Studies projecting that poverty among children will increase by 50% during this Parliament, what is the Secretary of State doing to reduce the appalling levels of child poverty we are experiencing in our country?

**Justine Greening:** First, we should all recognise that social mobility is a long-standing generational challenge that will not be fixed overnight. It has been present in our country for many decades. In the end, the route out of poverty is to have a strong economy, coupled with strong productivity. That is why the education agenda is not just about allowing people to reach their potential, but about enabling our country and our economy to do the same.

**Charlie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con): Parents in Dover and Deal want the choice of social mobility, with new grammar schools and new faith-based schools. They also want to thank the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills for his dogged support of higher and further education in east Kent.

**Justine Greening:** I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be very pleased to receive that compliment. I know that my hon. Friend has been a strong champion for his local community. Alongside all the other work we are doing, including in introducing the Technical and Further Education Bill later today, 3 million apprenticeships during this Parliament will be a step change in providing opportunities for young people in our country.

**Schools: London**

7. **Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What steps she is taking to improve funding provision for schools in London.

**The Minister for School Standards** (Mr Nick Gibb): We will introduce a national funding formula from April 2018, so that schools in all parts of the country are funded fairly and consistently. This significant reform will mean children with the same needs are funded at the same rate wherever they live. We will put forward our detailed proposals for consultation later this year, and make final decisions in the new year.

**Robert Neill:** Does the Minister accept, in looking at appropriate funding, that there is a great deal of complexity within London, that needs and demands vary within the capital and that, for funding, we currently deal with an artificial distinction between inner and outer London boroughs? That distinction goes back to the disappearance of the London County Council in 1966, and it is no longer relevant to the modern demographic and social pressures that our schools face.

**Mr Gibb:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, which I will take as a response to our consultation document. The proposals in the document for an area cost adjustment are about using either a general labour market methodology or a hybrid methodology with two elements: the four regional pay bands and a general labour market methodology for non-teaching staff costs. We will respond to the consultation shortly.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): I was not around in 1966, when that decision was taken. The reality of the Government’s policies in London is that schools are having to rationalise the range of choice in modern languages and are cutting back on subjects such as drama and music. The funding settlement for London does not currently meet the real needs of pupils in London today. Instead of mucking about with ideologically driven projects like grammar school expansion—there is no evidence that that will improve social mobility—why are Ministers not focusing on the bread and butter issues of the right funding, the right teaching and proper opportunities for all pupils across all parts of London?

**Mr Gibb:** We are protecting core school funding in real terms. We can do that because we have a strong economy. The hon. Gentleman may not have been here when the last Labour Government were in power, but he should be aware that the number of students taking modern foreign languages plummeted as a direct consequence of a decision taken by Labour in 2004 to stop languages being compulsory up to GCSE.
William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Notwithstanding the generally higher funding for London schools, will my hon. Friend update the House on the progress towards a fairer funding formula for the rest of the country?

Mr Gibb: Yes. We are considering the consultation document we published in March. The consultation finished in April, and we are looking at the responses. We will respond to the consultation shortly.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Far from core school funding being protected, as the Secretary of State said a few minutes ago, we know that schools are set to lose £2.5 billion by 2020. Headteachers in the Minister’s county are threatening a four-day week because of the funding formula. In that context, how will he secure fairer funding for schools, especially in London, which has had the additional benefit of the London challenge formula?

Mr Gibb: The Secretary of State was right: we are protecting core schools funding in real terms. We are consulting on a range of factors such as deprivation, English as an additional language and sparsity, for which there is a flat figure per school. All those factors are part of the consultation document because we are addressing an historic unfairness in the funding system that Labour presided over for 13 years. This Government are taking action to address that. I would have hoped that the hon. Gentleman supported the consultation, rather than criticise it.

Higher Education

8. Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): What priorities her Department has identified for higher education in the negotiations on the UK’s withdrawal from the EU.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): The Government are fully committed to ensuring that our universities get the best possible deal from the negotiations with the EU. We recognise the key issues for the sector as being the ability to recruit EU students, the student financial support to which they have access, EU programmes and funding streams and the status of UK students studying abroad. The future arrangements on all those issues will have to be considered as part of the wider discussions about our future relationship with the EU.

Dr Blackman-Woods: As the Minister knows, the higher education sector contributes a massive £73 billion to the UK economy, including £11 billion of export earnings, yet the Department for Education has no representation on the EU Exit and Trade Committee or Sub-Committee. What reassurances can he give the House that the priorities for the sector, such as growing the number of students and sustaining research funding, are being identified and protected in the Brexit negotiations?

Joseph Johnson: The Department has moved rapidly to provide significant reassurances to the sector in a number of respects, particularly on the continuity of the funding arrangements for Horizon 2020 resources. The Treasury will make up the continuing obligations on payments that fall due after we have left the EU. We have made it clear that EU students will be able to access our loan book and home fee status for the duration of their course of study if they start in the 2016-17 or 2017-18 academic year.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Some 15% of Scottish academics in higher education institutions are EU nationals. That rises to 25% in institutions such as Edinburgh University. Some universities already report having lost advance staff who were due to come from Europe. Will the Minister speak to the Home Secretary and try to get a guarantee of rights for EU staff before we lose any more talent?

Joseph Johnson: We fully value the contribution that EU staff make to the success of UK institutions. The higher education sector has a long-established tradition of attracting brilliant academics and students at all stages of their careers, and we are working hard to ensure that that continues. The Prime Minister has given assurances that she has every expectation of being able to guarantee the status of such academics, provided that other countries reciprocate for British nationals in their countries.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): The only way we will bring new jobs and industries to areas like the black country that have lost their traditional industries is if we have the skills that new modern and high-tech industries need. Will the Minister guarantee that the £50 million from the EU that is currently spent on skills in institutions such as Wolverhampton University and other organisations in the black country will be maintained after we leave? Will he use the rest of the money that we currently contribute to the EU to get behind brilliant institutions such as Dudley’s new institute of technology and to ensure that we have university campuses in areas like Dudley that do not have them at the moment?

Joseph Johnson: As I said in my earlier answer, the relationship we have with the EU will be the subject of a broad discussion, and among the important issues at stake in that will be the future of our access to funding streams that have been of value to institutions such as those the hon. Gentleman mentions.

Apprenticeships

9. Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): What steps the Government are taking in schools to promote apprenticeships.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): May I begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), and wishing him a speedy recovery?

We are transforming Britain into an apprenticeship and skills nation. We have ensured that schools provide high-quality careers guidance to pupils on their different options, and there is a legal requirement for schools to inform pupils about apprenticeships and other vocational options. We have also established the Careers & Enterprise Company to transform careers provision for young people, to inspire them and prepare them for the world of work.
Jake Berry: Sian Nixon, the modern languages teacher, is one of the many inspirational teachers at Haslingden High School. She has invited me and a local manufacturer to go into the school and talk about the value of modern languages before pupils make their GCSE choices. Will the Government say what can be done to encourage more businesses to enter schools, in particular to promote apprenticeships in areas of high manufacturing worth such as Rossendale and Darwen?

Robert Halfon: I know that my hon. Friend is an incredible constituency champion on skills and careers. I hope that when he goes into that school he will talk about apprenticeships as well as modern languages. We have created the Careers & Enterprise Company, with £90 million of investment. It has 1,200 enterprise advisers to help more than 900 schools interact with businesses and have work experience and other career options.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): At present, only 8% of young people finish apprenticeships with a higher level of qualification than they started with. Will the Minister set a target for young people starting higher level qualifications rather than just the target of 3 million starts that he has at present?

Robert Halfon: I have very good news for the hon. Gentleman. The number of apprentices doing higher apprenticeships has gone up by 500%. If we include degree apprenticeships, in which we are investing millions of pounds, more than 28,000 people are doing higher apprenticeships or degree apprenticeships.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I am delighted to hear the Minister speak so warmly of the Careers & Enterprise Company, and I know he will do a terrific job in his post. For schools to promote apprenticeships successfully the apprenticeship positions must be there for students to move into. He will have had a letter from IMPACT Apprenticeships and Loughborough College in my constituency about the latest announcements regarding apprenticeship training agencies and levy paying companies’ not being able to transfer funds to the agencies, as that will be delayed until May 2018. Will he meet me to discuss that further?

Robert Halfon: I am very happy to meet my right hon. Friend and the apprenticeship training agency she mentioned. As she has said, from 2018 it will be possible for employers paying the levy to transfer up to 10% of the levy funds to indirect employers.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): A few months ago, the Secretary of State prayed in aid the Technical and Further Education Bill, which we will debate today, as a measure to help apprentices. That Bill changes the name of the Institute for Apprenticeships and includes vast numbers of provisions to deal with further education colleges and sixth-form colleges going bust. Will the Minister tell me exactly which part of the Bill does anything to promote apprenticeships, in schools or elsewhere?

Robert Halfon: As I said, we are transforming our country into a country of apprenticeships and skills nation. The whole point of the Bill is to drive up standards to help improve our technical education offering. We already have an Institute for Apprenticeships, which will be up and running by April 2017.


Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): As the Minister is aware, developing skills through apprenticeships is key for today and for the future, and across my constituency businesses such as JC Payne are playing their part in creating apprenticeships. Will he reassure me, though, that, as we move forward and develop more apprenticeships, this will not just be about quantity but about quality?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: this is about quantity as well as quality. We made it a requirement that all apprentices have to be employed and have to do a certain amount of training. We tightened the definition of apprenticeships in law to ensure they are real apprenticeships. We are creating the new Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, and we are moving from frameworks to standards to improve apprentices’ qualifications. Everything we do—in addition to the 3 million apprentices and the 619,000 apprentice starts since May—aims to drive up quality as well as quantity.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): To promote apprenticeships in schools, strong careers guidance is critical. However, this month’s cross-party verdict from the two Select Committee Chairs who have looked at this, the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), is that “Ministers appear to be burying their heads in the sand while careers guidance fails young people”.

Will this Minister—the third Minister to whom I have put this question—back the Select Committee’s recommendation to restore proper work experience in schools at key stage 4? Will he lift his head out of the sand?

Robert Halfon: I suggest the hon. Gentleman stops being a doom-monger and becomes an apprentice-monger. We are providing the Careers & Enterprise Company with £90 million to boost career provision in schools, with £20 million for investment. The National Careers Service is getting £77 million to help people with careers. We have thousands of enterprise advisers in schools all over the country. This is what the Careers & Enterprise Company is all about. The Government are investing in careers, investing in skills and investing in apprenticeships.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Following the disability apprenticeship report by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), Scope and Mencap, which I set up with my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), will the Minister confirm that it is a priority to open up apprenticeships to those with learning disabilities?

Robert Halfon: I thank my hon. Friend for his work as Disabilities Minister. That is exactly the case. We are ensuring significant financial support to encourage investors and providers to provide apprenticeships to those with disabilities and special needs. We are investing in a special £2 million fund to help to provide apprenticeships for those with mental health difficulties, and we have agreed to adopt the reforms suggested by the Maynard review in full.

Bullying

10. Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle bullying in schools.

Edward Timpson: As I said, I think we all condemn all forms of bullying, from wherever it comes and for whatever its purported reasons, but we also need to make sure that we educate our children to understand the effects that bullying has on others, so that, as they grow older, they do not repeat the mistakes of those who have gone before them.

Education Provision: 16 to 19-Year-Olds

12. Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect of recent changes in the level of (a) funding and (b) costs on the provision of education to 16 to 19-year-olds in England.

16. Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect of recent changes in the level of (a) funding and (b) costs on the provision of education to 16 to 19-year-olds in England.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): We are committed to protecting the base funding rate of £4,000 per student for the rest of this Parliament. Moreover, the proportion of young people participating in education or training is now 81.6%, which is higher than ever before. Following reforms to qualifications, the system is delivering better quality provision to prepare young people for jobs and further study.

Nic Dakin: Sixth-form colleges have suffered a 17% cut in their funding since 2011, which has had a real impact on the quality and breadth of curriculum they can offer. Will the Minister, with the Secretary of State, commit to evaluating how much funding is necessary for 16-to-19 education so that it is of the global quality we deserve?

Robert Halfon: The important thing is that we have equalised the funding and that the money now follows the student, not the qualification, to ensure a fair balance between sixth-form colleges and further education.

Yvonne Fovargue: Winstanley College is one of the highest-performing sixth-form colleges in the country and won The Daily Telegraph’s Educate North college of the year award, but it estimates that by 2019 it will have seen a real-terms cut of 20% to its funding, which will fall to a level last seen in 2004. What measures is the Minister taking to ensure fair and equal funding for sixth-formers in England?

Robert Halfon: It is good news about the performance of the hon. Lady’s college—I thank her for expressing it—but it is worth mentioning that we are investing £7 billion in 2016-17 to ensure that every 16 to 19-year-old has a place in education or training and that we have protected the funding base rate of £4,000 per student. It is also worth remembering that we have the lowest level of youth unemployment on record and the lowest number of those not in education, employment or training. This shows that our investment in further education is working.¹

Huw Merriman: As I said, I think we all condemn all forms of bullying, from wherever it comes and for whatever its purported reasons, but we also need to make sure that we educate our children to understand the effects that bullying has on others, so that, as they grow older, they do not repeat the mistakes of those who have gone before them.

Robert Halfon: Either I or the Minister for School Standards would be pleased to meet my hon. Friend.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Over the next four years, funding for education is due to fall by 8% per head, although I note that Ministers have been describing this as “protecting” core funding, which is a funny use of language. So low is funding for sixth forms that schools that have formed academies are increasingly getting rid of their sixth forms because they are not profitable, thereby cutting off large numbers of opportunities for people, often in poorer areas.

Robert Halfon: As I said, by 2020 we will be giving more funding to further education than at any time in our island’s history. It will have increased by 40%, which we should be proud of. Our investment is working. As I said, we have the lowest youth unemployment and the lowest number of NEETs on record. The hon. Lady should be celebrating that.¹

Childcare

13. James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): What progress her Department is making on the provision of 30 hours of childcare to working parents. [907233]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): We are committed to ensuring that we have the high-quality affordable childcare that families need, and we are on track to deliver 30 hours of childcare to working parents. We announced a record funding of £1 billion extra per year by 2020; we have consulted on a fairer and more transparent funding system; and eight early implementer areas are already providing more than 3,500 places—one year early.

James Cartlidge: Does my hon. Friend agree that the greatest potential impact of extending support for childcare is helping families to make the transition from being on benefits and into sustainable employment?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We must tackle the causes of poverty, and the Government have set out stretching ambitions to remove the lowest number of NEETs on record. The hon. Lady should be celebrating that.

Caroline Dinenage: As I have pointed out on numerous occasions today, we are investing an extra £6 billion in this, and the sector has already demonstrated its ability to meet growing demand in the near universal take-up of our current childcare offer. We are now backing this with record investment.

Topical Questions

T1. [907246] Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): This Government want to ensure that all children and young people in our country, whatever their background, can go as far as their talents will take them. We set out plans to deliver more good school places in more parts of the country, and I am pleased to say that work on the first opportunity areas is under way. We are already legislating to strengthen our world-leading university sector even further, and now we have introduced a Bill to help deliver consistently high-quality technical and further education. Together with the Government’s commitment to create 3 million apprenticeships starts by 2020, these are part of our drive to improve dramatically the skills base in our country, and make it work for everyone—not just the privileged few.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the Secretary of State for her response. The Government’s proposed apprenticeship funding changes for young people in deprived areas is of great concern across the House. Given that some 625,000 young people between 16 and 24 remain unemployed, can the Secretary of State explain what is going to happen to the disadvantaged uplift after one year, and provide an assurance that it will be maintained in the long term?

Justine Greening: As the hon. Lady has pointed out, we are making sure that the funding is there to maintain the investment that is going into 16-to-18 apprenticeships, particularly in disadvantaged areas. I simply say to her that this is the first time our country has had a broad-based strategy on apprenticeships that is about not just Government investment, but employers investing too. I think the whole House should welcome that.

T6. [907251] Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): East Cambridgeshire ranks as the 14th worst area in the country for social mobility. Given its location so close to Cambridgeshire businesses that can help to improve aspiration and standards, does the Secretary of State agree that the area would benefit hugely from the opportunity fund so rightly being promoted by her Department?

Justine Greening: As my hon. and learned Friend points out, one of the underlying principles behind opportunity areas is getting businesses to work with schools and provide opportunities that are good not only for developing the life skills of young people but for setting higher aspirations. I have no doubt that it could work most effectively in East Cambridgeshire, which, as she set out, was recently ranked very low on the Social Mobility Commission index.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Despite investment, the National Audit Office has judged child protection services to be “unsatisfactory and inconsistent”, which suggests systemic rather than local failure. Six years of Tory tinkering, rebranding and outsourcing has resulted in too many children’s services being deemed simply not good enough. Can the Minister tell us how much longer children will have to suffer because of his Department’s failures?

The Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families (Edward Timpson): I realise that the hon. Lady wants to press the Government to do right by vulnerable children, but I am sorry that she has tried to create a division on something about which we agree. In fact, over the past six years the Government have intervened in 60 failing local authorities, 34 of which we have turned around, and we are now investing more than £300 million in an innovation programme to ensure that we can do right by children in our care and provide them with the best possible outcomes. I hope the hon. Lady will agree that we should never, ever settle for second best for children who are vulnerable. The work that we are doing is intended to ensure that we give them everything they deserve.

T7. [907252] Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): During my visit to The Morley Academy, Michael Cornfoot, the senior assistant principal, inquired about the new nine-to-one grading system for GCSEs. He would like more clarity on how to assess performance against a grade. What work are my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and her Department doing to clarify the system and to ensure that students are assessed accurately?

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): The purpose of the grade descriptors is to give an idea of average performance at the midpoints of grades 2, 5 and 8. The descriptors are not designed to be used for awarding purposes, unlike the descriptions that apply to current GCSE grades A* to G. The descriptors were, of course, developed with the input of subject experts.

T2. [907247] Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Last week I visited Tech for Life in Newcastle. It provides science, coding and electronics sessions for teachers, but schools say that they do not have the money or the time to take up those opportunities. We currently have a huge, devastating digital skills gap. What are the Government doing to provide, incrementally, additional funding and time so that teachers can become digital champions?

Mr Gibb: It was, of course, this Government who transformed the computing curriculum in our schools. We removed the ICT curriculum, which had become outdated and dull, and replaced it with a computing curriculum. We have also provided funds for the training of a whole cadre of teachers who will be able to teach that very difficult subject.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): What steps is the Secretary of State taking to improve financial management and accountability in multi-academy trusts and academies, especially academies that were established in some haste before 2010?

Justine Greening: We are bringing more transparency to academies’ financing. As my hon. Friend will know from a recent Education Committee session, we are also improving our annual accounts to increase transparency. They will appear alongside the “Academic annual report” that we published previously.

T3. [907248] Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): None of the amendments to the Higher Education and Research Bill that were tabled by my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) were accepted by the Government in Committee. What guarantees can the Minister give members of the Scottish research community that they will be fully represented in UK Research and Innovation?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): The Higher Education and Research Bill will provide mechanisms, through UK Research and Innovation, to ensure that our science and innovation system stays at the cutting edge for decades to come. It will, of course, also ensure that the excellence and expertise that exist in all parts of the United Kingdom are fully reflected in decision-making structures.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Some parents and teachers in my constituency find it frustrating that if Cheltenham’s schools simply received average funding per head, funding pressure could be dramatically alleviated. Can the Secretary of State assure me that fair funding is on the way?

Justine Greening: Yes, I can. As my hon. Friend knows, we are going to launch the second stage of our consultation. Ensuring that we have a fair formula which makes our funding follow need involves an incredibly complex calculation, but that is what we are doing. I know that he will look forward to and, no doubt, respond to that second stage of consultation.

T4. [907249] Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): When it comes to school improvements, Ministers talk least about what works best, which is getting the best teachers into the schools that need them the most. When will schools in coastal towns be able to count on having the same proportion of outstanding teachers as those in London?

Mr Gibb: We have a record number of teachers in our school system—15,000 more today than in 2020—and UCAS’s figures for the 2016-17 intake show that 27,000 graduates are coming into teacher training. We have very generous bursaries—£1.3 billion-worth—to attract the best graduates into teaching.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Last week I visited the excellent Eastleigh College, which is delivering 5,000 apprenticeships and would love the new Minister to come to Eastleigh. It was noted that apprentices gained the maths qualification but were struggling to get through the English qualification. Will the apprenticeships Minister help in this area?

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work she does. I will be very pleased to meet her to discuss these matters and to come to see her college.
T5. [907250] Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): In 2014-15 the EU-funded Erasmus scheme meant that 1,600 students from Scottish higher education institutions were able to enrich their learning and gain greater understanding of different European people and cultures by studying abroad. What assurance can the Minister give to young people across Scotland that they will be able to continue to benefit from the Erasmus scheme following the UK leaving the EU?

Joseph Johnson: We welcome student mobility schemes in both directions: the ability of international students and EU students to come to this country and the ability of our students to go and experience the higher education systems of other countries. Clearly, our membership of Erasmus will be part of the broader discussions on our future relationship with the EU.

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): On Friday I met Futureworks Yorkshire, which has been successful in supporting apprentices through shared apprenticeships, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises in the construction industry. It seeks assurances about what provision has been made for that in the levy. Will my right hon. Friend meet me and Futureworks to make sure that this successful scheme continues?

Robert Halfon: Of course I will be pleased to meet my hon. Friend and the organisation he mentions. We are investing heavily in skills and construction and doing everything we can to improve the quality and quantity of apprenticeships.

T8. [907253] Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Nursery providers have been contacting me because they are very anxious about the changes that are likely to result in reduced funding per child. The Minister has been very clear today that that will not happen. Will she meet my local providers so that we can have an exchange of information?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Caroline Dinenage): I will be more than happy to.

Mr Speaker: Splendidly succinct.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Ministers may have noted that earlier this month I introduced my ten-minute rule Bill highlighting the issue of school admissions for children suffering from autism. Will the Minister confirm that he will work with me to deal with effectively.

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): As I have said, we have protected the core schools budget and, in addition, we are bringing forward a new national funding formula that will ensure that the funding is spread fairly across schools in England.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Parents and children at the Minerva free school in Westminster were horrified to discover that the temporary lease on their building will expire at Easter next year, and that their new building will not be ready until the autumn of 2018. That means that the children will have to be educated in three separate school buildings over the course of 15 months. Is that acceptable?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady has set out those challenges and I would be very happy to meet her directly to see what we can do to ensure that they will be dealt with effectively.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Encouraging children to take an interest in current affairs can also boost literacy. Will the right hon. Lady welcome the Let’s Read: Leeds initiative organised by the News Foundation and supported by the Yorkshire Evening Post?

Justine Greening: Yes, I do welcome that initiative. Whatever works to get children into reading should be encouraged. For some, it will be fantastic novels and books; for others, it will be an interest in what is happening around the world.
Under-occupancy Charge

3.36 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to make a statement on the Supreme Court’s ruling of 9 November on the under-occupancy charge.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): The removal of the spare room subsidy was introduced in April 2013 to all working-age claimants in the social rented sector as part of this Government’s plan to create a welfare system that is fair for those who use it and those who pay for it. Under the previous system, the taxpayer had to subsidise benefit claimants to live in houses that were larger than they needed, despite the fact that people renting in the private sector were receiving housing benefit on the basis of the number of people in their household rather than the number of bedrooms that they had, which has been the case since 1996. Since we introduced the policy, it has saved over £1.5 billion, and the number of households affected by it is going down.

We, of course, operate a number of exemptions to the policy, and they include: all pensioners; households with a dependent child receiving the middle or higher rate care component of disability living allowance; households in which an overnight carer is allowed for the claimant or partner; households in which the claimant or partner is a foster carer; and households with an adult child who is in the armed forces and deployed on operations. In addition, we provide local authorities with funding to provide discretionary housing payments to claimants whom they evaluate as needing additional support with housing costs.

Turning to last week’s Supreme Court judgment, it was welcome that the Court found in our favour in five of the seven cases. These cases related to a panic room, a claimant with mental health issues and those requiring an extra room to house medical equipment, as well as cases involving shared care and adapted properties. The Court also agreed with our view that discretionary housing payments are generally an appropriate and lawful way to provide assistance to those who need extra help. In the two cases in which the Court did not find in our favour, we will take steps to ensure that we comply with the judgment. In most cases, local authorities are best placed to understand the needs of their residents, which is why we will have provided them with more than £1 billion to offer that support by the end of this Parliament. This ensures that people in difficult situations and those who are vulnerable do not lose out.

Debbie Abrahams: The Supreme Court’s judgment on Wednesday clearly stated that the bedroom tax is discriminatory, as Labour Members have repeatedly highlighted. The Court upheld the claim of Jacqueline Carmichael, who is disabled and cannot share a room with her husband, Jayson; as well as that of Paul and Susan Rutherford, who care for their severely disabled grandson, Warren. I pay tribute to them, as well as to the other families, for their courage, tenacity and determination in pursuing these cases.

The ruling states that housing benefit regulations allowing claimants to have an additional bedroom when children cannot share a bedroom because of a disability should be extended to adults. Likewise, adults who need an extra room for an overnight carer have been exempt from the bedroom tax, but children such as Warren have not. Those anomalies, the judges ruled, were “manifestly without reason”.

The Department’s spokesperson indicated that the Government accept the Supreme Court’s ruling. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether his Department also unequivocally does so? Will he tell the House how much taxpayers’ money has been spent on legal fees in the attempt to defend the Government’s bedroom tax policy? How many families does the Department calculate have been affected by the Government’s unlawful imposition of the bedroom tax on disabled people and their carers? When and how will the Government inform the families affected by the judgment? How quickly will the Government comply with the Supreme Court’s judgment and revoke the bedroom tax for those families? Will such a revocation be backdated and, if so, to when? Will the Government now formally apologise for the pain and suffering inflicted on disabled people and families caring for a disabled child? Finally, will the Government undertake to look again at their policy on safe rooms for victims of domestic violence, which affects a relatively small number of incredibly vulnerable women who live their lives in fear and are being punished by the Government for heeding security advice and being safe in their homes?

Damian Green: I am happy to repeat what I said in my statement. We of course accept the Court’s view and, to answer some of the hon. Lady’s subsequent questions, we will take the appropriate action as soon as we practicably can. She said that the removal of the spare room subsidy was unlawful, but it patently is not, because the Supreme Court found in the Government’s favour in five of the seven cases before it. It is interesting that those involved in every one of those cases—all seven—were receiving discretionary housing payments, which are the best way to ensure that those who are affected can be helped if they need it.

Discretionary housing payments are up fivefold since 2011-12 and the Government are committed to a further £870 million over the next five years—[Interruption.] I am surprised that the hon. Lady complains about the payments, because her local authority received the best part of half a million pounds for discretionary housing payments this year, which makes it clear that people in her area find them useful. She might also be interested to know that 63% of those who are affected and unemployed have decided to look for work, which shows one of the policy’s effects.

I hope that the hon. Lady will address the basic issue of fairness. Without these measures, neighbouring households could be treated differently, which many people would regard as unfair.

On the hon. Lady’s point about those receiving disability benefits, all seven cases involved people receiving discretionary housing payments. Four of the five people involved in the cases won by the Government have a disability, so the policy is clearly not unlawful. Her basic analysis is wrong. The Government are spending £50 billion a year on disability benefit, which shows that we want a practical system that cares for people with a disability. This court case does not alter that at all.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): I remind the Secretary of State that the real anger is not from Opposition Members, but from the 241,000 families in
overcrowded accommodation who are desperate to access family homes. It is those families, not Opposition Members, to whom the Secretary of State should be listening.

Damian Green: My hon. Friend, who knows a huge amount about this subject, is absolutely right. The Government are indeed taking steps to try to alleviate housing problems, but he is quite right about the indignation among Opposition Members.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Last week’s Supreme Court ruling is a damning indictment of the Government’s willingness to make disabled people and their families bear the brunt of austerity cuts. The ruling follows hard on the heels of a report by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was also published in recent days. Among other conclusions, the report notes that the Government’s measures “have caused financial hardship to persons with disabilities resulting in...arrears, debts, evictions and cuts to essentials”.

I am sorry that it is necessary to remind the Secretary of State today that, according to the Government’s own impact assessment, around two thirds of the households affected by the bedroom tax include a disabled adult. In Scotland, the proportion is a massive 80%, and I am proud that the Scottish Government have taken action to protect all affected families. Will the Government recognise that the bedroom tax has failed in its objectives and continues to harm disabled people? Will they finally call time on this destructive, discriminatory experiment?

Damian Green: I do not agree with the hon. Lady about that, and nor does the Supreme Court. As I said, it had seven cases before it, and five of them were found in favour of the Government, so she is wrong to say that the policy has been in any way found unlawful. She will have seen my response to the UN report, which I thought was out of date. It took completely the wrong approach by measuring the effectiveness of a policy towards disabled people purely according to the amount of benefit spend, because this is about the amount of practical help that people can get. The fact that 300,000 more disabled people have gone into work in recent years shows the success of the Government’s policies in helping disabled people. I hope that Opposition Members will also welcome the recent Green Paper, which will provide more practical help for disabled people.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will there be any retreat from a fairer and rational allocation of housing?

Damian Green: No, there will not. I am happy to reassure my right hon. Friend that the fair and rational allocation of housing is not only sensible but fair housing policy because, as I have said, it is clearly sensible that people in the social rented sector and those in the private sector should be treated as equally as possible in terms of benefits.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): In 2014, I had the privilege of meeting Paul and Sue Rutherford and their grandson, Warren. That meeting left a profound impact on me. They are heroes in our community, and they should be treated as such by the Government, rather than being penalised with policies such as the bedroom tax. When they were first charged the bedroom tax, they applied for a discretionary housing payment but were not granted it—they got it only on appeal—so the idea that discretionary housing payments are helping all the families is just wrong. After the Court verdict, Paul Rutherford said that he was happy but “exhausted”. He should never have had to go through what he went through. May I ask the Minister how many more families have been illegally charged the bedroom tax, and when will they stop being charged it?

Damian Green: I appreciate that the hon. Lady has campaigned very effectively with the Rutherford family for a long time. As she said, they received discretionary housing payments, and such payments are the main tool that we are using to make sure that people are given appropriate help. Obviously we are still looking at the number of people who may be affected as a result of this case, but I can only repeat that we will take steps to make sure that we comply with the Court judgment.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Does the Secretary of State find it strange, as I do, that Labour Members are protesting, given that in 2008 they introduced exactly the same changes in the private rented sector? [Interruption.] Does he agree that there should be equality for tenants receiving housing benefit, be they in social housing or the private rented sector?

Damian Green: I do agree with my hon. Friend about that. The fact that Opposition Members tried to shout her down rather than listening to her question suggests that she has hit the mark.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): This Secretary of State is no improvement on his predecessor. Is he aware that there is one advantage of the bedroom tax: it is a constant reminder of a Tory vendetta against social tenants, particularly those on low incomes? He should be thoroughly ashamed of himself for coming out with the same Tory line as his predecessor. This illustrates that the Tory Government have not changed at all as a result of a new Prime Minister.

Damian Green: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman asked a question, but his idea of a vendetta against tenants in social housing is completely bizarre, given that under the previous Labour Government, whom he supported, the number of social rented homes fell by 420,000 while waiting lists increased. In addition, more than twice as much council housing has been built since 2010 than was built in the previous 13 years, so this Government and the predecessor coalition are proving a much better friend of those tenants than the previous Labour Government—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Opperman, you are a cerebral figure in the House. You now occupy high office as a Government Whip. Chuntering from a sedentary position and gesticulating—even under provoke—is not quite the statesmanlike posture that we have come to expect from a man of your exalted status. I call Mr James Cartledge.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): I am reassured to hear my right hon. Friend say that the number of claimants for this subsidy is actually falling and that
part of that is due to the fact that people are moving into work from benefits. There are always difficult cases in the welfare system—cases that fall outside the normal rules—but the big picture is that worklessness, which is the biggest cause of poverty, is at an all-time low, and that the spare room subsidy has played a part in delivering that.

Damian Green: I agree that the subsidy has played a small role. It is also consistent with the rest of our welfare policy, which is about making sure that, as work is the best route out of poverty, as few people as possible face worklessness and that they are helped better than ever before. We have helped more people to get into work and progress in work. [Interruption.] I am afraid that the Opposition do not understand any of that.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) is also a proud product of the University of Buckingham in my own constituency, which is another consideration to boot.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The bedroom tax has always hit disabled people especially hard. More than any other single measure, it has driven the increase in food bank use and in penury that we are seeing in communities up and down the country. Surely it is now time, finally, to abandon this hated measure.

Damian Green: I just do not agree with the underlying analysis of the right hon. Gentleman. I know that he has considerable expertise in this area, but the fact is that, across the social rented sector as a whole, approximately two thirds of claimants are disabled. It was initially estimated that under two thirds of those potentially affected by this measure could be considered disabled. That fact shows that there is no disproportionate impact of the type he claimed.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend make sure that local authorities are clearly marking and marketing discretionary housing payments to constituents, particularly disabled constituents? In my surgeries, I have had to explain this process to people who are worried about this matter. Local councils can do better.

Damian Green: My hon. Friend is right that some local authorities are not taking up their full allocation of central Government funding for discretionary housing payments. On top of that, they are allowed, if necessary, to increase by two and a half times the amount given by central Government. Considerable sums are available under discretionary housing payments, and I join her in urging local authorities to use them.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has just talked about getting people back into work. The pay-to-stay scheme will probably mean a hike in rent for tenants of £87 a month. Is it really fair for the Government to be talking about making work pay when they are attacking people who are striving to get back into work through schemes such as pay to stay?

Damian Green: I do not think that the scheme has the effect that the hon. Lady fears. I can stand here and recite figures to her if she likes, but it is patently the case that more people are in work than before. We have more women in work than ever before in our history and unemployment is at its lowest level for more than 10 years. Our welfare policy has had a huge success in getting people into work. If we accept that work is the best route out of poverty, then that is the best measure that any Government can take to alleviate poverty in the long term.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I declare my interest as a member of Kettering borough Council. Can my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State confirm to the House that disability spending will be higher in each year of this Parliament than was the case in 2010?

Damian Green: I can, and my hon. Friend makes his point using his particular expertise in dealing with these cases not just as a Member of this House, but as a local councillor as well. I mentioned the figure for disability spending earlier, and it is indeed rising.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): It is not only councils, housing organisations and charities that have made it clear that the people who are now exempted through the court case should have been exempted all along: the Secretary of State also realises that he failed to listen to the will of this House when it passed the Affordable Homes Bill. Will he now listen and ensure that when people cannot find homes because there are no suitable homes to move to they are also not penalised?

Damian Green: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman and I think that this Government have a good record on affordable housing—we certainly have a considerably better record than the previous Labour Government. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has announced more money that will be used in part for affordable housing to ensure that we deal with what is absolutely a genuine issue.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): May I invite the Secretary of State to come to Liverpool and see the impact that the bedroom tax has had, particularly on some of the poorest communities, including those in my constituency? His remarks today will ring hollow to some of the poorest families in my constituency. May I urge him to think about the role of local government and suggest that the best way to implement the Court rules is to repeal the bedroom tax?

Damian Green: I am always delighted to visit Liverpool, but I can only repeat that the Court ruling in five of the seven cases was in favour of the Government. I cannot sensibly draw the conclusions that the hon. Gentleman draws from the judgments.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): My local authority, Cyngor Gwynedd, has used discretionary housing payments year on year, helping about 1,000 of the 1,400 people affected by this charge, many of them disabled, and effectively protecting this Government from the consequences of their own folly. Will the Minister accept that these wasteful churning bail-outs cannot continue indefinitely?

Damian Green: As I have said, the use of discretionary housing payments by local authorities is proving successful. Inevitably, some local authorities are using them differently.
from others but, as the Court confirmed, they are a sensible and practical way to proceed to ensure that those who need help will get it.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State confirm how much it would cost to exempt victims of domestic abuse from the bedroom tax, and how does that compare to how much money the Government have spent defending the bedroom tax in court?

Damian Green: I do not think that that first figure is available. If it is, I will certainly write to the hon. Lady with it. She will be aware that one of the seven cases specifically related to that issue and the Court found in favour of the Government. Obviously, the Government are very proud of our record on domestic violence and domestic abuse, and there have been many initiatives taken. It is certainly an area that I keep under constant review.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): When the Prime Minister said on the steps of Downing Street: “I know you’re working around the clock, I know you’re doing your best, and I know that sometimes life can be a struggle. The Prime Minister said on the steps of Downing Street, which were indeed memorable and correct. All Government policies are related to achieving what she set out to achieve.

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): I cannot stress too highly the pain that has been caused to families in my constituency living with a family member who is disabled. Many of them have got into debt to pay the bedroom tax. When can those families expect to get back the money that the Government have taken from them illegally?

Damian Green: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady heard me when I said that all the cases—those that the Government won and those that they lost at the Court last week—were in receipt of discretionary housing payments. It is not a question of the money—they were getting money—but of the structure of the policy, which is what the Court has challenged. The discretionary housing payments have been paid to those people.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): In trying to present the Supreme Court judgment as a 5-2 result, could the Secretary of State take more care not to imply that the Court found that discretionary housing payments were necessarily the best or only way of helping those in extra need? In taking steps to comply with the two judgments, will not the Secretary of State take the opportunity to have a wider and more fundamental recast of this controversial policy?

Damian Green: I can only present the facts, which are that there were seven cases, five of which were won by the Government and two by other people, but I take the hon. Gentleman’s point about the wider policy. We look at all our policies all the time to ensure that they are delivering what they set out to achieve.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): In what can only be described as coalition fervour, my Liberal Democrat predecessor voted for the bedroom tax eight times, despite a severe local impact. Based on the court decision, how many of the 4,238 people hit by the bedroom tax in Southwark should not have been affected?

Damian Green: I do not have figures at that level of detail. I hope that Southwark Council has been assiduous in using discretionary housing payments to make sure that people have not lost out financially, because those DHPs are available.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Instead of standing here saying that he welcomes the fact that five judges found that a woman with a panic room should be subject to a bedroom tax, should not the Minister go away and review his entire policy? Instead of attacking the people on the demand side, the Government need to look at the supply side of housing. The Government should end the right to buy, where a quarter of houses end up on the buy-to-let market, further pushing up the housing benefit bill, and they should target the right areas.

Damian Green: No, I do not think I should stand at the Dispatch Box and challenge the Supreme Court. The hon. Gentleman is right: the supply side is as important as the demand side. That is why this Government are spending huge amounts of money to help the housing market generally, and the affordable housing market specifically. I wish that previous Governments had done the same.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Can the Minister tell us how much the Government have spent on legal fees defending one of the most hated policies, the bedroom tax?

Damian Green: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. The Department has spent approximately £206,000 in legal costs in respect of the Supreme Court proceedings.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My constituents Ann and Kevin Gresham, who live in a two-bedroom flat, are unable to share a room owing to Ann’s various disabilities. They successfully fought the bedroom tax in court but this caused them significant heartache and stress. When will this Government finally stop punishing the disabled, admit that the cruel bedroom tax just is not working, and axe it?

Damian Green: As I said in response to previous hon. Members, I do not agree that the overall policy is not working, and we have no plans to change it.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): My constituency has the highest number of bedroom tax cases in the country, with more than 3,000 families affected. I want to raise the case of Mr Tony Gunning in my constituency. He needs regular kidney dialysis and he does not get a discretionary payment because he lives in Tory Trafford. If he had lived in Labour Manchester in my constituency, he would have got the discretionary payment. He has been hit twice by the Conservative party.

Damian Green: I have said that I hope local authorities will claim the discretionary housing payments that are available to them, and I say that to all local authorities.
Croydon Tram Incident

4.3 pm

The Minister for London (Gavin Barwell): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the tragic tram derailment in the early hours of Wednesday 9 November, close to Sandilands junction in Croydon.

The tram was running from New Addington to Wimbledon via Croydon town centre. Sandilands junction is the point where inbound trams from the Beckenham Junction, Elmers End and New Addington routes converge shortly before they arrive at Sandilands tram stop to the east of Croydon town centre. Trams approaching from New Addington have to negotiate a sharp, left-hand curve with a speed limit of 12 mph before reaching the junction. The derailment occurred on the curve and the Rail Accident Investigation Branch says that initial indications suggest that the tram was travelling at a significantly higher speed than is permitted.

Seven people lost their lives—Dane Chinnery, Robert Huxley, Philip Logan, Dorota Rynkiewicz and Phil Scary from New Addington, and Donald Collett and Mark Smith from Croydon. A further 51 people were injured and a number are still in hospital. Our thoughts at this time are with the families and friends of the bereaved, and the injured.

I visited the scene with the Mayor of London and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport on Wednesday, and again on Thursday and Friday. I would like to take this opportunity to express my profound thanks to staff from London’s emergency services, Transport for London and the RAIB for their professionalism and dedication in the most difficult circumstances. I would also like to thank staff from our local NHS hospitals—Croydon University and St George’s—who treated the injured. Without these amazing public servants, more people would undoubtedly have lost their lives.

Croydon Council has set up a centre at Croydon Adult Learning and Training New Addington, on Central Parade, which is being staffed by council officers, the British Red Cross, the Salvation Army, Victim Support, rail care teams, and local church and community groups to provide support, counselling and advice to anybody affected. My officials have participated in the council’s recovery co-ordination meetings, and we have offered the Government’s help, if that is needed. We stand ready to deal with any requests promptly. People can also obtain help from the Sarah Hope line, which was created to provide specialist support to people affected by fatal or serious injuries on London’s transport network. Run by TfL staff, it provides practical, financial and emotional help, and can also make referrals for counselling and specialised support.

The tram was removed from the site in the early hours of Saturday morning and has been transported to a secure location. Work is now under way to repair the damaged track so that tram services can resume as soon as possible.

The RAIB immediately began a major investigation to ensure that the relevant lessons are learned to improve safety and prevent a similar accident from occurring. This investigation is being run independently of, but in parallel with, the British Transport police’s investigation, as well as that of the safety regulator, the Office of Rail and Road. The BTP’s investigation will consider whether there were any breaches of criminal law. The ORR’s investigation will consider whether there were any breaches of health and safety law, which is responsible for enforcing.

The RAIB intends to publish an initial report into the accident later this week. Its final report will take months to produce, but if urgent safety learning comes to light during the investigation, this will be published without delay. As much as we are all desperate for answers, we need to give the professionals time to do a thorough job. The victims deserve no less.

Our rail and tram services have had a good safety record in recent years. I know I speak for not just the Government but the whole House and the industry when I say we are determined to maintain this. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport will give urgent and careful consideration to recommendations as he receives them, and I am confident the industry will do the same.

When we say goodbye to our loved ones each morning, it never crosses our mind that we may not see them again. Seven families are now having to face that terrible reality, and other people will return to their loved ones only after a lengthy stay in hospital and with life-changing injuries. They will need support in the days, weeks and months ahead, and the Government will work with the Mayor of London and Croydon Council to make sure they receive it.

I have made this statement in my capacity as Minister for London, but hon. Members may be aware that the accident took place in my constituency and that six of the seven people who were tragically killed were my constituents. The last few days have been the toughest in my six and a half years as a Member of this House, but I have been sustained by the way in which the people of Croydon have supported the emergency services, as they have carried out their difficult work, and the families and friends of those who lost their lives or were injured. We are a strong community, and we will support each other in our grief.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am most grateful to the Minister for his statement, in terms both of the content and the way in which he delivered it. I feel a duty to inform the House that two commiss chefs in the service of the House were among those injured in the tram incident last Wednesday. On behalf of all colleagues, I have written to both to express the hope that they will enjoy a full and, if possible, speedy recovery.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

4.8 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): May I begin by thanking the Minister for London for his statement and for giving me early sight of it? This is the first time we have debated London matters across the Dispatch Box, and I am sorry that it happens under such tragic circumstances. These have been the most difficult days for him and his constituents, and particularly the victims of the derailment—the injured and their families, and the families and friends of the seven people who died. Let me associate myself and everyone on the Opposition
side of the House with the Minister’s closing words: to lose a loved one is the hardest thing at any time; when disaster strikes from nowhere, and someone is taken away without warning or the chance to say goodbye, it is even harder to bear. The whole House will echo the Minister’s thoughts for all who have been touched by this accident and will join him in expressing sympathy for the bereaved.

All Members will, at some point, experience tragic events to which they and their communities have to respond. In my experience, such events bring out the best in all of us and bind us closer in solidarity. They also bring out the best in our emergency services. Let me add my thanks to the London ambulance service, the London fire brigade and the Metropolitan police. Of course, we all know and value our emergency services, but it is at times such as these that we truly comprehend their professionalism and heroism.

Let me turn to the aftermath of the accident. Staff from Transport for London, the NHS, Croydon Council and many other statutory and voluntary bodies have worked, and continue to work, tirelessly to resolve the practical, emotional and physical consequences of the derailment. The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has taken the lead in expressing the sorrow and sympathy of all Londoners at this terrible tragedy. His officers are working closely with Croydon Council to provide immediate specialist help and support for those most affected by the crash.

Finally, let me turn to the investigations into the derailment and the lessons to be learned. We await the reports of the Rail Accident Investigation Branch, the British Transport police and the Office of Rail and Road. Clearly, it is too early to expect answers to questions about what caused or contributed to the accident. In any event, there is a criminal investigation under way. However, I am sure that the Minister will agree that it is imperative that the operator and those conducting the inquiries ensure that even interim findings are translated into immediate action to provide the necessary reassurance that any further such incidents can be averted.

Trams are a very safe form of public transport, but incidents such as this reinforce the fundamental principle that when it comes to our public transport systems, there can never be any compromise on safety. It is essential that the investigations examine whether there were any organisational, as well as individual, errors or omissions that contributed in any way, and whether there was any prior evidence or concern that such an event was possible or likely. In such circumstances, it would be critical to understand why and how any such prior warnings were not recognised and acted on.

There have been calls from some in the transport industry for the introduction of automated braking systems on trams, similar to those used on the docklands light railway. May I ask the Minister to raise that specific matter as part of the inquiries? The Minister may be in a position to say when tram services in Croydon will resume; I believe that there is a test tram running today. In any event, could he say what interim steps will be taken to reassure passengers that this service and similar services around the country—in Nottingham, Sheffield, Edinburgh and Manchester—will be safe to use for the foreseeable future?

Gavin Barwell: I am hugely grateful for, although not at all surprised by, the tone of the hon. Gentleman’s response. It is good to have the support of the Official Opposition for the work that we are undertaking. I have paid tribute to the agencies, but I would like, on a personal level, to thank the Mayor of London for the support that he has provided to Croydon Council and for the detailed briefing that he has ensured that I, as a constituency MP, have had at every stage of the process.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that we should not speculate about the causes of the accident. Three investigations are under way, and it is important that we give the professionals the time to do their work thoroughly. The victims of this terrible tragedy deserve the whole truth, and that will not be served by too much speculation at this stage. I want to reassure him on two points. First, the RAIB has been very clear that if anybody has any evidence—either specific to the accident that took place on Wednesday morning or, more generally, concerns about the operation of the system—it wants to hear that evidence, and I encourage anybody who has such evidence to put it forward. Secondly, the investigation will be very thorough.

The hon. Gentleman asked about automation, and lots of constituents have already raised that issue with me. Essentially, trams are buses on rails. Because they run part of their route on rails and part of it on roads, trams have to rely, at least for part of the route, on drivers driving according to the conditions in front of them. Therefore, trams cannot have the same kind of signalling systems as trains. However, there is a legitimate question about sections of the route where trams run on rails and are akin to trains, and I am sure that that will be one of the issues addressed in the investigation.

The hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that the record of this system over the history of its operation shows that it has been extraordinarily safe. As and when the system reopens, people will obviously be looking for reassurance, but they can look at the safety record and have confidence in that regard. I also give him the assurance he was looking for that if recommendations are made during the course of the RAIB’s work, the Government will of course give them urgent and very careful consideration and make sure that all necessary steps are taken.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman is right to say that the track has now been repaired and that TfL is running test services today, so I anticipate a decision about when the service can reopen fairly imminently.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Communities across Croydon are certainly united in their grief and sympathy for the families of the seven victims. From attending remembrance services in Croydon South yesterday, I know that the hearts of people there have gone out to the families who suffered so tragically on Wednesday. I associate myself with the comments of the Minister and the shadow Minister in paying tribute to the emergency services, who responded so well in very difficult circumstances.

I want to tell the Minister that many of my constituents who also use the line, part of which runs along our constituency border, have contacted me in the past four or five days to say that they have felt in the past—not on Wednesday, but in general—that trains approaching the Sandilands junction from the tunnel to the south have been running at very rapid speeds. Will he confirm to
the House that the investigations will cover that? I believe tram users would find it reassuring if there was an opportunity to install either a warning system or automated braking in other trams, as the shadow Minister said, as well as in the ones in Croydon, to prevent any repetition of this accident.

Gavin Barwell: Like my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour, the Remembrance Day services in Croydon at the weekend obviously took on a special poignancy, with people taking the opportunity to remember those who gave their lives in the past to protect our freedoms in this country, but also those who lost their lives in this tragic accident.

Like my hon. Friend, I have had people contact me with their concerns about the operation of the system over a period of time. I assure him that the investigation will look into those issues. As I said in answer to the shadow Minister, I do not think we should prejudge what needs to happen at this time. Clearly, the investigation will look into such issues, and the Government will take very seriously any recommendations from that investigation.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab): May I add my condolences to those expressed by the Minister to those who have suffered injury or have lost loved ones in this tragic incident? I reiterate his gratitude to the emergency services, NHS staff—particularly those at the hospital—and the council, whose speedy professionalism undoubtedly saved lives after the incident. Croydon is an extremely tightknit community, and tragedies like the one we have just experienced have brought that community closer together. The shock and sorrow about what has happened has been felt in every part of the borough.

We need the inquiry to conclude as quickly as is reasonably practicable, because once the tram system starts moving again, people will need absolute reassurance that it is safe. Will the inquiry look at other recent incidents on the tram network, such as the impact between a car and a tram near to the Sandilands tram stop a few weeks earlier? That flags up that there have been other incidents that will cause concern to people using the system.

I thank the Minister for the work he has carried out. In conclusion, may I commend the people who have set up a fund to support the victims of this tragedy? Families that have now been hit with funeral expenses may not have the finances at hand to deal with them, and the fundraising that is going on will help to ease the financial strain, which comes on top of the emotional strain they are already suffering.

Gavin Barwell: The hon. Gentleman, who is a constituency neighbour, is right to draw attention to the work that the council and the Mayor have done in setting up the fund, which will prove invaluable to some of the families. Given the nature of the communities from which they come, some of them will face costs that are difficult to bear. He is quite right to draw attention to that issue.

I reassure the hon. Gentleman, as I have reassured my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), that the investigation will look at all the evidence on the safety of the system that is drawn to its attention. If constituents contact the hon. Gentleman, I encourage him to direct them to submit such evidence to the inquiry.

On the speed of the inquiry, I reiterate that an interim report will be published this week. There may well be issues that the RAIB can draw to the attention of the regulator, the operator and the Secretary of State. Experience suggests that the full report will take 10 to 12 months to produce. However, as I said in my statement, if issues emerge during its work, it is able to make recommendations in the interim. Our constituents should rest assured that any issues that come out of the investigation will be drawn promptly to people’s attention.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Many of my constituents travel to or through Croydon, as do I, so we join my hon. Friend in sending our deepest condolences to all those who have been adversely affected. I appreciate that three investigations into the incident are ongoing and must take priority, but a broader concern that constituents have raised with me is the safety and speed of trams at transport interchanges, such as East Croydon station. I wonder whether, at a later date, consideration can be given to those broader safety issues.

Gavin Barwell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind words on behalf of his constituents. A number of hon. Members have contacted me over the past four or five days, and I am very grateful for the support they have expressed.

My hon. Friend is right that the tram network, by its nature, runs on rail on parts of the route but also on main roads through the centre of Croydon, where there are clearly risks in relation to motor traffic and pedestrians, including right outside East Croydon station, which is one of the country’s busiest railway stations. Again, I say that if people have concerns, they should draw them to the inquiry’s attention.

The tram system has a very good safety record. My colleagues from Croydon who are in the Chamber will confirm that thousands of our constituents use it to get to work or school every day. It is one of the best things about the town, but everyone will want reassurance that its operation is safe.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): On behalf of the SNP, I pass on our condolences and sympathies to the bereaved families. It was poignant that the Minister said that six of his constituents were among those who were killed. As he said, when we say goodbye to our loved ones in the morning, we expect to see them at night and to spend time catching up on the day, rather than to go through the trauma of what happened. I thank those in the emergency services who were involved.

It is clear that we need to understand what happened. That is why the three investigations are very important. I look forward to the initial interim report of the Rail Accident Investigation Branch. Other Members have touched on the speculation, which is clearly not helpful. Unfortunately, I have read three variations in newspapers, apportioning different types of blame to the driver. That does not help us to get to the bottom of the matter and it does not help the bereaved families. I imagine the Minister will share those concerns.
Gavin Barwell: The hon. Gentleman touches on one of the most difficult issues with such disasters, which is the media’s reporting of them. We all understand and respect the job the media have to do, but I can report that the families of the victims whom I have met have found the media intrusion at a time of terrible grief very difficult to come to terms with. One family sat down to watch the news of the US election, only to see a photo and the identity of their loved one revealed on a TV news bulletin. They had not been told in advance that that was going to happen. I am sure all hon. Members understand how distressing that might be.

We all understand the vital role the media play in our society in disseminating information. It is natural that a day or two afterwards, attention turns to what caused the accident, and that naturally leads one into speculation, but the most important thing is to allow the three investigations to run their course, because that is the best way to make sure we get the facts about what caused the accident and understand what each of us needs to do to ensure that it does not recur.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement and for the way in which he has conducted himself, both as a Minister and as a constituency MP, in dealing with this episode. There seems to be a general view that the tram was going too fast at a sharp left-hand bend. Will he reassure the House that the investigators will take advantage of all the international experience in preparing the report, as there are lots of trams around the world? However, I think he and his constituents would be surprised if the final report need take 12 months. Surely, it can be done quicker than that. In a city the size of London, with a growing number of people using the tram network, most people would expect a comprehensive final report well within that 12-month time period.

Gavin Barwell: I am very grateful to my friend the right hon. Gentleman for his kind words. As he says, part of the network passes through his constituency and there is a long-standing ambition on behalf of the people of Sutton to extend the route down to Sutton town centre, which I am very keen to support—in my constituency capacity, I should hasten to add.

The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point about previous history. I will add that the operator is required by law to notify the RAIB immediately of any incident that, had circumstances been only slightly different, could have had a serious outcome. I am sure that the investigation will look into whether there have been any notifications of that kind over a period.

Without in any way casting any doubt on the concerns raised with me, as I have felt them myself on the tram, I would observe that we are not as individuals necessarily the best judges of speed on trams, in particular on this route, which passes through a tunnel where the tram gets up to its top speed before coming to the bend and having to slow down. I am informed that the operator does regular speed checks, so there should be a body of data that will provide good evidence about the record over a period of time. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for drawing that matter to the House’s attention.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): May I associate myself with the eloquent and compassionate words of the Minister and the shadow Front-Bench team, and with your words, Mr Speaker? Will the Minister promise that any learning from this tragedy will be disseminated to all tram networks in the UK and in particular to those of us who have huge tram network infrastructure in our patches?

Gavin Barwell: Those of us who have tram networks in our constituencies are aware of what a fantastic contribution they can make to our transport policies. They are quick, efficient and environmentally friendly. Modern methods of transport, and I am sure we are all keen for them to be expanded. The Secretary of State for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), are both sitting alongside me. I am hugely grateful for the support given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in coming down to Croydon on Wednesday to see the scene for himself. I know that they will want to ensure that any lessons that can be learned from this tragic event are applied not just to the Croydon system but to light rail right across the country.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): On behalf of the all-party group on light rail, I would like to express my condolences to all those affected, in particular...
to the families of those who died and those who were injured, as well as to the whole community and to the Minister, the constituency MP, for the burden he has had to shoulder over these awful few days.

What is particularly shocking about this awful tragedy is that light rail is such a safe form of travel, with 300 million passengers every year. The last passenger killed on a tram in this country had been in 1959. It is clear that this was one incident on one part of track. I am not asking the Minister, in looking at the incident and finding out what went wrong, to speculate on whether there was an engineering error, a human error or both. However, will he assure the House that he will make it clear to colleagues that light rail remains a safe form of travel and encourage his constituents and others to keep using the wonderful tram system that has, on this rare occasion, failed people badly?

**Gavin Barwell:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. He makes a very powerful point. Last year was the ninth consecutive year in which there were no passenger fatalities as the result of an accident such as that we saw last Wednesday in Croydon on any railway in the UK. That was testament to the hard work of the industry, the regulator and the Government to ensure we learned the lessons from tragic accidents such as Potters Bar, Hatfield and Ladbroke Grove more than a decade ago. He is right to point to the safety record of tram systems across the country overall.

What we need to do now is support the families of the victims of this tragic accident and ensure that the professionals are given the time to carry out their investigations, so that we can learn the appropriate lessons. I think that it is clear from these exchanges that we all share a determination to ensure that our transport systems are safe for the people who use them.

**Mr David Winnick** (Walsall North) (Lab): As I once represented the constituency, may I take this opportunity to express my own deepest sympathy to all those involved?

**Gavin Barwell:** I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that expression of sympathy. I think I am right in saying there are six living former Members for my seat, with reflects either its attractiveness as a place to live or its hyper-marginality.
Technical and Further Education Bill
Second Reading

4.34 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The background to the Bill is that the Government have worked tirelessly over the past six years to embed our school reforms so that we can raise standards and ensure that an excellent academic route is open to all students. That work continues. Thanks in no small part to the hard work of the teaching profession, over 1.4 million more children are now being taught in schools rated as good or outstanding compared with 2010. This is vital if we are to be a country in which everyone not only has a level playing field for opportunity, but has their potential unlocked and can thereby do their best. This transformational progress has been great news, particularly for those young people who choose to build on their time at school by pursuing an academic route through Britain’s world-class universities on their way to joining the workforce and making a contribution to the economy. The truth is, however, that half—last year, most—of our young people, often those from disadvantaged backgrounds will choose not to go to university, but to follow a less purely academic route, or perhaps one that plays to their individual strengths, talents and interests.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that we are failing nationally to train enough graduate engineers to serve our own needs. One reason is the teaching of mathematics and the failure of young people to acquire skills in that subject. A lot of effort has been put into improving the quality of mathematics teaching in schools. Are we now starting to see the fruits of that extra effort?

Justine Greening: I believe that we are. Not only have we seen investment in more effective mathematics teaching—through some of the Mathematics Mastery work, for example—but we have tried to widen participation by making sure that girls do maths and science courses, thereby better balancing our engineering careers between men and women. Alongside that—this is why the Bill matters so much—we must recognise routes into such professions that are not purely academic which, for many of our young people, will take the form of technical education.

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): Do the Government still want young people who do not achieve a C or above in maths and English to repeat their GCSEs, rather than having a more useful level 2 post-16 qualification?

Justine Greening: We have been clear that we do not want children to be left behind by not getting a GCSE in maths or English when they could have achieved one, so we want those who score a D to take resits. For others, however, there is the option to study for functional skills qualifications, and it is important for employers that we make sure those functional skills qualifications work effectively.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Secretary of State focused on functional maths and English, the Secretary of State focused on functional skills qualifications that can, in conjunction with a broader offer for technical education, enable young people to demonstrate their attainment in both maths and English. No young person should leave our education system without something to show for all their time spent on maths and English. It is important that they are able clearly to demonstrate their level of achievement, their potential, so that young people to demonstrate their attainment in both maths and English. No young person should leave our education system without something to show for all their time spent on maths and English. It is important that they are able clearly to demonstrate their level of achievement, their potential, so that young people have a proper pathway into the world of work. That is not acceptable. If we are to create a country that works for everyone, it is time that we gave technical education the focus its deserves, alongside our school and academic education reforms, so that people who choose to pursue this route have as good a chance at getting a high-skilled career as someone taking an academic route.

Nic Dakin: I think that everyone applauds the direction of travel for technical education. In response to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) about GCSE maths and English, the Secretary of State focused on functional skills. Is she saying that those functional skills will remain as an equal qualification in the future, because I do not think that that is being said to institutions or students?

Justine Greening: What we are saying is that we want an education system, particularly at the primary and secondary level, that really stretches our young people to get through their GCSEs and to come out with GCSE qualifications that are well recognised and respected by employers. Alongside the resit policy, we want strong functional skills qualifications that can, in conjunction with a broader offer for technical education, enable young people to demonstrate their attainment in both maths and English. No young person should leave our education system without something to show for all their time spent on maths and English. It is important that they are able clearly to demonstrate their level of attainment to employers. At the same time, we need to make sure that people achieve as high a level of attainment as possible to recognise their potential in maths and English. STEM subjects, especially maths and English, have been a strong push for this Government so that we ensure that we give young people the critical building blocks that are important not just for their future careers and work but, much more broadly, so that they have a chance of being successful in life.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is being generous with her time. There is still quite a lot of confusion about this point. She says that she wants to make sure that GCSEs are well understood and that they have a certain status, so will she clarify whether those who will take the new maths and English GCSEs next year will be required to resit if they get a 4 or if they get a 5? Will that apply thereafter, or is it a transitional arrangement?

Justine Greening: Of course, a level 4 broadly equates to a C grade. We will make sure that the resit policy aligns with the new way of grading GCSEs that will come through next summer. I hope Members recognise that the most important thing is to ensure that young people come out of our education system with adequate skills, particularly in maths and English, as well as—dare I say—adequate digital skills, which are also important.
The aim of the Bill is to ensure that there is a genuine choice between high-quality academic and technical education routes. The Government want to build on what exists in the further and technical education sector and steadily create a gold standard of technical education for the first time so that students can be confident that if they commit their time and effort to a course, they will be building towards a successful career. We will unlock those opportunities only by addressing the challenges facing further education. We need to get to the root causes of poor-quality provision, including weak employer engagement, ineffective training methods, the proliferation of qualifications that are not highly valued and, of course, institutions with uncertain finances.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Is collaboration between local institutions part of the process? Will my right hon. Friend commend the work of Kingston College in leading the way by federating with Carshalton College to provide a much better offer to local students?

Justine Greening: That work shows that colleges acting collectively can provide not only a higher-quality offer, but a broader one. We hope that through the local area review, other colleges will steadily make sure that they are co-ordinating their local provision for young people. Wherever young people are growing up, it is vital there is a strong further education offer on their doorstep if they want to follow a technical education route.

The good news is that much of the work is already well under way. Lord Sainsbury’s report on skills in this country led to the skills plan, which was published in July by my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles). Let me take this opportunity to wish him well, as will Members on both sides of the House, following the recent announcement about his health. I am sure that all Members look forward to seeing him back in the House as soon as possible.

The vision that my hon. Friend outlined in the skills plan involves streamlining technical education so that, despite the plethora of career opportunities, there are clearly identified routes into work that students can easily understand and that enable them to make informed decisions about their futures. The skills plan also explains how important it is for employers to play a big role so that the qualifications that young people obtain equip them with the skills and knowledge that they need to enter the jobs market successfully and start their careers. I shall come on to how the Bill will help us to deliver that.

Some 2.4 million apprenticeships were created during the previous Parliament. We want to build on our commitment to increasing both the quantity and quality of apprenticeships, and we remain committed to our target of creating 3 million more by 2020.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I accept that the Secretary of State is determined to ensure that enough students and other young people take up apprenticeships, but will she commit herself to a target for completing them, as well as a target for starting them?

Justine Greening: We do want to ensure that students complete their apprenticeships. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Higher Education and Research Bill commits us to widening our review of how inclusive and open higher education is, taking account of not just the number of young people who embark on courses, but the number who finish them, particularly if they are from more disadvantaged and diverse backgrounds.

As part of last year’s spending review, we announced that we would provide more than half a billion pounds this year alone to help further education colleges and sixth forms to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with low prior attainment. Moreover, we are already committed to future funding levels. Those assurances will give the sector the security that it requires to deliver the skills that young people need if they are to succeed in modern Britain. We are committed to doubling the 2010-11 spending on apprenticeships, in cash terms, by 2019-20, and to protecting the national base rate of £4,000 per student in 16-to-19 education for the duration of this Parliament. By 2019-20, our funding for 19-plus skills participation will be £3.4 billion, which represents a cash increase of 40% on 2015-16. The steady progress of the Government’s programme of area reviews for the further education sector means that we have taken another important step towards giving institutions the opportunity to put themselves on a secure financial footing.

Lucy Powell: I thank the Secretary of State for her generosity. I welcome the fact that further education funding streams have stabilised recently, but does she accept that the pernicious and deep cuts that the Government imposed on further education and technical education budgets during their first five years in office had a long-lasting and difficult impact on further education, and that that is why we are now so far behind our international comparators when it comes to post-16 funding?

Justine Greening: I do not accept the picture that the hon. Lady presents. In the long term, our technical education offer for young people has not met the ambitions that all of us should have had for it. However, when we went into government in 2010, we asked Alison Wolf to look into further education. Her report said that at least 350,000 young people had been let down by courses that had “little to no labour market value.” She said that those courses were not valued by employers and did not prepare young people for further study. Perhaps as damagingly, she also said that students had been “deliberately steered” away from challenging qualifications—that “funding incentives have deliberately steered institutions, and, therefore, their students, away from qualifications that might stretch (and reward) young people and towards qualifications that can be passed easily.”

I make the point about what Alison Wolf said about the further and technical education system to demonstrate why the body of work undertaken over the last six years is so important. It has at its heart the Sainsbury review that was undertaken alongside Alison Wolf’s work, and what came out of that was the skills plan. I hope that Members on both sides of the House will now swing in behind the skills plan and, indeed, the Bill, which is part of how we will develop it.
Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): What steps are being taken to address the continuing gender imbalance in our apprenticeships?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We want to make sure that young girls get exactly the same opportunities as young boys. We know that part of the challenge relates to the kinds of industries that might offer apprenticeships. The hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) asked me about the engineering profession. It is important to ensure that the technical education route is as desirable for young women as it is for young men, and among the ways we will do that is by steadily changing its image, by ensuring that it is of high quality, and by making sure that people know that if they follow this route, they will come out with experience and qualifications that employers truly value. That is why part of the Bill’s purpose is to put employers at the heart of our technical education strategy.

University technical colleges have also been established to address skills gaps in local and national industries. They provide technical education that meets the needs of modern businesses. Indeed, they also give a much different offer to young people who are interested in specialising through a technical education route.

Nic Dakin rose—

Justine Greening: I would like to make a little more progress. I recognise the hon. Gentleman’s long-standing interest and expertise in this area, but let me get on to the Bill itself.

Alongside our wider education reforms, the Government’s work on technical and further education over the past six years represents a firm foundation on which we can now build a really strong technical route in this country. The Bill serves to do exactly that. Part 1 focuses on technical education. It extends the role of the Institute for Apprenticeships to give it responsibility for classroom-based technical education in addition to apprenticeships. It will be renamed as the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. The measures taken forward and support the reforms set out in Lord Sainsbury’s report and the skills plan so we can truly streamline the technical education system and ensure young people can follow clear routes to skilled employment. That will ensure that we have strong standards as part of an employer-led approach on technical education so that courses and apprenticeships develop knowledge, skills and behaviours in individuals that meet the needs of employers and improve overall productivity.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): The right hon. Lady may well know that those of us who have worked in factories and in similar jobs realise that often the people at the chalk face, as it were, know at least as much as employers about what skills are needed. How will we ensure the revamped institute includes workers or their representatives—as well as employers, of course—so that there is a rounded view of what is needed and what is appropriate for a particular skill?

Justine Greening: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have talked significantly about our plans to ensure that workers have more representation at the higher echelons of business. As the Institute for Apprenticeships becomes responsible for technical education, it will of course have employers at its heart, but it will also work with other stakeholders including, importantly, further education colleges themselves. We will make sure that the institute can truly deliver on our ambition for it to be at the heart of how we drive forward and improve standards in technical education.

Part 2 of the Bill puts in place protections for students for the first time and provides greater certainty for institutions by introducing an insolvency regime for further education and sixth-form colleges. It applies normal insolvency procedures to colleges. At present it is not clear whether or how colleges are covered by existing insolvency law, and the resultant uncertainty is bad for colleges and for students. The Bill will remove the uncertainty for all parties by putting in place a regime that allows for an orderly process in the very unlikely event of a college becoming insolvent. As I have said, we need to rectify the lack of protection for students. Crucially, chapter 4 of part 2 will put in place a special administration regime that will have the special objective of minimising or avoiding disruption to the studies of existing students at affected colleges. These measures will ensure that students can be protected if a college becomes insolvent.

As I mentioned earlier, the current programme of area-based reviews is already putting the sector on a sustainable financial footing for the future. Part of the review process is to encourage colleges to consider needs and provision locally. That will help to ensure that the right provision is available in the right places. The proposed insolvency regime and technical education measures also require certain delegated powers, and we will be providing more information about those to the House before the Bill goes into Committee.

Part 3 of the Bill, the title of which is “Further education: information”, includes a measure to amend existing legislation to ensure that, after the devolution of further education functions and the adult education budget to a combined authority, FE providers and others will continue to submit relevant information to the national data system. This will ensure the continued availability of relevant data that are needed to make intelligent and strategic policy decisions about investment in further education.

Six years ago, we inherited a system from Labour in which too many young people—often those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds—left school or college without the skills and qualifications that they needed to build a successful future. Our wide-reaching reforms have had a transformational effect on the education system in this country, and it is important that we now build on the work of my two immediate predecessors in this role, my right hon. Friends the Members for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) and for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan).

We know that there is still so much more to do, which is why we are doubling free childcare for working parents of three and four-year-olds to 30 hours a week. We are also working hard to put our first-class universities on an even stronger footing so that they can continue to compete with the very best in the world. We are starting work on opportunity areas to ensure that the education system at work can work better to drive social mobility in those parts of the country where it has been stalled for generations, and we have doubled the previous Labour Government’s spending on school places and
set out plans to make more good and outstanding school places available to more families all over the country.

The newly broadened remit of the Department for Education, with skills and further education back under one roof alongside schools, gives us an exciting opportunity to build on the excellent work that has already been done over the past six years, both in FE and in the wider education sector. In the end, education underpins how this Government want to create a country that works for everyone so that, irrespective of their background, people can get the skills that they need to take advantage of the opportunities in our country. This is not only good for individuals, but will ensure that we have the skills that our businesses and our economy need so that we can drive up prosperity across the country. The Bill will allow us to take the next steps to give the technical and further education route the status and the spotlight it deserves so that it can flourish as a genuine, high-quality alternative to the academic route, and one that leads to successful careers for those who choose to pursue it. I commend the Bill to the House.

4.59 pm

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree that this Government have done nothing to provide technical skills. Colleges have faced dramatic budget cuts. It is audacious for Ministers to stand at the Dispatch Box and say what they have done when they have failed. In fact, the Government included the word “technical” in the Bill only as an add-on—it was not there in the first place.

I would be the first to say that an excellent academic education must be provided to all pupils from all backgrounds, but given that many will not go to university, other educational routes remain vital. That is why it is so important that further education is put on a sustainable financial footing. It is not too late for the Government to do that and to bring forward the changes that the sector needs. Next week, the Chancellor will stand at the Dispatch Box and deliver his first autumn statement. The Government could take that opportunity to ensure that the hundreds of millions of pounds that has been cut from the further education sector since 2010 are reinvested in colleges across Britain, in our future and in our best and most valuable asset: the people.

The Secretary of State could get the Chancellor to bring back the education maintenance allowance, which helped hundreds of thousands of young people from low and middle-income backgrounds to stay in education. The Institute for Fiscal Studies confirmed that the EMA represented value for money for the taxpayer, boosted the rates of young people staying in education and improved attainment. I fear, however, that we will be left disappointed once again. After all, this Government and improved attainment. I fear, however, that we will be left disappointed once again. After all, this Government
become cuts of 30%. So although we welcome the Institute for Apprenticeships, now to be renamed the “Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education”, we are concerned that changing the name is the extent of the progress made in the Bill. For example, there is no role for apprentices or learners on the institute’s board. First, the Government gave us an office for students with no students, and now we get an Institute for Apprenticeships with no apprentices. There is no inclusion of further education providers, colleges, universities, the relevant trade unions or local authorities either, and I cannot help but wonder whether anyone in the sector will actually be allowed on the board. Despite that, we have long welcomed the institute in principle, as the body to implement a plan to improve both the quality of apprenticeships, and access to and participation in them. We will now have the institute, but where is the plan? Why is there so little mention of the institute’s need for a strategy to promote participation among care leavers, learners from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, and learners with disabilities? Why have the Government not used the Bill as an opportunity to enshrine in law the recommendations of the Maynard review on apprenticeship accessibility? We simply know too little of the Government’s plans for what the institute will do, and how it will help providers and students in the years to come.

However, that is not really a surprise. After all, the Government do not seem to know what the capacity of the institute will be. In a recent written answer, the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills said:

“We are currently developing the detailed structure of the Institute for Apprenticeships, and therefore we are not yet able to set out initial staff numbers”.

So the Secretary of State and the Minister can come to this House with a Bill to set up this institute, but they cannot tell us how it will be structured, staffed or operated. We can only hope that the institute will fare better than every other body this Government have set up to help them deliver their policies in further education.

Tristram Hunt: Is my hon. Friend also aware that the Minister for School Standards, having said at the Dispatch Box that the royal college of teaching was up and running and had full Government support, has said in answer to my parliamentary questions that there have been no meetings with the Secretary of State, no meetings with Ministers of State, and no effective funding? The royal college of teaching is something we should all support in this House, and I would hope those on the Treasury Bench were behind it. [Interruption.] That is what the parliamentary answers said.

Angela Rayner: I will be interested to see what the Secretary of State has to say about that. I find it absolutely shocking—

Rob Marris: Shocking.

Angela Rayner: Absolutely shocking. We have seen the Skills Funding Agency lose nearly half of its staff since 2011, and we have seen continued and accelerating decline in the staffing of the National Apprenticeship Service and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. Of course, all those bodies were threatened with further cuts under the “BIS 2020” project, which was overseen by McKinsey for the former Secretary of State. We found out about the details of that not from any ministerial statement, but through internal documents leaked to my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) in April. Perhaps the Secretary of State can take the opportunity today to clarify that that process is no longer ongoing, and what her plans are for the staffing of bodies transferred from the former Department.

Given that businesses will contribute to the apprenticeships programme through the levy, it would help if the Minister reassured them that they will not be short-changed or end up just paying in to cover for cuts rather than for a genuinely new and improved level of service. As welcome as the institute is, there is concern that it will not deliver if it is not resourced for the job. With all the challenges facing the further education sector today, with the hundreds of millions of pounds of funding lost, and with the sky-rocketing number of providers facing deficits or requiring direct intervention of the Government, now is the time for radical action to ensure that our further education sector is able to continue on a sustainable footing in years to come.

James Berry: The hon. Lady could at least welcome the apprenticeship levy, which her party considered so radical that it would not even include it on its platform for the last election.

Angela Rayner: It is always a pleasure to take an intervention from the hon. Gentleman. I will come on to that point.

I have no doubt that the Secretary of State read the same National Audit Office report that I did on the growing financial crisis in further education. It was that report that recommended the creation of an insolvency regime. That recommendation is in the Bill, but it would be alarming if that were the only response on offer. The Secretary of State seems to be aware that dozens of providers are reaching crisis point, but instead of deciding that something needs to be done about it, she seems to think that we should be helping that process along. While Labour Members call for investment, Government Members offer insolvency.

This Bill offered the Government an opportunity to improve the situation faced by providers and students. Instead, they seem content with managed decline. We should make no mistake that the decline of a sector that helps more than 4 million people every year will fail not only them, but the needs of our economy and society as a whole. For that reason, I urge the Secretary of State to look again at the opportunities that may have been missed in this Bill. We will not oppose the Bill tonight, but we will most certainly seek to improve it.

5.11 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate. I very much welcome the Bill and pay tribute to the ministerial team who are rightly focusing on providing opportunity for all. I speak as somebody who went to a school that was bottom of the league table in Worcestershire and who employed many young people in the 10 years that I ran my business. I recognise the absolute importance of equipping all young people, regardless of background, with the necessary skills to fulfil their potential in their working lives.
I wish to focus on a very narrow part of the Bill, which is to do with the opportunities for young disabled students, particularly on the apprenticeship programme. Typically in this country, non-disabled people have an 80% chance of being employed. If a person has a disability, that figure drops to 48%, which is still up 4% on 2010—an extra half a million more disabled people in work. If a person has a learning disability, they would typically have only a 6% chance of having meaningful and sustainable careers. All Governments of all political persuasions have tried their very best to look at different initiatives and different programmes to try to boost that figure, but, by and large, it has stuck rigidly at 6%, and we all desperately want to see huge improvements in that area.

I had the pleasure of visiting Foxes Academy near Bridgwater. It has taken over a former working hotel and takes on young adults with learning disabilities in a three-year programme. For those first two years, their time is split between learning about independent living, slowly progressing up the floors of the hotel as they become more independent, and more skilled and confident. They learn real-life tangible skills within the hotel, which can be transferred to local employers in the restaurant trade, the care homes and other local hotels. On this visit, I was absolutely staggered to see that, at the end of that three-year course, 80% of those students—not 6%—remain in work. That was because of that three-year, constructive and patient approach to learning to give them those skills. They spent the final third year in supported training with local employers, patiently being taught the skills that are needed. It was no surprise that those employers, having invested in training and support, were then keen to keep on those young adults.

I was so impressed that I invited people from the academy to come to see me in Parliament when I was Minister for Disabled People. I asked them why we could not have one of those projects in every town. They said that in the first two years they could take on as many students as they could fit in the hotel, but the challenge was the cost of the supported training in the third year. I said, “Well, surely this is just an apprenticeship by another name. Why can’t we call it an apprenticeship? You can access the funding for the Government’s commendable pledge to have 3 million more apprentices by the end of this Parliament.” They said, “We can’t, because most of our students wouldn’t get the grade C in maths and English that is the typical entry requirement to access an apprenticeship.”

We agreed that we would look into this as a matter of urgency and I met my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), who was the skills Minister at the time. He shared with me that he thought this was both a frustrating situation and a real opportunity to make a difference. We commissioned my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), Scope, Mencap and many other experienced colleagues, to look at what we could do. As part of this Maynard review—we only gave him three and a half weeks, as we had a suspicion that my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford and I might no longer be in a position to sign things off after that, and it is a credit to him that he rushed it through—they identified that if we made an exemption for those with a learning disability, we could offer real, tangible opportunities for those young people through the apprenticeship programme. I am delighted that the Government have been so positive in welcoming that. In the Minister’s closing remarks, I would be keen to hear what steps need to be taken for this to happen, how quickly we can do this and how we can advertise it to local employers.

The other key lesson was that there were many local employers who were willing to engage and offer that opportunity. They were not doing that to tick a box, or as a favour because they wanted to feel good. They did it because these young adults, after patient training, proved to be excellent employees who would stay with their organisation year after year. I was sent photographs of many of these young adults on their first steps into a career, and every one of them had a huge beaming smile because of their pride in having the opportunity to work. They were not always full time—some were part time—but they felt proud, as did their parents.

I have one other slight request, to do with university technical colleges. I am very proud that Swindon has its own UTC; I am a huge fan. In fact, our party launched its election manifesto from the Swindon UTC, which mixes modern technology and Swindon’s proud railway heritage in one wonderful, fantastic building.

UTCs could go much further if entry was at the beginning of secondary school, not at 14. I have talked to many of those students and they chose to go there not always because it was the right route for them but because they were unhappy in their secondary school. I have also talked to people who should have gone to the UTC and have a natural aptitude for the courses it offers—in higher engineering or computer programming; in the sorts of roles in which we have desperate skills shortages in this country—but who were already settled in their secondary schools with lots of friends. They did not want to break away from that, so they missed out on taking advantage of the opportunity of going to a UTC. If we could change the entry age to the traditional entry age for secondary school, UTCs would compete on an even footing and those who would most benefit from this opportunity would be more likely to take it.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that as well as talking to young people about the time at which they can enter the UTC, parental knowledge is important in influencing that choice? The lack of information for parents, particularly from many local authorities, stops the progress of the UTCs.

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Lady for making that important point. When we talk to the heads of UTCs, they say that one of the biggest challenges is that secondary schools, when seeking to recruit students, go into neighbouring primary schools and get involved in assemblies, have displays and make contact with parents. The primary schools work with those secondary schools to advertise those opportunities, but, obviously, UTCs are seeking to take students away from secondary schools, and with those pupils comes the funding—so the secondary schools are not always receptive to opening their doors and saying, “Look, there’s an alternative. Why not take the funding that follows you to another organisation?”
If we put it back on an even footing by having the same entry point as secondary schools, primary schools will be able to engage with those parents and provide those opportunities.

UTCs are training those young adults with the skills we very much need, and we need to do far more to get businesses to support UTCs by providing mentoring, work experience and expertise. Too many local businesses are not yet up to speed with the great links they can get with UTCs. If they invest early in those students, they will be their next generation of staff. We can use things like the business rates mailer—all businesses, whether they like it or not, will get one every year—to send out information about apprenticeships and UTCs. Local businesses will then know that by investing a little time and support they can help to fill those skills gaps in the future.

I welcome the Bill, which is a positive step in the right direction to deliver opportunity for all.

5.20 pm

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson).

I do not see many exciting opportunities arising from the UK’s decision to exit the European Union, but if we are feeling optimistic, as I always try to be, a rebalancing of educational provision and opportunity is one of the elements that we need to look to as we think about a new political economy for the United Kingdom, and part of that has to be a more effective technical and vocational education system.

In his great work “Our Kids”, which I urge the Secretary of State to read if she has not already done so, Robert Putnam charts the decline of social mobility in rust belt America, hinting at what has happened in recent days. He is clear that if people are interested in tackling inequality and promoting social mobility, the two areas to focus on in respect of Government provision are high-quality early years support and an excellent system of technical and vocational education. Those are the two elements that really make a difference in terms of inequality.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend mentioned Brexit. Since the referendum, the pound has depreciated to a much more sensible level, such that manufacturing is starting to grow. Does he agree that it is vital that as science Minister taught him that one of the blocks for achieving excellence in British science was making sure that we have not just top-flight research chemists, physicists and biologists, but high-quality technicians in our science-based industries. We are not producing those level 4 or 5 qualified technicians who are fundamental to the success of the science base.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) pointed out, productivity and economic growth demand that we invest more effectively in technical and vocational education. We should also see it as an opportunity. The Edge Foundation has shown time and again that we are going to see a huge growth in jobs in science, engineering and technology, and we need to provide the professionals to fulfil those opportunities. Much of our education system works against that. Whether we think of Progress 8, EBacc or the Ofsted inspection requirements, we have on the one hand a demand for an education system almost on the model that the British set up in Germany to provide our technical and vocational system, and on the other hand every element of incentive in our education system working strongly against that.

I am excited by the addition of the technical component to the Institute for Apprenticeships. I urge the apprenticeships Minister to visit the institutes of technical education in Singapore, which are doing a phenomenal amount on cutting-edge technical and vocational education, as that economy, too, begins to think about the kind of provision it needs to fill the skills gap and about the very demanding requirements on the sector.

My reservations are as follows. First, having the divide at 16 is a missed opportunity. My passion in the next few years will be to see whether we can create a consensus in this House on committing ourselves to ending GCSEs by 2025 and to getting rid of a school leaving qualification for people who do not leave school. We should strip out an examination that is an anomaly across Europe and America and that is not providing our education system with the academic or technical, vocational learning it requires. I urge the House to think much more creatively and imaginatively about having a 14-to-19 framework that includes an academic baccalaureate and a technical baccalaureate. That would get over some of the criticisms levelled at the Bill about having too narrow a focus on educational provision from 16 to 19. A broadly constituted baccalaureate between 14 and 19 would work, so I urge the Secretary of State to think big and to set up some kind of bipartisan thinking about how we—in exactly the same way that countries such as Singapore and Finland manage their education systems—can reach a national consensus in a decade that the GCSE model, having served its time, is no longer necessary. The introduction of differing pathways at 16 in the Bill is interesting, but I urge us to think now about how we put that upstream and have some of those differing pathways from 14 to 19.

Secondly, following on from my comments to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), careers guidance is so important in this. When we think
about accessing UTCs or further education colleges, having decent and effective careers guidance is really significant. The last Secretary of State had a clever plan—a sort of careers guidance and business thing—that was going to work. I do not know what has happened to it, or whether it is coming under review by the new Secretary of State, and I more than accept that there was no great golden age of careers guidance, but if we want technical and vocational education to work, we must have effective careers guidance. We have to make sure that parents and young people not only have the career immersion in primary school, but have effective careers guidance early on in secondary. That is the way they can access FE and UTC provision.

Thirdly, the Secretary of State valiantly defended retakes for English and maths GCSEs. I want English and maths to continue in education until 18, but— I see this in my constituency, and I think colleagues see it in theirs—young people are retaking and retaking GCSEs on a highly academic syllabus, which the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) introduced. We can debate its merits, but it is really not useful or effective in terms of young people’s career pathways. What these young people need is a good level 2 post-16 qualification that gives them the English and maths skills they need, but does not give them an academic syllabus that they do not necessarily require. I am all for people pursuing the academic pathway, just as much as the technical, vocational pathway, but if we are forcing them to do that at great expense, and causing them to be frustrated about their learning, that is one element of the previous Secretary of State’s system that the current Secretary of State might want to think about.

When it comes to technical and vocational education, we create a lot of institutions: UTCs, FE institutions and career colleges. As I understand it, UTCs were not part of the FE review, so we have divided up the review of further education colleges without taking account of UTC provision, even though there is a lot of crossover between UTCs and further education colleges. In Sheffield, for example, the further education college sponsors the UTC. If the Secretary of State is looking for savings, overprovision and institution-building are prevalent in the English education system, and a bit of co-ordination among those institutions would be a good idea.

That leads me to my final point, which is that the best way to achieve that aim is to devolve educational provision. We are beginning to devolve skills policy to combined authorities and directly elected mayors, but we need to think much more creatively about devolving schools policy to directly elected mayors and combined authorities. The needs of the Cornish economy are different from the needs of the Birmingham economy, which are different from the needs of the Northumbria economy. If we devolve some of the authority to a local level, we will end up with a more effective technical and vocational education system.

I admire some of the principles in the Bill, and I admire the direction of travel, as we now say. I urge the Secretary of State, as she begins to think big, to push this upstream and think about the 14-to-19 technical and vocational pathways.

5.31 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I am going to talk about the local experience of further education in Kent. I welcome the independent report of the panel, chaired by Lord Sainsbury, that conducted an important review into the post-16 skills system. The panel was right to advise on improvements that could be made, as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) has just said. Improvements were needed after flaws were spotted following changes made in the last Parliament. The system is over-complex, with a confusing array of courses and qualifications that are insufficiently linked to the world of work and the needs of employers. Lord Sainsbury and the Government were right to accept the panel’s recommendations in July 2016 and publish a post-16 skills plan setting out their vision.

The proposals are about boosting technical education to make sure that it is of high quality and responds to employer needs, and the introduction of a new insolvency regime to protect students’ interests. Such things matter. In Kent, we have long had a problem with an institution that has variously been called K College and South Kent College. It suffered from debt problems and, frankly, ate principals. The problems were so deep-set that every now and again the principal would be sacked and the college would be renamed, but the whole thing would continue. The fundamental problems were the big debt overhang and the teaching of courses that employers did not want—courses that did not have the relevance to learners that is completely necessary. That is why the focus on good-quality technical education and information sharing between colleges and local authorities is so important. It is important for everyone—local authorities, employers and educationists—to work together and make a good job of it, because when they do so, learners benefit.

K College finally collapsed in a heap of debt, and it had to be sorted out during the last Parliament. It basically had to be broken up. Part of it was taken over by Hadlow College and part of it by East Kent College. We were able to reset and restabilise the whole situation, but doing so was difficult and took a long time. There was no real process for doing so, because there was no proper insolvency reconstruction mechanism. That is why this Bill is important. It will put in place a proper process, rather than haphazardly trying to make everything work and gluing it all together, and it will ensure that there is a focus on the kinds of skills that learners need.

In my constituency, the East Kent College campus in Dover was threatened with closure as part of the reconstruction. I fought against that for the very simple reason that many people have a low capital base, low household wealth and low aspiration, and they simply would not travel further out of Dover for skills education. That is a real concern, and we made the case for keeping the Dover campus because the skills it taught were more in keeping with the jobs available in the local economy.

The most important thing we can all do for our young people and our learners is to provide ladders in life—to raise the bar of aspiration and to tell people, “You can succeed and achieve, and you can do really well in life. If you go to college and learn some skills, you will do better, and you will achieve and succeed.” The most important thing to do, particularly for this
Conservative Government who are so committed to the new meritocracy, is to allow people to climb ladders in life at any time.

Much has been said about whether we should have skills education from 14, 16 or 19, but we need skills education to be available at any point in life. We need the ladder to descend at any time. Many people with a difficult home life are not able to achieve and succeed in the usual exams—in school at 16, with A-levels at 18 or for a degree course at 21—and many people who have simply been slow to grow up have spent their teenage years less formatively than they might have done and with people who have not necessarily been a good influence on them. For those who have had such a life, but who suddenly wake up at 21 and 25, a ladder should descend for them to climb. Skills education is not just about the teenage years, but about lifelong learning because everyone should be able to climb the ladder of prosperity and success at any time.

For me, it was important to make sure that we kept the Dover campus of K College, which is now part of East Kent College, and to make the case for a new FE college in Deal—I also represent Deal—which suffers from so many of the same issues of low aspiration. In such ways, we can raise the bar and give people greater aspiration and life chances. That will enable them to find it easier to climb the ladders in their home communities—to get more skills and get better-paid jobs in the areas in which they live—without having to move away, as so many do. I am very passionate about such things, because we need more further and technical education in our towns, particularly coastal towns such as Dover and Deal, which too often suffer from less aspiration than they should.

I feel very strongly that we must focus on and do more about building an aspiration nation, with such ladders in life and life chances, and with proper processes for when things go wrong. That is why I think the Bill is fundamentally a good thing.

5.37 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke). It is a rare treat for us to agree on something, but I did find myself shouting, “Hear, hear” about his comments on adult education. All of us in the House would applaud that, but I urge him to look at what has happened to adult education during the past six years, because I am afraid that that ladder has been well and truly kicked away for many of the people wanting to get such skills later in life.

It is also a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt). I entirely agree with much of what he said, especially about how we should tackle some of the deep-rooted causes of inequality and of the lack of social mobility in this country. To the issues he raised about the quality of early years education, which is so critical, and technical and vocational education, which today, I would only add that we need enough quality teachers teaching all our children, but especially the most disadvantaged.

It is worth pondering for a moment, if you do not mind, Madam Deputy Speaker, that we should have been in the Chamber this evening to discuss a different education Bill—the education for all Bill, which was going to force all good and outstanding schools to become academies against their wishes. The Technical and Further Education Bill was only meant to be a small part of the bigger education for all Bill. I am glad we are not discussing that Bill, because it would have been a terrible mistake to force good and outstanding schools, against their wishes, to become academies, when we simply do not have the capacity, oversight and accountability in the system to tackle such a change. We all have to admit that in its place, we are left with a much-reduced education Bill. None the less, it contains some important principles, as others have said. I welcome the extra focus on post-16 vocational and technical education and the extra support the Government are giving it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central said, we should all welcome the direction of travel.

I want to raise a couple of issues with the unintended consequences of the Sainsbury review and how it is being implemented, including through measures in the Bill. I worry about the idea that, at 16, someone should choose either an entirely technical education or an entirely academic education. That is more akin to the grammar school era of the 1950s and ’60s than today’s world of work and modern economy. Most of the jobs that we need today and will need in the future involve a blended mix of academic and vocational education. They require general applied qualifications, where those two streams come together. As many Members have commented, that is exactly what the best university technical colleges and further education colleges provide—highly academic and highly technical education alongside one another.

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend mentioned joint pathways being undertaken by the same further education institutions. She might like to know that the secondary school where I am chair of governors has a construction academy attached to the main academy. We do everything from elite sport right through to construction and vocational pathways. It is all prestige and all rooted in academic and vocational attainment, all under one roof. We can do it from the beginning right through to further education.

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent intervention. It sounds like just the sort of institution we should explore further and support.

As I said, many of the jobs that we need today and will need in the future require both types of education. The pathways into professions such as nursing, engineering, health and social care and many more require a blend of general applied and academic education, as well as technical and vocational education. That will be especially true in post-Brexit Britain, where the supply of such workers is likely to be reduced further, particularly in nursing, social care, health and engineering. Closing down those pathways at this point in time could have serious unintended consequences.

It is a well-trodden pathway for people to go to university to study nursing, health and social care or engineering with an applied general academic qualification and some technical BTEC qualifications alongside it. That pathway is highly regarded by universities. We should be careful about closing down that pathway, because if Ministers look they will see that the vast majority of the tens of thousands of undergraduates who come into the system through that route have that blended mix of academic and vocational qualifications.
Rob Marris: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. We need to think about technical education not just for the jobs of tomorrow, but for the jobs of the day after tomorrow. I am considerably older than her and my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) is a little older than me. When he entered the workforce, let alone when I did decades ago, many skilled jobs existed that do not exist now, such as in printing. Typesetting basically does not exist now. The world has changed and we have to equip the coming generation with not only the skills they need now, but the flexibility to adapt to what the workforce will look like, inasmuch as we can foretell that, in the next 30 years.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes a great point, although I do not want to get into the relative ages of Members here. But I look at my own children and think of the world of work ahead of them. We perhaps have an old-fashioned view of jobs such as engineering—engineers come in all shapes and sizes now, from digital engineers, sound engineers and construction engineers to the other types of engineer that we may know about. A key issue with the productivity gap we are facing in this country is the problem we have in applying technology and technological advances in small and medium-sized companies.

I want children from Manchester Central to have exactly those types of skills; they will therefore need literacy, numeracy and other academic qualifications but also education in digital engineering and many other technical areas. The combination of the two will be the route for so many, and for all jobs in the future—I firmly believe that. I look at my own son, who I think will want to be an engineer one day: he is highly technically able—he has great skills there—but is highly academic as well. I want him to have the option to do both right through till 18.

The Minister seems to recognise the issue here, as he has recently the launched degree-level apprenticeship scheme, which I welcome. However, the tiny numbers involved in that scheme can in no way make up for the tens of thousands already going through the university vocational pathway. I hope that he is not falling foul of the same ideological dogma that his colleague the Minister for Schools and a previous Secretary of State for Education perhaps fell for in trying to cut away entirely the university professional pathway into teaching. As the Minister will know, that has in no small part caused the recruitment crisis in the teaching profession; stripping away the university pathway to teaching has meant that teacher supply is now at crisis point. I know the Minister, and so know that he is a lot more pragmatic than some of his colleagues; I urge him to watch the situation carefully, and make sure that these well-trodden routes—both academic and vocational—into professions remain very much open for our young people.

I will touch on a couple of other points that have already been raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central raised resits. I concur with him entirely. We have to look again at the enforcing of required resits post 16. In many cases, less than 50% of children are passing those GCSEs the second time around. Many FE and post-16 institutions are struggling to get in the teaching skills needed to get children through GCSEs, as that is not something they are used to doing. The size and nature of the maths and English curricula make them increasingly difficult for some children to pass, and they are not necessary for the types of careers those children may want to go on to.

Like my hon. Friend, I entirely support the notion that children should do English and maths right through to the age of 18, but the Minister should clarify what will be required for resits. Will it be a level 4 or a level 5? I understand that it is a level 4 this year and next year, and will then go to level 5. We do not know what is happening; never mind parents and children, what are employers to make of that?

Finally, we should not have this debate without looking at the international comparisons for our funding levels for 16-to-19 education in this country. We compare really badly with our OECD competitors: we do well in terms of funding from five to 16, but then there is a significant dip in per-pupil funding. After that, funding goes through the roof for those who make it to higher education. We need a better and more consistent funding stream. The transformation we need in this area will be achieved only when we couple this sort of reform with funding.

5.50 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): For too long, technical and vocational education has been seen as the poor relation to academic education, so I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment, in her speech last week, to bring the “same lens and focus” to the technical education routes that most people follow. Perhaps more than many hon. Members, I know the importance of technical education because my constituency sends fewer of its young people to higher education than any other, although we have a lot of young people in further education and on apprenticeships. That is the genesis of my interest in, and passion for, this issue and the Bill.

I want the Government to succeed with their ambitious target of 3 million apprenticeships. I also want the Government to succeed with the Bill because I believe its spirit is well placed. Its basis is sound, too, and I welcome the fact that it aims to deliver the recommendations of the Independent Panel on Technical Education, chaired by Lord Sainsbury, but—it is important for an Opposition party to have a “but”—I am concerned about a number of issues. I want the Bill to work for the people of Bristol South, so I want to use this contribution to seek some clarity from the Government.

The Institute of Apprenticeships and Technical Education will have a huge remit. I support its aims and will help to support its success, but I would like more detail about how it will deliver its remit in such a short timescale, especially as the Institute for Apprenticeships is currently operating without a permanent chief executive. As a member of the Public Accounts Committee, which looked at proposals for apprenticeships, I believe that there is a danger that the reform could suffer if the new institute’s remit also includes sweeping changes to technical education. Will the Minister assure us that such fears are groundless and that the institute’s “lens and focus” will remain rigorous?

As the Secretary of State acknowledged last week, the way in which we as a country help young people to fulfil their potential and use their talents will become more important than ever in post-Brexit Britain. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central
(Tristram Hunt) considered the positives that Brexit might bring in this area, but they will be something of a challenge. We all know that in any period of change and transition there is a danger of focusing only on future beneficiaries and neglecting those already in the system, especially if the existing system is flawed. I would therefore like assurances that my constituents who are going through the system will not lose out in the transition to the new framework.

It is important to consider those who stand to gain in the future: young people who are currently in school, and their parents and carers who want to help them to navigate and plan for their futures. What are the Government doing to ensure that those who will encounter the new system receive the guidance and advice they need now so that they will not lose out when the new frameworks and assessments are introduced? My concern stems from a number of new provisions, particularly in relation to university technical colleges. Parents are not involved in these discussions. As a parent of three boys in secondary school, it has been eye-opening to find out how little information gets to parents and how little we understand about the future of our own young people. We cannot allow those who lack the necessary prior knowledge to navigate the system to flounder, so will the Government please provide proactive support and guidance? How will they do that?

I take issue with the idea in the Bill that employers should be at the heart of the system. Surely it is students—young people themselves—whose interests must be at the heart of any Bill that seeks to improve their opportunities.

On social mobility, I have explained that my constituents’ interest in this matter runs deep, not least due to our low take-up of higher education, but there is more to it than that. I welcome the introduction of the 15 vocational pathways but, given that I represent a constituency in the FE sector and how apprenticeships can work when there is a danger of focusing only on future beneficiaries and neglecting those already in the system, especially if the existing system is flawed. I would therefore like assurances that my constituents who are going through the system will not lose out in the transition to the new framework.

I also want to know how young people will access opportunities in areas where local providers struggle to improve quality, alongside dealing with their financial difficulties. As the Minister is aware, the Public Accounts Committee has looked closely at the sustainability of the FE sector and how apprenticeships can work when providers are struggling. Some of the 15 routes appear to be apprentice-only openings but, as we know, many employers will not countenance taking on a 16-year-old apprentice. Additionally, what careers advice will be available to young people in my constituency to ensure they are best advised on which pathway to follow? I would welcome more clarity on the process for switching between academic and the technical routes, which I raised with the Government last week.

Finally, I appeal to the Government to make the revised system as easy to navigate as possible for young people, and their parents and carers. Much work has been done in recent years to make academic pathways easy to navigate, but we need to take the chance the Bill presents to ensure parity of transparency and ease of navigation for those pursuing this all-important technical route.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is a great privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), who rightly set the Minister a series of challenges around pathways, transparency, equivalency and all those sorts of things. She raised very important issues.

Drawing on the Association of College’s key facts and figures, I will begin by reminding the House of the value of colleges and their contribution to the country. Colleges provide a range of education and training, helping to provide skills and qualifications to students entering the workforce. Colleges educate and train 2.7 million people, including 1.9 million adults, and 744,000 16 to 18-year-olds choose to study in colleges. Almost every general further education college offers apprenticeships, with 306,000 people choosing to take one in a college. Some 153,000 people study higher education in colleges, and students aged 19-plus in further education generate an additional £70 billion for the economy over their lifetimes. It is worth reminding ourselves of the great contribution that colleges make.

I declare an interest as someone who has led a college—back when I had a real job—and therefore knows the nuts and bolts of doing that. John Leggott College in my constituency, which I was privileged to be principal of, is still doing a cracking job locally, as is North Lindsey College, the general FE college. These colleges make a real difference to people’s lives day in, day out. However, the funding challenges that colleges face are very real: a 17% cut in sixth-form college funding since 2011; and a significant squeeze in adult education funding, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) set out earlier.

I have high hopes for the Education Secretary, the first Secretary of State to have been educated in a comprehensive sixth-form college, but when she says that area-based reviews are already putting the sector on a sustainable funding footing for the future, I fear that she is being over-optimistic. The area-based reviews have reported, but nothing has really happened as a result. Indeed, if the funding cuts continue and the autumn statement does not contain a commitment to the 5% increase in college funding that the AOC is calling for, the challenges facing colleges will remain significant. I therefore do not think that area-based reviews will be the cavalry coming over the hill.

We have seen under this Government a plethora of confusion in post-16 provision. Area-based reviews did not look at the new university technical colleges or post-16 provision in schools. We have a complete hotch-potch: free schools, studio schools—a whole mess has replaced the preceding coherence.

I am in favour of university technical colleges where they are needed, but if a college is established as additional capacity in an area that does not need it, that creates much more inefficiency. It is not good enough for the Government to continue to fund such colleges more generously on the basis of estimates rather than real numbers. We see problems in these areas that we all know about as politicians—even in times of austerity, we can fund our pet projects—but it should not be like that, because that lets our young people down.

The insolvency scheme introduced by the Bill is probably not necessary, but we will need to see how it develops. The Sixth Form Colleges Association is concerned that
it might create unintended consequences in the way banks lend to the sector, so we need to make sure that the right conversations take place between the Government and the banks. We would not want the policy to make it more difficult for colleges to go about their business.

Let me pick up one or two issues that hon. Members have raised, starting with the debate over GCSE C grades in maths and English, and the matter of functional skills. When I was principal of a college, all our students did either English and maths GCSE, or functional skills. They are both good, solid qualifications, but overall it was the opposite of the holiday postcard: there was a very different feeling from “Wish you were here” in maths and English classes. Thankfully, however, and thanks to great maths and English teachers around the country, the situation has been transformed, and people now do quite well when they resit maths or English post-16. The post-16 sector has always had bespoke qualifications that are appropriate for an older age group studying additional qualifications alongside them, rather than a system of merely repeating what was done at the pre-16 level. I ask the Minister to think carefully about functional skills because it seems that they are being put to one side. If the Minister is going to correct that, it would be very helpful, because that is certainly felt outside this place.

The hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) is pursuing a good campaign on getting apprenticeships for young people with learning challenges, which I support. He cited the example of what is happening in the hospitality sector. My example would be a young constituent who recently contacted me. She has level 2 functional skills, which she achieved with great effort during her time in college. She is now doing a level 3 apprenticeship, but she has been told that she has to get a grade C in English GCSE and that her level 2 functional skills will not count. I hope that the Minister will confirm that he will brush that aside, because that seems like unnecessary repetition for a young person who has worked extremely hard. Instead of following the route suggested by the hon. Member for North Swindon, things seem to be going in the opposite direction, so I encourage the Minister to find ways to address the situation.

That brings me to the key point I want to focus on: the nature of applied general qualifications. As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central said, those qualifications are crucial so that young people can work towards the professions and jobs that will be needed when an ever-changing workforce face ever-changing challenges. Paragraph 2.18 of the “Post-16 Skills Plan” states:

“We plan to review the contribution of—

applied general qualifications—

“to preparing students for success in higher education; what part they can play in a reformed system; and the impact any reform would have on the government’s ambitions on widening participation. We will announce our decisions later in the year.”

Well, it is quite late in the year already, and those qualifications are crucial because of the way in which they work. They are combined with other qualifications: a student might study for a BTEC alongside an A-level, for instance. That combination allows flexibility, enabling them to gain applied general qualifications as well as academic qualifications, and to move forward positively and successfully. I know from my own experience that those qualifications have allowed young people who might not be suited to a full programme of three A-levels to find a successful model in an area in which they are interested and to which they are committed, with good, strong progression routes. I am anxious for us not to end up, in the course of our entirely proper search for more rigorous and effective technical education, throwing the baby of strong applied general qualifications out with the bathwater.

I know that the Sixth Form Colleges Association has been convening round tables of practitioners and arranging for members of the Department to visit sixth-form colleges to see the good work that is going on there, but I urge the Minister to champion applied general qualifications and the role that they can play for young people in driving up standards and developing progression routes. I hope that he will also give us some idea of when the review mentioned in the skills plan will take place, and when it is likely that a report will be produced.

6.7 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), who shared with us his professional experience of guiding many young people towards the paths that they need to take. It is a shame that we have not given greater priority to further education in the past, because the skills challenge that we face remains acute, as it has been for a very long time. My hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), the shadow Minister, shared with us her own rocky path from secondary education to a career and secure work. A number of people find it a difficult path. That is the challenge that the Bill seeks to meet, and many of us are supportive in respect of both the path and the challenge.

I left my school in Bognor Regis—ironically, the constituency of the Minister for School Standards—with almost no usable qualifications. I had to return to secondary school at the age of 25 to obtain the qualifications that I needed in order to return to the education system. I know from first-hand experience that for many young people, the door to education is slammed shut and needs to be broken down. We all tend to assume that the doors to education, and indeed to all our public services, are open all the time. I am very keen to remind Labour Members, as well as others, that doors are often shut and that it is our job to break them open, rather than expecting individuals to remove the barriers to getting the best out of our public services the first time round without waiting for the second.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend is making a strong point. Some years ago, funding for adult education at sixth-form colleges was taken away. Excellent teachers and wonderful facilities are no longer used in the evenings, which used to enable adults to go back and take A-levels, for example, and possibly go to university after that. The door was shut very firmly some years ago, and it should be reopened.

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend makes a good point.

This door being slammed shut, often in the faces of young people who do not have the skills to break it down or a background that they feel they have to break it down, is one of the reasons why we have ended up with a society where those who are asset-rich will succeed in life and those who are talent-rich but asset-poor will
very often not succeed. That is why it is incredibly important that we get this Bill right. It is of paramount importance for the Government’s plans for technical education, apprenticeships and the apprenticeship levy, which is now only a matter of months away from being launched.

It has long been my view that the levy as currently formatted is too rigid to fully take into account the skills challenges facing our country. When taking evidence on the issue of skills as a member of the Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills and as chair of the all-party group on further education and lifelong learning, it became clear that some sectors will struggle with the way the levy is currently formulated. The technology sector, for example, needs to invest very early, right back to the early years. I have visited many technology companies that are investing in nursery and primary education, and in secondary education. It is a sector that needs programming skills, and it needs imagination, flair and creativity in the way that people develop those skills. Often in such sectors post-16 is just too late. I support the apprenticeship levy, but we need to get it right, and if we are not careful we will end up with a perverse incentive in the system whereby technology companies are forced to invest in post-16 education, and in order to pay for it they will be withdrawing their support for pre-16 education, which would be a tragedy for our economy, particularly in the post-Brexit era when we might find that such companies struggle to secure investment and recruits from abroad with the right skills. We are entering tricky territory and we need to get this right first time. On mention of the word “Brexit”, I am very pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) is still in his place.

It also concerns me that existing spending on employer-sponsored degrees or graduate schemes will not be recognised by the levy; that risks closing those routes in favour of what could be entry-level apprenticeships in order for companies to get back what they pay for the levy. The Bill creates an institute for apprenticeships that also covers technical education. I want to see that institute play a strong role in ensuring that standards remain high in apprenticeships and technical education. I still have real concerns that the levy, along with the Government’s pledge to have 3 million apprenticeship starts—starts, not completions, I note—risks incentivising a dash for quantity rather than quality.

I listened with great interest to the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins). I have pressed him and the then Secretary of State to introduce a target for the number of apprenticeship starts at level 3 and above, because that is where the training will really address our skills needs. It is nice to know that someone has been reading all the parliamentary questions that I have been submitting on this subject, because the Policy Exchange’s report on apprenticeships, which was released on Friday, calls on the Government to do just that. I hope that the present Minister will take heed of that report. I would support him in embedding targets for quality as well as quantity in the Government’s plans.

I have also pressed the Government to set a target for apprenticeship completions, which I am sure we all agree is the key figure. There is no point in getting 3 million people to start apprenticeships if a significant number of them simply drop out. The Minister has not previously shown any interest in setting a target for completions, but I noted that the Secretary of State was more conciliatory on this point when responding to an intervention today. I hope that means that the door is still open and that such a target will now be considered.

The Institute for Public Policy Research report calls for an assurance that the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education will have the necessary resources and power properly to enforce quality standards. I totally agree with that. Only last week, I asked the Minister for details of the staffing levels for the institute. I hope that we will get clear answers to these questions during the passage of the Bill. Given the imminent closure of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, which did a great deal of work with employers to utilise labour market information to map out skills gaps and sectoral needs, it is vital that the institute is able to fill that void.

If it cannot, we will be much worse off.

The Bill also introduces a new insolvency regime for FE colleges, with the aim of protecting students if such an institution should become insolvent. The Government say that this follows on from the area reviews, which aimed to ensure that all FE colleges within a certain area were on a solid financial footing. In Brighton and Hove, we are lucky to have three excellent colleges: BHASVIC, City College and Varndean College. Our area review, covering Sussex, started last year, but despite an expectation that the final report would be published some months ago, it still has not seen the light of day. I hope the Minister can offer some reassurance to me and my neighbouring MPs, as well as those in other areas who are waiting for their reviews to be published, that they will be released shortly. Providers and students are anxious to know what the future holds for the institutions in which they work and study. In the Budget in March, which feels like a very long time ago, the Government pledged to “review the gaps in support for lifetime learning, including for flexible and part-time study.”
Will the Minister update us on that, too. When can we expect the results of that study?

I welcome the Bill as a chance to focus on technical and further education, which often feels neglected in the overall educational landscape in this place and beyond. However, the Bill and the Government’s policy priorities leave a lot of questions unanswered, and I hope that the Bill’s passage through Parliament will give us a chance to remedy that.

6.18 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in the debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle). He is currently the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on further education and lifelong learning—a job that I had many years ago. I have had a long association with the further education and post-16 sector. I taught in further education more than 40 years ago, and while I was teaching a basic statistics course I discovered that one of the major problems with education in Britain is the poor level of mathematics teaching. The students I taught had difficulty with basic computation, multiplication and division. I found that quite shocking at the time, but the problem has continued.

Some 20 years ago, the great Lord Claus Moser produced a report on numeracy and literacy, finding that more than 50% of the population was functionally innumerate. He illustrated that point by saying that 50% of the population did not understand what 50% meant, which is quite surprising—if not shocking. More recently, I asked the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), why we were having to recruit so many qualified engineers from abroad and he said that it was because our mathematics is not good enough to produce sufficient engineers. There is a serious problem.

Rob Marris: Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the problem with mathematics is down to English culture? It is still acceptable for people to say words to the effect of, “Ooh, I don’t do maths,” without that being seen by the students to the effect of, “Oh, shall we put them in the FE sector?” It was a last-minute thought just to drop them into that sector.

Kelvin Hopkins: I agree with my hon. Friend, but it is changing and I am optimistic about that. People such as me who are good at maths are regarded as being a bit of a geek, but what is wrong with being good at maths? In the country of Isaac Newton, Isambard Kingdom Brunel and Alan Turing, why should we be ashamed of being good at maths? That is being addressed, but we are still having to recruit thousands of engineers from abroad because people cannot do the maths to become engineers through our education system.

As I said, I taught in further education 40 years ago, but I also spent four years as chair of governors at the then Luton College of Higher Education when we were producing hundreds of qualified engineers doing ONCs, HNCs and then AMIMechEs and so on. They were good engineers and they could do the maths. It may just be that we have declined in some areas because the manufacturing demand is not as great as it was. We are now trying to pick up the manufacturing sector again and we are realising that we have missed out on maths.

I am happy to say that Luton College of Higher Education went on to become the University of Luton and then the University of Bedfordshire. The vice-chancellor is now Bill Rammell, a former colleague in Parliament, and its chancellor is Mr Speaker—the greatest honour of all—and I am absolutely delighted about that. I have also been a governor of the superb Luton Sixth Form College for 25 years. It does brilliant work and gets better and better every year.

Barnfield College is also in my constituency. A dozen or so years ago, it was the first ever general FE college to be given beacon status, but it went into serious decline and wound up almost collapsing into a state of failure a year or two back. It has now been picked up by its great new principal Tim Eyton-Jones and I am sure that it will be revived, but it needs Government support. It should never have been allowed to get into that situation. The neglect of colleges was criminal. Barnfield is now on the up and will be great again, but it needs the active support of Government, particularly in finance.

In Parliament, I was for some years chair of the all-party parliamentary group on further education and lifelong learning—lifelong learning is also important—but I am now chair of the all-party parliamentary group on sixth form colleges and am pleased about that. Colleges in general, FE colleges in particular, have been neglected over decades. Colleges represent an abused sector of education, and one reason for that is that so many people in the political sphere have no connection with further education. They go to posh schools—grammar schools, public schools, whatever—and then to university. Indeed, some become special advisers—a former Spad is in our midst now—and then go into politics never having touched further education or understood what it is about.

Rob Marris: Does my hon. Friend recall the reorganisation of Government Departments in about 2007—sadly under a Labour Government—when the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills was set up? It took a week for the Government to realise that they had not put further education in either of the two possible Departments.

Kelvin Hopkins: There is another story, which may not be true, about what happened when incorporation was introduced in 1993. When the legislation was going through, the then Education Secretary was asked what was going to happen to sixth-form colleges and he said, “Oh, shall we put them in the FE sector?” It was a last-minute thought just to drop them into that sector. Sixth-form colleges are really schools and had they stayed with the local education authorities, we would by now have a lot more of them because LEAs would never have given away all the sixth-forms from their schools to create new sixth-form colleges because they were a different, independent sector.

Unfortunately, LEAs, and indeed, councillors are possessive about their institutions and do not want to give them away. I have experience of that, because when I was chair of governors of the Luton College of Higher Education, we had a battle royal to get that college into the higher education sector—out of LEA control and into the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council.
The chief education officer threatened to sack the college principal for pursuing that avenue, and I had to intervene to say to the CEO publicly, “If you sack the principal, you will have me to contend with and I will fight you all the way.” He backed off and we got what became the University of Luton and, subsequently, the University of Bedfordshire. LEAs are, understandably, possessive and they are not going to give away their sixth-forms to move towards sixth-form colleges. Had they done that, our education system would be much better, but that is another story.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about people’s understanding or experience of the FE sector, but may I just invite him to reflect on the statement he made a moment or so ago? He said that the Conservative Benches are full of posh boys and girls who went to posh schools. A good four or five of us sitting on the Parliamentary Private Secretary Bench this afternoon paid no fees at all for our education and are products of state school, hard work and good teachers.

Kelvin Hopkins: I thank the hon. gentleman for his intervention, but I think the majority of Members, probably on both sides of this House, have not gone through the further education sector. A small number have, and they understand this, but a high proportion are not very familiar with FE and the vast contribution it makes to our society, in all sorts of ways.

Karin Smyth: I agree with my hon. Friend. I went to an FE college to do my A-levels, but what he is saying applies not just to politicians, but to people in our media, our legal establishment and throughout other walks of life. They do not have experience of going through that sector, which means that it is often the forgotten sector.

Kelvin Hopkins: I agree with my hon. Friend about that, and of course another cultural factor is the fact that we are not aware of things. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) says, there is this idea that mathematics is something we do not do; we say, “Oh, I can’t do maths”. People do not boast about how they cannot read. They do not have experience of going through that sector, which means that it is often the forgotten sector.

Kelvin Hopkins: I agree with my hon. Friend about that, and of course another cultural factor is the fact that we are not aware of things. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) says, there is this idea that mathematics is something we do not do; we say, “Oh, I can’t do maths”. People do not boast about how they cannot read. They do not have experience of going through that sector, which means that it is often the forgotten sector.

Kelvin Hopkins: I thank the hon. gentleman for his intervention, but I think the majority of Members, probably on both sides of this House, have not gone through the further education sector. A small number have, and they understand this, but a high proportion are not very familiar with FE and the vast contribution it makes to our society, in all sorts of ways.

Kelvin Hopkins: Indeed. In my day, it was certainly an excellent college and we did our very best.

I keep digressing from the points I am trying to make. One problem we have is that we try to pick up problems in mathematics post-16, in further education—as shown in Alison Wolf’s report—when the real problem is lower down. If someone misses out on maths in primary education, they will have much more serious problems later on. Picking it up later is much harder than picking it up at six, seven, eight or nine. My two granddaughters are studying at a wonderful school, and they are very good at maths. One was doing her long division, or whatever, yesterday, and she got every single question right, because they are being well taught now. I hope that that will feed through the system, but it certainly was not the case all those years ago when I was teaching.

At the sixth-form college—I hope that this can happen in FE colleges as well—we are putting massive resources intensively into retakes for GCSE maths. The retake results, as in most places, were appalling until about two years ago; then we introduced a system with extra resource and the best possible teachers and we doubled the pass rate for GCSE retakes. That means that many more youngsters can go off to university or to apprenticeships with a maths qualification at A to C. It can be done, but it is hard work and takes more resource. I hope that the Government will recognise that. If they want to get the maths results up post-16, resource has to be put in. That means recruiting more teachers and ensuring that we have the best teachers teaching maths—people like my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), who feel comfortable with the subject. Someone who is comfortable with maths is more likely to be a good teacher of maths than someone who feels uncomfortable or who has it as an add-on to something they have been doing elsewhere.

There are many other points I wish to make, but some have been made by my hon. Friends and by honourable colleagues on the Opposition Benches.
[Kelvin Hopkins]

The contribution that sixth-form colleges must make to our communities and our economy is vital for our future. If we do not get it right, we will not have the successful future we should have. We will see a declining scientific and technical culture, which we cannot afford. We must ensure that our maths is good and that our maths teaching is good at every level. Picking it up in further education has to be done, even though it is difficult, and I support Alison Wolf and her report, but we have a long way to go to ensure that we catch up with some of those other countries.

6.33 pm

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I must declare that I, too, am a comprehensive-educated special adviser from a long time ago, which may be familiar to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. We will move on from that. I spent many years in business, too, and that is why I am pleased to be able to speak in this debate.

Before I get to the meat of my remarks, I want to join my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) and the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) in recognising the important work that FE colleges do throughout the country. In Macclesfield, we have a great principal in Rachel Kay, who is moving things forward. That is great.

There have been lots of interesting developments over the past few months. Following on from Brexit, there has been Trexit—we might want to think what is Nextx—[HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] It took a while. It is not clear what will happen, except that it is clear that there are vital lessons we need to learn. One lesson I took away from the referendum campaign and from Brexit was that there was an underlying concern from many people across the country about the impact of immigration.

As I spoke to people during the referendum campaign, it was clear to me that the concern ran deeper than just that. There was a sense of insecurity and a desire for greater security about jobs, work and prospects for the future. Those concerns will not be addressed by changes to immigration policy alone. That is why the Government are right to take a more comprehensive approach, a more comprehensive response, working to enhance an industrial strategy, continuing with welfare reforms, and pressing ahead with plans to address the skills gap that has been too prevalent for far too long. That is why this Bill is so important.

Since being elected in 2010, I have often spoken in the House on the importance of social mobility. I want to see more first-time entrepreneurs, more first-time employers, more first-time exporters and, crucially for those from the most challenging backgrounds, more first-time employees. A strong focus on those four roles, the four E’s, as I call them, and on motivating people to take on those roles, especially for the first time, delivers the key to economic success.

Progress in technical and further education and in apprenticeships is vital for the life chances of those seeking first-time employment. I therefore strongly support the Bill. I support it because it seeks to open clear, defined, aspirational paths to success, and it has the potential to help create much-needed parity of esteem between academic education and technical education, as has been talked about during the debate. That is further evidence that we on the Government Benches are the real workers party and that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills is at the vanguard of that movement.

Lucy Powell: There is nobody behind him, though!

David Rutley: Let us move on—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We cannot have sedentary remarks and remarks from behind the Chair. That is simply impossible.

David Rutley: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Lucy Powell: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to put it on the record that it was I who was speaking from a sedentary position. The Minister is indeed at the vanguard, but the only other discernible member of the Government is the Minister for the Armed Forces, who is standing behind the Speaker’s Chair.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): May I make a quick point? As the debate has highlighted today, it is quality, not quantity, that counts.

David Rutley: Indeed.

The Bill is timely. After strenuous efforts to stabilise the economy following the financial crisis, the UK faces a new opportunity—and some challenges—in Brexit. If we are to make a success of leaving the EU, it is increasingly urgent that we tackle our long-standing productivity gap compared with other leading economies. The challenge is to upskill the existing and future British workforce. It is interesting that the Chartered Management Institute says that one in four jobs was left vacant in 2015, owing to skills shortages.

Kelvin Hopkins: The hon. Gentleman is right to focus on our poor productivity level, but poor productivity often results from the availability of cheap labour because employers are not forced to invest in modern technology. That is a factor in the equation. Low productivity and low-priced labour are a problem for us.

David Rutley: The Government have already put in place improvements to the national living wage and will do more in that arena. Productivity is about a lot more than wages. From contributions that the hon. Gentleman has made in previous debates, I know that he is fully aware of that, too. The situation is more complicated.

One in four jobs left vacant in 2015 were due to skills shortages. The CBI has found that one in five employers want candidates for jobs who not only have academic qualifications but can demonstrate other skills as well. So the Government must ensure that their efforts to close the skills gap inspire and motivate those who would gain most—those in training and businesses that need their skills. If we are to strive to achieve the greater parity of esteem that we have talked about and to get businesses actively involved in education and training, we need to motivate more young people who are planning to pursue the non-academic track to gain the skills that will transform their lives. Only then will we secure the prize of greater national productivity. Wages have a role to play, but so, increasingly, does motivating young people to want to acquire these skills.
The key to promoting technical training will be the Government’s drive to provide 15 clear routes to 3 million quality apprenticeships. These routes are set out in the post-16 skills plan, which was published in July. It is a strong plan; my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) deserves real credit for setting it out, and I join the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) in wishing him a speedy and full recovery from his current health challenges. Those routes—or “occupational categories” as they are called in the Bill—will signpost such sectors as construction, catering and hospitality, and vital ones such as engineering and manufacturing. The obvious, recognisable nature of these categories will give young people the assurance they need that apprenticeships are, and will be, focused on delivering identifiable careers and are relevant to their own fields of vocational interest. Relevance is absolutely key.

Confidence in these routes as genuine career paths can be bolstered only by involving businesses in their design. Fostering links between business and schools, and between business and the rightly reconstituted Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, has never been more urgent. The Government have taken the initiative in encouraging businesses to step up to the plate and to deliver employer-led technical education that addresses the skills gap. I hope businesses will now seize this opportunity—it is vital that they do.

The Bill should be seen as part of a process of going further in breaking down the barriers between education and business—between school lessons and work experience. I have talked to my right hon. Friend the Minister about this. We need to get more young people out of school and into business, and more businesses into schools and further education. Indeed, schools themselves need to be made more aware of the options for, and the importance of, motivating young men and women in the classroom about wider opportunities to develop skills and career options.

No one in the House wants schools to feel they are being imposed on by the Bill; we want them to recognise the benefits of the Bill for the futures of the young people in their care. It is important to establish, as set out in part 3 of the Bill, an information-sharing relationship between the Department, schools, academies, colleges and other providers. Businesses, too, will need to find it easy to engage with education providers to be motivated to participate. Those relationships will need to be forged—in some cases, from scratch.

Fortunately, there is good practice—from existing schemes to introduce business skills into schools—to learn from and extend. For example, Young Enterprise and Enabling Enterprise provide teachers with opportunities to link up with business, and supply model exercises in flexible, transferable life and work skills. Young Enterprise already has relationships with over 50% of secondary schools. I shall be interested to hear—although this is not directly relevant to the Bill; it relates to the wider issue of what we can do to engage and motivate people—what role my right hon. Friend believes these schemes will play in this vital area of motivating more people.

There is much more that we need to do to close these skills gaps. In South Korea, for example, there is a clear difference between the skills gap among 55 to 65-year-olds, nearly half of whom are low-skilled, and among 16 to 24-year-olds, who have a much higher skills base. In England, however, about 30% of the 16 to 24-year-old age group and the 55 to 65-year-old age group are classified by the OECD as having low skills. It is clear that we are not closing the gap for the different age cohorts, and the Bill will be fundamental in taking that work forward.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely keen to move things forward on social mobility and to play his part in the party for the workers, which he has helped to articulate in recent years.

Rob Marris: The hon. Gentleman is extolling the party for the workers, so does he agree that workers and workers’ representatives, and not simply employers, should be involved in institutions?

David Rutley: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. The Prime Minister has already talked about how we should look at having workers on the boards of companies. Let us see how we can take that forward, and what role they can play.

My right hon. Friend the Minister has a role to play in taking the Bill forward, and he has helped to articulate it further. I wish him well in the work that he is doing. He has already done important work in securing extra funding for businesses that take on an apprentice who has grown up in care. That shows that he has real credibility in driving this agenda forward.

As Conservative Members seek to build a Britain that works for everyone, we must promote social mobility and open up young people’s horizons to new experiences and aspirations beyond their own backgrounds. The Bill is vital in taking that work forward. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will also take the opportunity to learn ways to bring businesses into the classroom and help more young people get out into the world of work. The Bill is an important start, and I wish him well with it.

6.45 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I thank everyone who has spoken today. We have had a thoughtful, productive and constructive debate. Among Conservative Members, I particularly welcome the comments of the hon. Members for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), for Macclesfield (David Rutley) and for Dover (Charlie Elphicke). The hon. Member for North Swindon is not in his place—[Interruption.] Oh, I am sorry; he is. I particularly want to congratulate him and my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), on the work that they did on the review of access to apprenticeships for those with learning disabilities, which was really important.

We have had some excellent speeches from Opposition Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) quoted the famous American academic Robert Putnam on the decline of technical education and made a powerful argument for UTCs. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) talked about the importance of adult learning and the need to worry about the binary split, and I will say a couple of things about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) pressed hard the need for upskilling, on the basis of the number of people in FE and schools in her constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), a most excellent former college head, spoke delightfully
for his sector. He talked about the “cavalry coming over the hill”, but I think that the area-based reviews are not so much the cavalry coming over the hill as the “Charge of the Light Brigade”.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) drew on his considerable business and FE experience and talked about the rigidity of the levy. The Minister and his colleagues would do well to take on board the points made. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) brought his own wealth of experience to discuss the pitfalls of reorganisation, and he reminded us all of how these processes come and go and sometimes reincorporate themselves.

The Bill is timely, even if the methodology of its appearance is curious. If we wonder why it is necessary and why the Government should introduce it in a mood of humility, we need only survey the state of play in the twin areas of its operation. I bring to the House’s attention a document published today by Alison Wolf called “Remaking Tertiary Education”, which was supported by the Education Policy Institute. That research finds that technical education at levels 4 and 5 is on the verge of total collapse in terms of numbers. In 2014-15, only 4,900 learners achieved level 4 awards. In England, technical post-secondary awards now account for less than 2% of the qualifications taken and well under 1% of all qualifications funded in the skills system. Where level 4 and 5 qualifications are being delivered, they are not in subjects that meet the needs of the UK economy or labour market. Those are things that we should all think very hard about, and I look forward to Professor Wolf’s further observations when she comes before the Bill Committee as a witness.

We have heard about the decline in the financial health of the sector, and current forecasts suggest that the number of colleges under strain is set to rise rapidly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) said in her excellent speech, it is no wonder, given the alarm bells about their continued viability that the Skills Funding Agency and the National Audit Office have been ringing. It is not just FE colleges that are feeling the strain. In September 2016, a Sixth Form Colleges Association survey showed that two thirds of colleges had dropped courses as a result of funding pressures, a third did not believe that next year’s funding would be sufficient and 31% thought that the college would cease to be financially viable in the next three years.

That is the context in which the Government decided to introduce a stand-alone Technical and Further Education Bill. We all know why they have done so: because the academies Bill into which they wanted to drop these measures as a feel-good sweetener has itself been dropped. The entire process has been mired in dither, uncertainty and an overall lack of connection. There was no attempt to put these measures into the Higher Education and Research Bill, where they would naturally have fitted. Rightly, the HE White Paper hanged on strongly about the importance of technical and higher education skills. However, we have to look at the Bill before us.

As we have said, there is no role in the Bill for apprentices or learners to be on the board or to be involved with setting standards. We are right to draw parallels with the way in which, in the recent Higher Education and Research Bill, the Government resisted putting stakeholders—in that case, students; in this case, apprentices—into a new institution that is crucial for their success.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gordon Marsden: I am afraid that I will not because I am short of time. [Interruption.]

I am sorry, but it was
forward. We agree with the Association of Colleges that the Government have missed an opportunity to introduce a legal scheme that would apply to FE and HE corporates. This means that a college might have an additional regulatory burden that will make it harder to secure finance.

The skills plan itself is not without criticisms—how strategic it will be post-Brexit, and on productivity, workplace training and adult training—and the Government will need to talk about such issues. The concerns about binary choices and standards, which my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central spoke about, have been echoed by me, the general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers and the University and College Union. We are also concerned about the potentially limiting scope of some of the routes. As Mark Dawe, the chief executive of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, has said, a large proportion of jobs in the economy will be outside the scope of the routes. As a Blackpool pool MP, with my local FE college, I believe it is crucial that the service sector, which will potentially provide huge numbers of apprenticeships and jobs, is not left out of the process.

There is no reference to the new institute having any responsibility to widen access, and nothing on a strategy to promote participation among care leavers, people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds or those with disabilities. We need that to be in the Bill. We agree with the excellent analysis of Shane Chown, the head of policy at the Learning and Work Institute, on that point. We agree that the Bill ought to enshrine the recommendations of the Maynard review, to which we contributed. It suggested that the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills revisit the recommendations of the Little report of 2012. The Bill needs to do more for looked-after children and care leavers.

Insolvency might force some students to travel longer distances, but the Bill makes no reference to how they might be compensated or how difficult it might be for suburban and rural colleges. All these points strengthen our argument for the return of the education maintenance allowance.

I spoke earlier this afternoon about the problems the Government have got themselves into over careers advice. If we are to make a success of the institute, it is crucial that young people are alerted early in their school life to the importance and attraction of technical routes, and we must maximise the opportunities for them to get work tasters that translate into real work experience.

I am glad that the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills has shown more enthusiasm for the progression from traineeships to apprenticeships than a couple of his predecessors. Traineeships are a key point of entry that can make more young people competitive. However, traineeships have to be progressive. If not, there is a danger that we will see some of the issues we saw in the 1980s.

Finally, I come to the issue of devo-max. In view of the potential for combined authorities to take on skills and education, why does the Bill not take more account of the potential for devolved skills policy? All it contains is a brief but important reference to the need for such authorities to report their statistics to preserve a national database. That is hardly an endorsement of the potential to drive apprenticeships and skills at a local level.

We speak in this debate having seen two overviews from two key think-tanks, the Institute for Public Policy Research and Policy Exchange, cast doubt on the Government’s direction of travel. The Government need to think very hard about some of the issues raised, such as whether level 2 apprenticeships are too job specific and whether a significant proportion of the apprenticeship standards are inadequate and a cause for concern. We will give the Bill a fair hearing. We want the Bill to succeed, but if it is to succeed there needs to be more detail and we need to hear less self-congratulation from Ministers and more aspiration for the groups that they have signally not included in the Bill.

6.58 pm

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): I welcome the thoughtful contributions to the debate from Members on both sides of the House.

This important Bill has two purposes: to provide high-quality technical education to students; and, when colleges are suffering extreme financial difficulties, to provide clarity in the unlikely event of insolvency while protecting students as part of the process. The Bill has the protection and best interests of students at its heart, which is why David Hughes, the chief executive of the Association of Colleges, has stated that he is “pleased that the Government is continuing to take forward the measures outlined in the Post-16 Skills Plan”.

The Bill is vital because we face serious challenges: a chronic shortage of high-skilled technicians; acute skills shortages in science, technology, engineering and maths; and low levels of literacy and numeracy compared with other OECD countries. A number of Members have raised an important issue about maths. We do not yet require all 17-year-olds who have not achieved an A to C in maths and English to resit the qualifications. Students who achieve lower than a D grade at 16 may take other qualifications. We are looking at functional skills. I want functional skills to be better and for them to be as prestigious to employers as other skills.

Robert Halfon: I ask the hon. Gentleman to hold on on one second, because he said that he wanted resources for maths, and we have invested £67 million to recruit up to 2,500 additional maths and physics teachers, and to upskill up to 15,000 non-specialists. We are investing the resources.

Kelvin Hopkins: I will not give way because of the shortage of time.

A number of hon. Members mentioned the Maynard reforms. We will implement those as soon as we possibly can, particularly with regard to the issue of maths for those with disabilities. We will inform the House as progress is made.

The hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) talked about the levy and technology. The thing is that if companies have apprentices, they do not pay the levy, and they get 10% on top. This is about changing behaviour and raising money to fund millions of apprenticeships in our country.
We have substantially grown apprenticeships, with 619,000 starts, which is why we have the levy. It will have an impact on employers with a pay bill of £3 million or more and help to fund the quantity and quality of apprenticeship training. We are dramatically reducing the number of technical qualifications available, ensuring even better quality for students.

A lot has been said about FE funding, but by 2020 more will be spent on FE and skills participation than at any time in our island’s history—£3.4 billion in the year 2019-20. My hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) correctly described FE as a ladder of opportunity for young people.

We are adopting the Sainsbury report, as has been suggested, and will put in place 15 high-quality technical routes to skilled employment. Those will be implemented by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, which will oversee the employer-led reforms.

We are proud of the university technical colleges. There is clearly a debate here, as some Members want those for pupils at 14 and some for education at 16. That debate will no doubt continue, but we allow flexible entry to UTCs in certain circumstances.

My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) asked about the role of business. We have created the Careers & Enterprise Company to boost businesses’ linking up with students in schools.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) talked about representation. I am very keen for all kinds of organisations to be represented. I am a trade union member myself, and I am very proud that this Government give Unionlearn £12 million. It has an incredible fund that supports thousands of learners and apprentices. I very much hope that trade unions will be involved in the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. The institute will ensure that all technical provision, across both apprenticeships and college-based courses, matches the very best in the world.

Rob Marris: Will the Minister give way?

Robert Halfon: I am sorry, but we have very little time.

Rob Marris: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Order Paper I have says that this debate can continue until 10 pm. Am I misreading it?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): No, indeed. The hon. Gentleman is technically absolutely correct that the debate can continue until 10 o’clock.

Tristram Hunt: Wahey!

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr Hunt is excited at the prospect of another three hours from the Minister, but it is incumbent on every Member of this House to judge the mood of the House, the pace of the debate and the necessity of taking up the time of the House. From my observation and experience, a speech of between 10 and 15 minutes from a Minister winding up is usually appropriate and welcomed by most Members of the House.

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman and other Opposition Members talked about quality, not quantity. They should practise what they preach.

Let me give an example of the technical education reforms in practice. For someone aspiring to be an engineer, rather than choosing from the 500 qualifications that are currently on offer, many of which hold very little value for employers, there will be one clear route: the new engineering and manufacturing route. That individual will choose an apprenticeship or college-based technical education course by choosing an occupation. They will initially learn a broad base of knowledge based on one approved standard per occupation, and then they will specialise, for example towards electrical engineering. The awarded certificate will be universally recognised and have real value for employers. That is an example of the nature of our technical reforms.

There is no doubt that FE and sixth-form colleges play a vital role in our education system, as the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) noted so brilliantly. That is why I have visited my own FE college more than 50 times since becoming an MP. FE colleges act as genuine centres of expertise. We know that, because 80% of colleges are either good or outstanding, and 79% of adult FE students get jobs, move to apprenticeships or progress to university afterwards. It is worth noting that 59% of institutions are in good financial health and 52% are operating with a surplus.

A minority of colleges, however, are in serious financial difficulties—about 40 colleges face these problems. In supporting these colleges, we forecast by March 2017 a total spend of £140 million on exceptional financial support. That £140 million could have been invested in students. We have to deal with the roots of these problems and ensure that we protect students, which was why we started the area reviews, about which there has been much discussion. They will be completed by March 2017 and will ensure financial resilience, strong leadership and well-governed institutions.

The insolvency regime under the Bill will clarify what all involved should a college become insolvent, and will reassure creditors about how their debt will be treated.

Jo Churchill: Will the Minister give way for a brief intervention?

Robert Halfon: I am very sorry, but I cannot because of time, even to my hon. Friend. I apologise.

Let me be clear: no FE or sixth-form college will close as a direct result of the Bill. The Bill will help to ensure prudent borrowing and lending, and to safeguard the protection of students.

The insololvency regime under the Bill will clarify what will happen should a college become insolvent. The special administrative regime we are introducing will allow Ministers to take action to ensure that learners are protected. There will be duties on the Secretary of State to promote education, and to provide suitable apprenticeship training and basic skills training for certain people. All existing statutory requirements will stay in place. Local authorities are also legally responsible for promoting effective participation and making clear how transport arrangements support young people of sixth-form age to access opportunities. That is not to say, however, that creditors are not important. Colleges and banks have long worked together to grow and develop the FE sector. The Bill will introduce a clear process for all involved should a college become insolvent, and will reassure creditors about how their debt will be treated.
The reforms in the Bill are fundamental to the Government’s vision for a country that works for everyone. It will ensure that we improve the skills base in our country, that we increase our economic productivity, that we protect students, and that those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have a chance to climb up the ladder of opportunity. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

TECHNICAL AND FURTHER EDUCATION BILL

(PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Technical and Further Education Bill:

Committal
1. The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee
2. Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 6 December 2016.
3. The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading
4. Proceedings on Consideration and the proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.
5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.
6. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

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

Question agreed to.

TECHNICAL AND FURTHER EDUCATION BILL

(MONEY)

Queen’s recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Technical and Further Education Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, and
(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(Heather Wheeler.)

Question agreed to.

TECHNICAL AND FURTHER EDUCATION BILL

(WAYS AND MEANS)

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Technical and Further Education Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the charging of fees, and
(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(Heather Wheeler.)

Question agreed to.

HOMELESSNESS REDUCTION BILL

(MONEY)

Queen’s recommendation signified.

Resolved.

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Homelessness Reduction Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(Mr Marcus Jones.)
M25: Dartford

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

7.10 pm

Mr Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): I am extremely sorry that the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) did not get his way and see the previous debate continue for a further three hours, because that would have given me time to actually write a speech. It is a bit of a disaster, but I am sure that my hon. Friends the Members for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) and for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) will be delighted.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): You’ve got three hours, Adam.

Mr Holloway: I’ll need all of it.

This debate has been rather boringly entitled “M25: Dartford” but this is not a boring subject at all—I and my hon. Friends the Members for Dartford, for Thurrock and for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) have been looking at this for several years. What we do about another Thames crossing will affect tens of millions of journeys over the next 30 years. Drivers up and down the country, in Kent and Essex, Dartford and Thurrock, are being affected by the appalling congestion at Dartford.

To a very considerable degree, this debate is also about the appalling situation facing the residents of Dartford. As my dear friend—my hon. Friend, although I am not so sure about the others. My hon. Friends the Members for Dartford, for Thurrock and for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) have been looking at this at for several years. Drivers up and down the country, in Kent and Essex, Dartford and Thurrock, are being affected by the appalling congestion at Dartford.

To a very considerable degree, this debate is also about the appalling situation facing the residents of Dartford. As my dear friend—my hon. Friend, although I am not so sure about the others.

Mr Holloway: I completely agree. There is no solution if it adds to the problems faced by the people of Dartford and Thurrock. I shall come back to that.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): As a slightly dispassionate observer from the other end of the county, in east Kent, it seems to me that there is a need for new capacity across the Thames. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as a matter of principle—irrespective of the location—there must be a new crossing?

Mr Holloway: Absolutely—100%. A few months ago, I had Mr Potts of the Highways Agency in my office, and I got quite heated with him. I got him to admit that, however many crossings he built to the east of the existing crossing, he would at some point have to come back and fix the M25 at Dartford. It is possible to fix the problems of the M25 only if they are fixed at Dartford. Let me explain why.

There are several different types of traffic that all meet in the congested area between Dartford and Thurrock. First, there is what we could call national long-range traffic. Secondly, there is the regional traffic off the A14 in Essex and off the A2 in Kent. Thirdly, there is the local traffic—people going to hospital appointments or collecting children from school on either side at the exits in Dartford. The problem is that those three different categories—fast, long-range traffic to someone doing the school run—collide at Dartford and, into the mix, we also have to throw heavy goods vehicles and dangerous goods vehicles, as well as a huge amount of freight that comes in from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke).

Dartford to the south, we will notice that the M25 goes straight through both places. At the moment, we have two tunnels, one very good, the very poor, going from south to north, and a great big bridge running north to south. The problems of congestion tend to be in Dartford because heavy goods vehicles have to cross through the right-hand tunnels. Thurrock is awful as well, but since we have had free-flow traffic, it is not as bad. Thurrock is as bad or as good as the rest of the M25, but Dartford remains a real problem.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Holloway: I would love to give way to my hon. Friend, although I am not so sure about the others.

Stephen Metcalfe: My hon. Friend and I know the problems all too well from our own experience, and he is giving a good description of the problems we face coming from south across a bridge that closes when the wind blows too hard and from tunnels that are not up to spec. Part of the reason for the problem is that that crossing has developed with no real strategy over the last 50 years. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is where the problem lies, and that it is where we must focus our solution? We posed a question back in 2009 that we are trying to answer in 2016, but we have forgotten what the original exam question was. We have had so many changes of teacher and lesson plan since that time that we are now trying to answer the wrong question. We need to get right back to the basics.

Mr Holloway: I completely agree. There is no solution if it adds to the problems faced by the people of Dartford and Thurrock. I shall come back to that.
If we want to fix the problem at Dartford, therefore, we have to find some way of separating those three different types of traffic. As I have said, there were originally a number of options, including option A at Dartford, but none of them, including the current option C, meant new roads to connect one bit of the M25 to another.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Can he tell us why he believes that Highways England, the local enterprise partnership, the freight and haulage industry, Ebbsfleet Development Corporation, both county councils, Lakeside, Bluewater, the port authorities, the chambers of commerce—and the list goes on—are all wrong and he is right on this issue?

Mr Holloway: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for that. I am about to provide an even longer list of people who are in favour of option C, so I shall answer his question then.

Charlie Elphicke: My hon. Friend said he agreed that there must be a crossing somewhere. Wherever that crossing goes, does he agree that it should not simply plug back into the M25, but that there needs to be a join-across to the M11, so that there can be a corridor through to the north of the nation?

Mr Holloway: Yes. There is only one real option now—option C—but I think that if option A were accepted that should be the case, and, indeed, the same would apply to any of the other options, historically.

Charlie Elphicke: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Holloway: Yes, once more.

Charlie Elphicke: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend. This is my last intervention.

Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are not to make this some glorified M25 relief road, but a route from the channel ports to the north of the nation, we ought to upgrade the A2 as well?

Mr Holloway: Again, I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Friend. I also think that it is crazy for all those freight trains to offload at Ashford when they could easily trundle on for another two hours and be well north of the affected area.

Stephen Metcalfe: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Holloway: Of course. I thank my hon. Friend for making my speech for me.

Stephen Metcalfe: We are pleased to be of assistance.

May I return to my earlier point? We all accept that something needs to be done. I do not think anyone doubts that there is a problem of congestion in our part of north Kent and south Essex, caused by a crossing which, according to a written answer from the Department for Transport, failed 300 times last year in one way or another. I entirely understand the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) about an alternative route linking up with the wider road network. That is all very welcome, and option C might well fulfil that requirement. What it would not do, however—because it would remove only 14% of the traffic—is address the problem where it exists. We have a crossing that is not fit for purpose at the moment, and we need to focus our energies on that.

Mr Holloway: I am really enjoying agreeing with everyone so far this evening. As I have said, for many years no one really thought that option B, C, D or E would be chosen. I remember one of my friends, who was the roads Minister at the time, saying, “Don’t worry; it will be option A, another bridge at Dartford.” I have every sympathy with my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford, and I understand his concerns, but we never thought that options that did not do something to ameliorate the M25 would ever be selected. Even the Highways England guy accepts that at some point you will have to go back and fix the problems of the M25, because the M25 is still going down that route today, as it did 30 years ago and as it will in 30 years’ time.

Gareth Johnson: My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. Does he not accept that the solution is not to funnel more and more traffic through the narrow corridor that is the approach to the Dartford crossing at Dartford? Should we not have more resilience, as we have across the rest of the Thames, and site crossings at various different locations? My hon. Friend seems to be advocating the funneling of more traffic into the Dartford area, whereas the solution, surely, is to take traffic away and site the crossing east of Gravesend.

Mr Holloway: I think that the solution lies in any number of measures, but there certainly needs to be further capacity. I agree that we cannot try to squeeze more and more stuff into that collision of long-range national, regional and local traffic. I think that we need to seriously revisit the idea of taking Dartford and Thurrock out of the equation. I have spoken to tunnelling experts who say that that is eminently doable. We need—and it is perfectly feasible—a long tunnel that would start south of the A2 and pop out north of the A14, and vice versa, to swallow up the traffic. The effect of such a tunnel would really depend on numbers, and numbers are a moving target. As I shall explain a little later, Highways England is extremely good at making numbers fit whatever its argument is at the time. However, let us say for argument’s sake that 40%—it could be more, but Highways England would say that it was very much less—of the traffic that goes through your constituency, or hangs around for hours in your constituency, killing your constituents—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. By coincidence, the hon. Gentleman’s mistake is actually correct. He is unaware that he has used the word “you”. I never pick people up on that on the first occasion when it is a mistake, but the hon. Gentleman is an experienced parliamentarian, and he will know that if he says “you”, he is referring to the Chair. Normally I object very significantly if a Member says “you”, meaning another Member but technically referring to me. In this case, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct to refer to me, but wrong to do so in the way that he did.

Mr Holloway: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; of course you are right and I am sure you have also experienced the nightmare at the Dartford crossing.
For argument’s sake, let us say that the national long-range through-traffic going from the area around Gatwick, along the M25 and then up to the north of England without going anywhere near the exits at Dartford and Thurrock is 40%. If we could somehow get rid of all or most of that 40%, we would suddenly find we had 60% of the traffic remaining. So if we were to build a long tunnel, the regional and local traffic, and presumably some heavy-goods traffic, could use the existing crossings, which would, I would think, be great for the people of Dartford and Thurrock, and the through-traffic would not be seen at all.

I understand that Highways England thinks that when in 2025 the road to nowhere to the east of Gravesend is built—unfortunately, the road has no further connectivity south of the A2, which has not been considered too well—there will be only a 14% reduction at Dartford. I intend to comment later on the fact that Highways England has not provided the public with the numbers, although it may have provided them to Ministers.

Mr Holloway: As I have suggested, I have very little confidence in Highways England’s numbers, and that was underlined for me by the meeting a couple of weeks ago where the guy said with a straight face that 12% of the traffic was through-traffic. I will come on to this in a minute, but the benefit-cost ratios are almost changed to fit whatever crisis Highways England has been having at a particular point.

So the crossing to nowhere, east of Gravesend, would reduce the traffic at Dartford by 14% when built. Apparently, it would also reduce by about 25% the number of trucks coming up from Dover at the existing crossing. However, that is nothing compared with the benefits of a long tunnel completely bypassing Dartford and Thurrock. Highways England’s sham consultation does not even mention a new crossing at Dartford; it mentions only option C.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford has pointed out that the only people who now seem to be against option C are those who live in the areas that would be affected by it, or Members such as my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) and myself, who represent people who will be affected. I have here a list of the people and organisations who want this new road to nowhere. It is a formidable list, and it includes: Highways England; Kent County Council; Essex County Council; the South East local enterprise partnership; Dubai Ports World London Gateway; the Claridon Group; Ebbsfleet Development Corporation; Kent Invicta chamber of commerce; St Modwen Properties; the Port of Dover; London chamber of commerce and industry; the Port of Tilbury; Essex chamber of commerce; intu Lakeside; the Port of London Authority; London Southend airport; Eurotunnel; Kent Developers Group; Navigator Terminals; Glenny LLP; and Cogent Land LLP. Annoyingly, the list also includes the Freight Transport Association and the Road Haulage Association.

Kent and Essex County Councils—and, indeed, all those others—have, quite understandably from their perspective, leapt at the opportunities for economic growth offered by a crossing east of Gravesend. However, the group of people that no one has been thinking about is the road users. They are the ones who will actually have to drive on the M25 over the next few decades.

Charlie Elphicke: That is a formidable list, and my hon. Friend has mentioned road users such as the Road Haulage Association and the Freight Transport Association. Given the length of his list, is it not possible that this might actually be the best location, even though it might prove difficult for him and his constituents?

Mr Holloway: I will say more about my constituents in a moment. One reason that I read out the list is that this could become yet another great disconnect between the political and business classes and the ordinary people—not that we need much reminding of such things, given recent events in the world. The message has not yet got out to the users of the M25, but at some point it will. They are the people who will be most affected by this proposal. It was a big disappointment to me that road hauliers support it, because I was pretty sure that they would come on side, given that it is very expensive to have a truck sitting idling in traffic for hours and hours. My worst experience of that lasted about two and a half hours, and anyone else listening to this debate will have their own memories of such nightmares.
Stephen Metcalfe: I recently met a representative of a logistics company based in Thurrock—unfortunately, this was after we had met the Road Haulage Association and the Freight Transport Association—who estimated that when the crossing fails, the traffic backs up at a rate of a mile for every minute it is closed. The area would therefore still become gridlocked when the existing crossing fails even if a new crossing were to be built to the east. Unfortunately, I did not have that evidence when we held those important meetings. Had I done so, perhaps it would have changed people’s minds.

Mr Holloway: Thank you for helping me out there. I did not actually know that. That is very useful. I am looking around the Chamber. Sometimes, the public do not appreciate that many of the people who are not here are actually working quite hard elsewhere. The reality is that the Chamber is virtually empty and that all but one or two Members here have a personal interest in this case. If people realised the enormity of the carnage that will follow if we do not take this opportunity to fix the M25 at Dartford for another 30 years, or however long it takes before we have to come back to sort it, this place would be full of MPs from all parties. There might actually be some Labour Members who would be genuinely and deeply worried about the situation for their constituents and the constituents of Members in the decades to come. The problem is that the people of England have not yet spoken on this matter because they have not realised what the decision to go ahead with option C will mean.

My neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Dartford rightly pointed out that, as the Member for Gravesham, I will of course be against the proposal—not strictly true, but I will come to that in a moment—but it is true that it will blight thousands of homes in my constituency and others. I hope that I have shown this occasionally in my 11 years in this place, but if I believed that the road to nowhere to the east of Gravesham was the right decision, I would pluck up the considerable courage needed to go and see my friend Rev. Nigel Bourne, the rector of Chalk, my friends in the Higham action group or the Shorne action group, with whom we have been working for many years, and the people of the villages of Higham, Shorne, Chalk or Riverview Park to tell them. I would try to show some moral courage even if they hated me forevermore.

However, I will not do that, because the reality is that the proposal is a looming disaster that will become a scandal for this Government when the public realise that the £5 billion opportunity to fix the M25 is about to be wasted and when we all realise that it is too late to stop a plan that will result in another 30 years of misery. There are entirely viable schemes, including the seven-mile tunnel under Dartford and Thurrock in option A, but Ministers in the Department for Transport are highly competent, intelligent people—

Stephen Metcalfe: Hear, hear.

Mr Holloway: It is true, but they are not experts on roads. Ministers must listen to the people who pass for experts—in this case, Highways England.

Stephen Metcalfe: My hon. Friend and I have been communicating with a Mr Potts from Highways England. He has now left his current position and is moving on to pastures new—I am sure we both wish him well. Everyone knows that something needs to be done here, but my worry is that we are unable to step off the path we are on because there is no continuity. We have had a change of Ministers, all of whom are capable as my hon. Friend said, and a change of personnel in Highways England. My great concern is that we are on this path and will keep plodding along it without actually taking stock of what we are trying to achieve.

Mr Holloway: Absolutely. One thing that I have noted in my time here is that we are told that certain things must happen or cannot happen. Back in about 2007, when we again had appalling traffic at Dartford, I remember writing on behalf of constituents to say that it was crazy that people have to pay money at the toll and asking why we could not have a free-flow system. We were told back then—I presume by the same people—that there was absolutely no way that we could have a free flow because of some safety thing, but that suddenly disappeared. Quangos change their numbers and what they say depending on where the argument is going. We have seen that in some of the disastrous military ventures over the past decade. Officials do sometimes get it wrong. Ministers are prudent to listen to the experts in their Department, but that does not mean that they are always right or that they are always looking after the interests of ordinary people who, in this case, have to use the road for years.

I completely get where my hon. Friends the Members for South Basildon and East Thurrock and for Dartford are coming from, because when the question of a new crossing at Dartford came up, they would rightly have been horrified, equating it with more traffic. But if I were one of them right now, I would be on my knees begging the roads Minister to look at something that could separate the traffic out at Dartford, and I would be begging the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Transport, and writing to the Prime Minister.

Gareth Johnson rose—

Mr Holloway: I will give way in a moment. I fear that something has happened with the political classes in these places. It has almost become a sort of truism: it is quite hard to go anywhere now. I do not know whether I am allowed to ask a question to someone who is about to intervene on me, but I will throw this out there: I would have thought that, if this were possible, my hon. Friend would love to see a long tunnel that could save his constituents.

Gareth Johnson: Yes, I would, but that tunnel would be east of Gravesham. I ask my hon. Friend to consider carefully the fact that any road system we put in place at the approach to the existing Dartford crossing—option A, the alternative advocated by him—would result in at least six years of roadworks and would kill the Thames Gateway area. It would kill the house building and enterprise that exists in that place and would be devastating for local communities, who are already suffering from pollution, which is going through the roof. I ask him to consider some of those issues and to understand that the option C route provides an alternative to all those downsides and can help seriously to improve the current traffic congestion from which we suffer.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. May I say to the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) that I am allowing interventions to be very long on the
understanding that people will not make speeches, but these interventions are turning into mini-speeches themselves? If people kept their interventions a little more brief, I would be grateful.

Mr Holloway: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Tell that to your constituents in 10 years’ time, when the problem at Dartford has not been ameliorated by a long tunnel to the east of Gravesend. Again, I am not an expert, but I think you are thinking in the old way and you are still—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is speaking through the Chair, so if he would refer to the hon. Member for Dartford, I would be grateful.

Mr Holloway: I am sure you are not thinking in the old way, Madam Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford may be thinking in terms of six years of disaster, building new bridges and so on. I am not an expert on tunnelling, but I would have thought that, where a tunnel is being built, there is inconvenience from things such as ventilation shafts. However, where a tunnel is being started to the south of the A2 or north of the A14—


Mr Holloway: A13. Where that is being done, there are an awful lot of large fields for the large equipment, and all that expertise that we currently have in Britain as a result of the building of Crossrail is available, all in the cause of swallowing up the traffic and rescuing constituents—whether 40% or 12%, if we believe Highways England, or whatever the number is.

Stephen Metcalfe: The Member for Thurrock may be thinking in terms of coming up the A2 and coming round the M25?

Mr Holloway: I thank my hon. Friend for that, and that point has been made by Bob Lane, who has been chairing the opposition to the proposal in my constituency. Understandably, early on, when someone raised the prospect of yet another crossing at Dartford, local residents were concerned that it would lead to more traffic, but they were not aware of the tunnel option. Indeed, I think that there are a few other options that would be considerably less intrusive than what they originally had in mind, which was another great big bridge, squeezing a few more lanes through.

Everyone in this country suffers because of the huge economic disbenefits of millions of hours lost to the economy because of traffic. This is an unquantified figure that is not in Highways England’s cost-benefit analysis. The cost-benefit analysis is traditionally used to assess the value for money of something, so it represents the ratio of benefits to cost. If the benefits of a proposal are smaller than the cost, that is, if the benefit-cost ratio is less than one—I am sorry to do this, but it is important—it would represent bad value for money. Generally, the higher the BCR, the better the value for money.

During the 2013 Department for Transport consultation on options for a new Thames crossing, it is telling that reducing congestion was only one of the five key criteria. A comparison of cost and value for money was carried out and BCRs were produced for option A and option C. In 2013, option A’s indicative BCR was between 1.0 and 1.8 and option C’s BCR was between 1.2 and 1.3. We then come to 2016 and Highways England’s consultation and the BCR for location A had gone from 1.5 to 0.9—that is, bad value—and for location C, it had gone to between 2.3 and 1.7, a complete turnaround. I say it again: they fit the numbers to suit the argument, in my view. That takes absolutely no account of the economic disbenefits of people sitting in that traffic for another couple of generations.

I am sorry to be slightly evangelical, but for the good of millions of people, over many years of misery, I ask anyone hearing this debate to tell their friends and not to say that they were not warned. We only fix the M25 at Dartford by fixing the M25 at Dartford. We have an historic opportunity to fix it for all those people living in the south-east of England, all those people driving through and, in particular, for the people of Dartford for whom, if I were in the shoes of my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford, I would be on my knees.

Gareth Johnson: Does my hon. Friend agree that in many ways this is a conversation and a debate that we should have been having 15 years ago? Frankly, it is outrageous that nothing has taken place since the bridge was built to tackle the increasing congestion and projected increase in traffic flows at the Dartford crossing. We are therefore playing catch-up after the failure of what has gone before.

Mr Holloway: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. People in my constituency have spoken about him—people from Gravesham speaking about the Member for Dartford—and have said what an amazing fight he has put up over the years for his people, as has, more recently, my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Thurrock. I am not disputing that at all. He is to be commended for that. However, we now have a chance, possibly, and we should be looking into it. I remember speaking to him about the M25 a few months ago, trying to persuade him of this. I think there is a chance.

We should be getting Ministers to talk seriously to Highways England and the tunnelling firms. If we flunk this final chance in favour of a ludicrous scheme that has morphed from solving the misery at Dartford to include road capacity, economic regeneration and all
sorts of other things, we will, even by Highways England's own account, have to come back to fix the M25 at some point in the future. For 30 years or whatever the period is, people will have to sit in traffic if this bizarre decision goes through. I pray that in 15 years' time people do not look back on us and think that we were the guilty men and women.

7.50 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): It is a great pleasure to respond to the debate and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr Holloway) on securing it. It is not the first time that he has raised these matters either in the House or with me. He is diligent in addressing the concerns of his constituents in this regard.

By the standard of Adjournment debates, we have already had an extensive exploration of the subjects before us. For that reason, and so as not to tire the House or delay those Members who wish to make strides towards other important and exciting events, I will abbreviate my remarks by responding closely to what has been said in the debate already. I have 10 points to make, some of which are contained in the text prepared for me and some of which are not; I say that chillingly, as far as my future is concerned, but it will be, I have no doubt, for the excitement of the Chamber.

First, my hon. Friend and other Members, including you, Madam Deputy Speaker, have known me long enough and seen me often enough to know that however he might characterise other members of the Government, heaven forbid, I am not a man who is a slave to the advice that I receive from my Department. I would not go as far as to say that I entirely share the views of my right hon. Friend called for consistency. In that sense, I am the personification of consistency in this job because I have no doubt, for the excitement of the Chamber.

Secondly, I am very familiar with the subject of this debate, having been in the Department before. My hon. Friend called for consistency. In that sense, I am the personification of consistency in this job because I have done it twice. I am not sure that many other people could say that about any job in government. I looked at the matters closely when I was first in the Department, and as he will know. Since then things have changed, but they have changed only in one way: the problem of congestion has, if anything, become greater. He will know that there are now around 55 million vehicle crossings a year. The crossing is operating at overcapacity of around 117%. Even with free-flow charging, congestion is a very significant problem. There has been a 7% increase in traffic volumes in the past year alone.

I know how difficult the problem of congestion is for my hon. Friend's constituents and others who use the crossing, including those who use it for national purposes. I was impressed by what he said about the numbers and the split between local, regional and national traffic in as much detail as we reasonably can. These are not exact figures—we would have to count every vehicle and determine where it was going, why it was going there and where it came from to get those numbers pinpoint accurate—but we can work on broader numbers to his satisfaction.

The third point I would make is that there are no fixed views about this. There was an implication that the Government are entirely rigid in their approach to this matter. That is not true. The circumstances are changing and highly dynamic—I have already illustrated that in what I said about changing volumes—so it is important that we are open-minded. Where there is an absolute consistency—indeed, a certainty—is that we cannot leave things as they are.

Mr Holloway: Absolutely. I completely accept what my right hon. Friend says about Ministers, but I do think that Highways England's mind is probably closed.

That was well demonstrated by the fact that the so-called consultation we had, which 49,000 people answered, did not, I think, even mention option A.

Mr Hayes: In the end, Highways England is answerable to Ministers, who are answerable to this House. In the approach I outlined at the outset, in the first of my 10 points, I made it clear that Ministers should take the decisions and that those missioned to make those decisions happen should deal not with those key strategic matters but with the delivery of the strategy determined by Government. I hear what my hon. Friend says, and I tell him what I will do—this is not one of my 10 points, but I will add a point, if I might do so, with your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I do not want to lead anyone up the garden path. I will meet the chief executive of Highways England tomorrow and raise exactly this point. I will tell him what has been said tonight, and I will test his view of these things. I will make it clear that we need to be open-minded and to take an evidential approach; we certainly need to take the views of those who know best—by that, I mean my hon. Friend and others—very seriously indeed.

Mr Holloway: Would my right hon. Friend also commend it to those officials that they answer the questions of Mr Steve Gooding, who is the director of the RAC Foundation, and a former very senior official at the Department for Transport? He and the head of another very large motoring organisation have concerns that this has morphed from something just about roads and transport into something much wider. Mr Gooding shares the Minister's concerns that we need some proper, hard numbers. It is clearly complete nonsense to say that only 12% of this stuff is long-range through traffic. I know that the Minister is determined to get to the truth of this, too.

Mr Hayes: As my hon. Friend also knows, I am, by and large, in favour of faith, but I am not sure, when one is dealing with road traffic analysis, that things can be quite a matter of faith. I think it does, as I said, need to be empirical, and I will certainly make that point.

The gentleman my hon. Friend referred to has corresponded with me in just the last couple of days, when he was admiring my work as Minister, I am delighted to be able to report to the House. I will certainly discuss with him his views on these matters when I have the chance to do so.
Let me move to my next point. My hon. Friend spoke about the split between local and national traffic. He is right to say that the solutions for each may well have to take a rather different form. Now, I can tell that there is something of a—I will not put this too strongly—creative tension between the perspectives of my hon. Friends the Members for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) and for Gravesham. I do not want to draw too much close attention to those differences, but both of my hon. Friends have their point, and both make it well on behalf of their constituents. I understand those arguments, and it is because we are wrestling with them, and trying to get this right, that we are not fixed in our view of what solution would be best. Clearly, we have been through a consultation, we have looked at options for a crossing further east, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham, and indeed the whole House, is well aware, and we are still deliberating on those matters. However, I would not want to give the impression that we are not aware, and we are still deliberating on those matters. However, I would not want to give the impression that we are not prepared to listen. We certainly are prepared to continue to listen to the overtures that are made in this House and elsewhere.

Gareth Johnson: Because I am prepared to listen, I need to give way to my hon. Friend.

Mr Hayes: That is certainly true. It is also true that Highways England needs to do more in the way in which it communicates with Members of Parliament. I have told it so and, to its credit, it has taken that on board. My hon. Friend will know that it is now holding a series of meetings with colleagues from across the country to discuss local and regional concerns. That is a direct result of the emphasis that I placed, when I returned to the Department, on the need for Highways England to provide hon. and right hon. Members with accurate information of the kind that has been requested tonight.

I want to move on, because it is not right that I detain the House unduly, although I want to respond as fully as possible to my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham and others. The existing crossing is at capacity for much of the time, as I have said, and it is one of the least reliable sections of England’s strategic road network of motorways and major trunk roads. Closures and congestion occur frequently and have a big impact on business and communities regionally, locally and elsewhere in the UK.

I emphasise that we can, however, do more with the existing crossing. Reference has been made to the Dart Charge, and hon. Members will know that the introduction of Dart Charge necessitated some changes to the way in which the crossing is managed. Even with free-flow charging, as I have said, there is a congestion problem. We can take a close look at what more can be done. The road signage on the northbound crossing approach is being reviewed, and we are looking at the movements of different types of vehicles as they approach the crossing to see what improvements can be made. Work continues with local authorities on both sides of the crossing to improve traffic flows between the local and strategic road networks. That includes a joint approach from Highways England and Kent County Council on a number of improvement measures for the junctions used by traffic approaching the crossing from Dartford.

Highways England will continue, on my instruction, to monitor the conditions at the crossing and to understand the various factors contributing to its performance. I want to make sure that, notwithstanding the wider debate about a second crossing, we are using the existing system as effectively and efficiently as we can. I note that point, which has been made by various hon. Members, and I think we can probably do more. We are certainly looking at the matter closely, and I will bring further information to the House when we have done so.

Gareth Johnson: I am heartened that the Minister appreciates that wherever the new lower Thames crossing is situated, a lot of work will need to be carried out to mitigate the existing problems at the Dartford crossing. Does he agree that Highways England needs to take a radical approach? It needs to look at the possibility of partially closing junctions and at the better management of box junctions, as does the Department for Transport. Highways England needs to look at this whole matter in a radical way so that we can ensure that, during the approximately 10 years it will take to build the lower Thames crossing, my constituents are not held to ransom by the traffic congestion that we suffer daily.

Mr Hayes: That is certainly true. It is also true that Highways England needs to do more in the way in which it communicates with Members of Parliament. I have told it so and, to its credit, it has taken that on board. My hon. Friend will know that it is now holding a series of meetings with colleagues from across the country to discuss local and regional concerns. That is a direct result of the emphasis that I placed, when I returned to the Department, on the need for Highways England to provide hon. and right hon. Members with accurate information of the kind that has been requested tonight.

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application of imagination that he describes is necessary for making best use of the existing capacity, as well as when looking at changes that are needed.

To that end, it is worth saying something about the M25 more widely. My hon. Friend the Member for Gravesend mentioned the M25, if I may put it in these terms, in the round. He is right to say that looking just at the crossing without considering the wider road network would be an error of judgment. We will look at it more widely, and in my meeting with him I want to explore the issue of the M25 in full to ensure that while the steps we take may be many miles from the crossing, they will have an effect on it. He is right to draw the House’s attention to the M25 per se.

My hon. Friend was also right to talk about continuing dialogue with the community. I have spoken about the exchanges between Highways England and hon. Members, but it is important that the community—through Members and other representative bodies such as local councils—is taken fully into account. I will ensure that that happens in parallel with the work that Highways England does with colleagues.

Highways England has a challenging task, and it is easy for us to be very critical of it. I am quite tough, frankly, with those who work with and for me, but I think that we should adopt a tough and appreciative tone. We recognise that Highways England will be trying its best to get this right, and we need to work with it to ensure the best possible outcome for road users. I will be demanding, but at the same time I want to be appreciative of its efforts.

Mr Holloway rose—

Mr Hayes: I am sure my hon. Friend shares that view and is dying to make that clear in his next intervention.

Mr Holloway: Absolutely. However, I urge the Minister to have a look—this is in my file, but I cannot find it now—at how the criteria have changed. They were originally about the capacity to rescue the constituents of my hon. Friend for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) and everyone else from sitting in the traffic, but they are now about all sorts of other things, including wider economic benefits. I think that five new criteria have emerged, and that needs to be looked at because this should be a roads project.

Mr Hayes: That is a very good point. If I am right that we need to communicate effectively with constituents and others, it will also be right to do so with a settled view about priorities. We should of course be flexible enough to take account of changing circumstances of growing demand, but we cannot keep moving the goalposts. I hear what my hon. Friend says and I want to look at that closely, but I will not make any definitive comments about it now. Again, I will be happy to raise that with Highways England so that he, other Members of the House and the wider public can be sure that the criteria used are consistent, reasoned and well communicated. That is not an unreasonable request—it seems to me to be a perfectly modest one—and I will make sure that it is made.

I am rattling through my points, as you can tell, Madam Deputy Speaker, but before I bring my remarks to a conclusion, the House will expect me to say something about the lower Thames crossing. A lot of work has been done on it, and I do not want to repeat what the House will already know. Most Members in the Chamber are very familiar with this territory, if I may say so. Let me simply emphasise that the objectives of any further crossing are plain and straightforward: value for money, which to me is critical in any changes that are made; improving the resilience of the Thames crossings and the major road network; improving safety; minimising adverse impacts on the local community, health and the environment; and dealing with congestion.

I will, if I may, add a further element that has not been announced in this House previously, but which I think is a common-sense approach that has been given life and substance by tonight’s debate: we must try to look to the long term. It is a perennial challenge for the Government to make infrastructure decisions that are sufficient and appropriate for the long term. That is not straightforward, because one is projecting and modelling sometimes for many decades ahead. When we build a new road or crossing, or invest in a major piece of infrastructure, we do so not for our generation and perhaps not for the next, but for the generations to come, because those things last decades. It is right, in any decisions we take, to take full account of the long-term trends and changes that any changes we make will have to cope with. That point was made forcefully earlier in the debate and I want to add it to the core list that I have just read.

Mr Holloway: The Minister talked about affordability, value, resilience, safety, minimum impact and capacity, and then mentioned the long-term, but what is desperately needed now is capacity. Option C does not provide the capacity that is needed right now by the tens of millions of people who are suffering in traffic queues. Once we have sorted out capacity, by all means let us go for some of those other things and have a conversation about something to the east of Gravesend or wherever, but let us not confuse two things. The problem is the disaster at Dartford and it will be a complete scandal if we do not sort that out.

Mr Hayes: Of course my hon. Friend is right that we must deal with the imperative. The imperative problem, as I have described it, is one of growing congestion, growing demand, compromises therefore on the rest of the road network, inconvenience for travellers, disruption to businesses and so on. Of course, in dealing with those imperatives, not to take account of what will happen later would be a failure.

Governments, as I have said, are not always good at looking at long-term strategic decisions. That is why Governments in democratic polities tend to underinvest in infrastructure. It is quite bold and brave to think 20, 30, 50 or even 100 years hence, but when one is making big decisions about infrastructure, that is exactly what one is trying to do. It can only be based on an estimate, an understanding of the trends and a set of models. It can be based on nothing else because we cannot be certain how, why or by what means people will travel in 100 years’ time, but the roads and bridges we build will certainly last that long. All the evidence of the past suggests that they do, does it not? There is no contradiction in taking decisions that deal with the imperatives while doing so in a way that looks at things for the long term.
Stephen Metcalfe rose—

Mr Hayes: I will give way once more and then move to my exciting peroration.

Stephen Metcalfe: It is a pleasure to have a Minister at the Dispatch Box who understands the issues so clearly—he has been in his job twice, as he points out. The figures from Highways England point out that if we were to pursue its proposed route, by 2035 the capacity at the existing Dartford crossing would again exceed 100%. We really must focus—I respectfully ask the Minister to do so—on solving the problem where it exists at the moment. If we do that, we can work towards other long-term solutions for the M25 at a later point. Let us solve the problem that we have set out to solve now.

Mr Hayes: I will not go into great detail about—

Gareth Johnson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I do not want unnecessarily to suggest that there is antagonism in the Chamber, but given that I have already given way generously to one side of the argument, in an exercise in balance I ought to give way to the other.

Gareth Johnson: In a final intervention, may I be so bold as to give the Minister a brief history lesson? When in the 1600s it was decided that London bridge was too congested, the town planners of the day decided that they would not put another crossing right next to the existing one, but would give some resilience to London. The same situation happened again and again, so we have crossings at various locations in London. That is exactly what we need to do for the future. We must ensure that we have a separate crossing location east of Gravesend.

Mr Hayes: I wonder whether the House has heard enough about the origins of London bridge and whether my hon. Friend might apply for an Adjournment debate on just that subject. I would be delighted to respond to that debate if I were given the opportunity to do so. We could then explore the veracity of his suggestion about the arguments that were advanced then, and why they were advanced. I have a limited knowledge of the history of that time in London and of that bridge, so I assume that everything he has said until now has been entirely accurate.

This matter has been brought before the House a number of times. It is of great concern to the Government. We went about the business, as Members will know, of consulting on the crossing of the Thames that my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford strongly supports, and more than 47,000 people took part in that consultation. I said earlier that we are analysing the results, and we will say more in due course. But I emphasise again that this debate has served a useful purpose in drawing the House’s attention to the balance between the pressing imperatives at Dartford, which I fully appreciate and in no way make light of, and the wider need to ensure that there is adequate capacity to deal with demand to cross the River Thames, which my hon. Friend has articulated so effectively.

The assumption sometimes affects politicians—sometimes, indeed, emasculates them—that we are merely creatures of circumstance. That is not true. In the words of Benjamin Disraeli:

“Circumstances are the creatures of men. We are free agents, and man is more powerful than matter.”

It is now for good men and women to consider these things fully and in the round, on the basis of the evidence that I described earlier, and to come to appropriate judgments. That is the job of Government. These things are not easy, for government is not easy, but we are determined to do what is right. To that end, I say again that my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham has done the House a service in drawing its attention once more to these important matters.

Question put and agreed to.

8.18 pm

House adjourned.
Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): What plans he has to prevent excess deaths in the winter of 2016-17.

Mr Dunne: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman included in his survey the fact that the reduction in the establishment payment to each pharmacy will be of the order of £200 a week from 1 December, and £400 a week from 1 April. How many of those pharmacies in Dudley will not be able to sustain that reduction in Government subsidy? We use community pharmacies to undertake flu vaccinations for which they will be paid.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): What can be done to reduce the effect of winter pressures on the bed state of our acute hospitals and thus reduce the awful phenomenon of bed blocking this winter?

Mr Dunne: As my hon. Friend knows, we are taking steps, in particular through the sustainable transformation plans, to increase the integration of social care and the health sector. For this winter, we are working hard on delayed transfers of care, to try to ensure that there is more rapid patient flow through our hospitals. That involves closer integration with social care professionals to encourage quicker discharges from the hospitals.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): One way of making sure that people do not die in the winter or at any other time is for this Government to concentrate on keeping hospitals open, thereby saving the beds. In that context, why does the Secretary of State refuse to answer the question why hospitals such as Bolsover and another half a dozen in Derbyshire are secretly being closed and Ministers are doing nothing about it?

Mr Dunne: The question is about flu vaccinations and I strongly encourage the hon. Gentleman to join me in having a flu vaccination, as I believe he is one of the eligible individuals. In relation to Derbyshire, the local health services there are working together to identify the best pattern of provision for a sustainable health service for the future.

Mr Speaker: The question was about the prevention of excess deaths, so the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) was entirely in order in his interpretation of the question. It was not about flu vaccinations, and nobody should mislead the House, however inadvertently.
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Kettering general hospital would be better able to deal with winter pressures were it given permission to develop its urgent care hub. The hospital tells me that its application has been with NHS Improvement for nine months now. Will the Minister prod NHS Improvement to get a move on in approving this application?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend held an Adjournment debate recently which I was pleased to respond to. We discussed the status of Kettering general hospital and the foundation trust that runs it. He is correct that it is discussing with NHS Improvement the development of a business case for an urgent care hub, and this is being considered in the context of the wider sustainability and transformation plan. Mr Speaker, I accept your admonishment in respect of my answer to the previous question. Of course, one of the primary solutions to winter excess deaths is the flu vaccination programme.

Mr Speaker: Or even admonition.

Hospitals in Special Measures

2. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What progress has been made on turning around hospitals in special measures.

Mr Hunt: Let me tell the hon. Lady that what is different now is that we have a special measures regime. When Labour was in power, the problems were swept under the carpet and not dealt with. Now they are being dealt with because we want every NHS patient to have confidence that we will not have another Mid Staffs. That is why we are making very good progress. With respect to funding, may I respectfully tell her that had we followed her party’s spending plans, the NHS would have £1.3 billion less this year?

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that with depressing regularity the same hospitals come up on that list that he has just referred to. Sustainability and transformation plans provide the opportunity to address some of the unsustainable elements of local health economies, but only, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) says, if the money is there. With the health service facing its tightest financial settlement in its history, these plans are just not deliverable.

Mr Hunt: The right hon. Gentleman understands health extremely well, both from his ministerial position and from being on the Select Committee. If he looks at the hospitals going into special measures, he will see that we are beginning to succeed in moving hospitals out of special measures, but because we have an independent inspection regime, sometimes other ones go in. That is how it should be. That is what works very well in the education sector and is beginning to work well in driving up standards in health care as well.

To go back to my answer to the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), £1.3 billion more in the NHS this year compared with what would have been put into the NHS if Labour had won the last election means 30,000 nurses, 13,000 doctors or 200,000 hip replacements that we are able to do because of this Government’s funding of the NHS.

Healthcare Spending

3. Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): How much his Department spent on healthcare as a proportion of GDP in (a) 2009-10 and (b) 2015-16; and what estimate he has made of the amount that will be spent on healthcare as a proportion of GDP in 2020-21.

Mr Hunt: Let me tell the hon. Lady that what is different now is that we have a special measures regime. When Labour was in power, the problems were swept under the carpet and not dealt with. Now they are being dealt with because we want every NHS patient to have confidence that we will not have another Mid Staffs. That is why we are making very good progress. With respect to funding, may I respectfully tell her that had we followed her party’s spending plans, the NHS would have £1.3 billion less this year?

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Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for taking time last week to visit the Peterborough City hospital and to praise the magnificent staff there, who are labouring under a £35 million annual private finance initiative millstone. Is the wider context not that we would have a lot more money to spend on front-line care if we did not have to deal with a poisonous legacy from Labour of £64 billion of appalling PFI contracts in the NHS?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I was incredibly impressed with the staff I met at Peterborough hospital—there was incredible commitment to patients and some fantastic work going on in the oncology and renal departments, which I visited. He is right: PFI was a disastrous mistake, saddling hospitals up and down the country with huge amounts of debt, which cannot now be put into front-line patient care. We are doing everything we can to sort that out and not repeat those mistakes.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the NHS spends only about £400 million a year on homoeopathic medicine and treatments through the 400 doctors who have trained in homoeopathy and are members of the faculty. If he wants to reduce antibiotic prescribing, may I suggest that he increases that budget, because there are very good scientific trials now showing that upper respiratory tract infections can be treated using homoeopathic medicine? May I write to him about that?

Mr Hunt: May I commend my hon. Friend for his great persistence in flying the flag for homoeopathic medicine? While we must always follow the science in the way we spend our money on medicines, as I know he agrees, he is right to highlight the threat of antibiotic resistance and the need to be open to every possible way of reducing it.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Today I publish my first annual report as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, in which I conclude that there is a sustainability crisis in the funding of the NHS. Surely the Secretary of State will agree—he has made some comments in the media that suggest he is becoming aware of this—that he will need to lobby the Chancellor for a better settlement in the autumn statement. Will he update the House on his negotiations?

Mr Hunt: I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Lady but I do not update the House on Government discussions which happen in the run-up to every Budget and autumn statement. What I would say to the hon. Lady is that I am not someone who believes that the financial pressures that undoubtedly exist in the NHS and social care system threaten the fundamental model of the NHS. What they remind us all of is that what we need in this country is a strong economy that will allow us to continue funding the NHS and social care systems as we cope with the pressures of an elderly population. That, for me, is the most important challenge—the economic challenge that will allow us to fund the NHS.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, under his tenure as the Minister, there has been a real-terms increase in spending on the NHS in England, unlike in Wales, where, over the last few years, we have seen real-terms cuts under the Labour party?

Mr Hunt: As ever, my hon. Friend speaks wisely. Thanks to this Government, health spending in England is up by 10.1% in cash terms—4.6% in real terms—since 2010. That is double the cash increase in Scotland and three times the cash increase in Wales. Other parties talk about funding the NHS, but Conservatives say that actions speak louder than words.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): But we have seen public health budgets cut and social care budgets cut, and I can now tell the House that the maintenance budgets have been cut. In fact, the backlog of high-risk maintenance facing the NHS has soared by 69% in the past year. In London alone, the high-risk backlog has grown by £338 million; across the country the figure is nearly £5 billion. NHS finances are so stretched that even the most urgent repairs are being left undone. Is this what the Secretary of State meant when he said that he is giving the NHS the money it asked for?

Mr Hunt: I know that the hon. Gentleman has only been shadow Health Secretary for a while, but may I ask him to cast his mind back to 2010, when the party that wanted to cut the NHS budget was not the Conservative party but Labour? In 2015, his party turned its back on the five year forward view and said it would increase funding not by £8 billion but by just £2.5 billion. It is not enough to found the NHS—you have got to fund it.

Mr Speaker: Order. These exchanges, not unusually, are taking far too long, and part of the reason for that is that the Secretary of State keeps dilating on the policies of the Labour party. If he does so again, I will sit him down straight away. [Interruption.] Order. There are a lot of colleagues who want to ask questions. We want to hear about Government policy, not that of the Opposition. I have said it, it is clear—please heed it.

Jonathan Ashworth: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

If everything is so rosy with the NHS’s finances, why did Simon Stevens say just a couple of weeks ago that “2018-19 will be the most pressurised year for us, where we will actually have negative per-person NHS funding growth in England”—in other words, that NHS spending per head will be falling? The number of patients waiting longer than four hours in A&Es has increased. The number of days lost to delayed discharge has increased. The number of people waiting more than 62 days to start cancer treatment following referral has increased. Should not the Secretary of State do his job and make sure that next week’s autumn statement delivers the money that the NHS urgently needs?

Mr Hunt: Unlike other parties in this House, we have been increasing funding for the NHS. Thanks to that, we are now funding the NHS in England at a 10% higher proportion of GDP than the OECD average, and we are in line with the western European average because of our commitment. These are difficult financial times and there is financial pressure, but this Government have been saying that despite that financial pressure we must make sure that the NHS continues to offer safe, high-quality care—and that is our focus.
4. Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): What is the average time taken is between referral and treatment for patients with (a) ovarian and (b) bowel cancer; and if he will make a statement.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): The figures for times between referral and treatment are published against the standard whereby 85% of patients should begin treatment within 62 days of GP referral. The September 2016 figures were 69% for bowel cancer and 75% for ovarian cancer.

Fiona Mactaggart: Is it not the case that only skin cancer and breast cancer referrals are meeting that 62-day target? Is it not unsurprising that the survival rate over 10 years is 78% for breast cancer and 89% for skin cancer, whereas it is 35% for ovarian cancer and 57% for bowel cancer? How does the Minister feel about these excess deaths, and what is he going to do to ensure that people with these cancers are treated in time?

David Mowat: There are eight cancer standards for waiting times and we are consistently meeting seven of them, as we did in September. The right hon. Lady is right to say that the 62-day waiting time has been challenging, and that has an impact on bowel cancer and ovarian cancer. It is also true, though, that one-year, five-year and 10-year survival rates for bowel and ovarian cancer are improving significantly. However, we do need to go further. That is why all 96 recommendations of the Cancer Taskforce have been accepted—we are investing up to £300 million to make that happen—and there is going to be a new test whereby all patients will be either diagnosed or given the all-clear within 28 days.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I refer to my entry in the register. Does my hon. Friend agree that research will defeat bowel and gastrointestinal tract cancer, and may I invite him to congratulate Bowel and Cancer Research on its fundraising and support for the cancer research community?

David Mowat: My hon. Friend is quite right: research, in the end, is the way we will beat cancer. This country is ahead of all countries in the world in terms of the number of trials going on, including the US. The voluntary sector, including the charity to which he refers, makes a big impact and I congratulate it.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I lost my mum to ovarian cancer just a few years ago. She received outstanding treatment at the Rosemere centre in Preston. That is the centre that my constituents need to travel to for radiotherapy for all forms of cancer, but an average round trip to receive treatment takes about two hours. Does the Minister agree that that is not acceptable, and will he support the Rosemere centre in setting up a satellite unit at Kendal hospital, so that people in south Cumbria can get treatment quickly?

David Mowat: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman that two hours is a long time. His is a large constituency and I am very happy to look at his specific point and to revert to the House.
taken firm action, including consulting on the soft drinks industry levy and launching a broad sugar reduction programme.

Stuart C. McDonald: Channel 4’s “Dispatches” programme has comprehensively demonstrated how the former Prime Minister’s obesity strategy was drastically watered down by the time of the final publication. Both Public Health England and the Health Committee agree that control of in-store promotions of unhealthy food is absolutely vital. Why was regulation of such promotions ditched from the Government strategy?

Nicola Blackwood: We have made no secret of the fact that we considered a range of policies before publishing the childhood obesity strategy, which is a world-leading strategy and one of the most ambitious in the world. It will cut childhood obesity by one fifth in the next 10 years, and I am determined that we do not get lost in a debate about what it could or should have been, but instead get on with implementing it. Our children deserve no less.

Gavin Newlands: A few weeks ago, I hosted a Westminster forum on the implementation of the strategy, at which there was much consternation about why another important recommendation—the creation of a 9 pm watershed to reduce children’s exposure to junk food advertising—was cut. Does the Minister not realise the seriousness of the obesity crisis, and can she explain why that important measure was dumped?

Nicola Blackwood: Current restrictions on the advertising of less healthy food and drink in the UK are among the toughest in the world, so I am pleased to reassure the hon. Gentleman and his constituents on that fact.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I draw the Minister’s attention to some excellent leadership from the private sector? Lucozade Ribena Suntory, which is based in my constituency, announced last week—rather buried in the news from the United States of America, I am afraid—that it was going to take 50% of the sugar in their drinks. It is proof that doing so is possible and meets the expectations of many consumers.

Nicola Blackwood: I welcome my right hon. Friend’s support for some excellent leadership from the private sector. Lucozade Ribena Suntory, which is based in my constituency, announced last week that it was going to take 50% of the sugar in its soft drinks by reformulating all its new and existing products. That demonstrates really good leadership and is an example to other companies.

Nicola Blackwood: I welcome my right hon. Friend’s question. He is absolutely right. We very much welcome the actions of not only Lucozade but Tesco in cutting the sugar in their drinks. It is proof that doing so is possible and meets the expectations of many consumers.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Recent data from the national childhood measurement programme shows that obesity rates have risen for the second consecutive year. With that in mind, will the Minister outline what further steps she has taken to make the childhood obesity plan for action into a true strategy?

Nicola Blackwood: As I have been saying during this Question Time, I am absolutely determined to focus on implementing the plan that we have. It is one of the most ambitious in the world, and it will deliver a reduction of a fifth in childhood obesity over the next decade. However, we have been clear that this is not the final word; it is just the beginning of the conversation. I would welcome contributions from my hon. Friend, who is a dogged campaigner on this issue.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Yesterday, on World Diabetes Day, the Prime Minister opened the new headquarters of Diabetes UK and said that the number of cases of diabetes increased by 75% in the last decade. The Minister and I attended the launch of the Food Foundation’s declaration on how to tackle obesity. Which of the 10 measures put forward by the foundation has she decided to accept?

Nicola Blackwood: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this issue, and we are considering the contributions from the Food Foundation, which are very important. He is right about the role that obesity plays in triggering diabetes. That is why we are focusing on preventing type 2 diabetes through the world’s first national diabetes prevention programme, which aims to deliver at-scale, evidence-based behavioural change to support people to reduce their risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May I urge the Minister, in tackling childhood obesity, not to go down the line of nanny-state proposal after nanny-state proposal, but instead to look at Active Movement, which is in operation in a number of areas around the country? It builds exercise into the average day of children in schools, and it is already making a great difference to childhood obesity levels.

Nicola Blackwood: I very much welcome the hon. Gentleman’s support for a key plank of the childhood obesity strategy, which is helping all children to enjoy an hour of physical activity every day and which will include physical movement as well as specific physical education.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Another target that “Dispatches” uncovered was to be scrapped was the target to halve childhood obesity by 2026. This was compounded by recent national childhood measurement data showing that obesity is on the rise and that obesity rates are more than double in deprived areas compared with more affluent ones. Instead of squandering this opportunity, the Government should be pushing ahead with a comprehensive and preventive strategy. Can the Minister explain, therefore, why this significant target was dropped from the Government’s plans to tackle childhood obesity?

Nicola Blackwood: The hon. Lady is right to say that the childhood obesity strategy is one of our key priorities for tackling health inequalities in the UK. Obesity prevalence for children living in the most deprived areas is double that for those living in the least deprived areas, and the gap continues to widen. That is exactly why we will press ahead with the plan, but, as she has said, this is just the beginning of the conversation and we will continue to fight obesity as a government priority.

Sustainability and Transformation Plans

6. Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): What discussions he has had with local government representatives on the sustainability and transformation plan process. [907202]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): STPs are a collaborative local effort, involving providers and commissioners coming together with other stakeholders to produce place-based plans. The vast majority of plans have been developed jointly between the health sector and local authorities. Several plans have been led by local government.

Ms Eagle: Yesterday, the King’s Fund rightly characterised what is euphemistically called the sustainability and transformation project as being planned in secret, behind the backs of patients and the public. In Merseyside and Wirral, we know from leaks that the Government are going to cut £1 billion from our local national health service, which, despite rising demand, will close hospitals, downgrade many accident and emergency departments and possibly leave the whole of Wirral without an acute hospital. Will the Minister now come clean and publish these plans in full, and will he undertake to visit Wirral so that my constituents in Wallasey can come and have a word with him about his plans for their NHS?

David Mowat: To be clear, every single STP will be published by Christmas. About 12 have been published so far, and the Cheshire and Merseyside STP will be published tomorrow. When the hon. Lady has access to it, she will see that some of the statements she is making are just scaremongering. She mentioned the King’s Fund, so let me quote it:

“The King’s Fund continues to believe that STPs offer the best hope of delivering long term improvements to health and care services.”

That is what the King’s Fund says.

David Mowat: I give the categorical assurance that if local authorities and the NHS managers doing the planning work have not engaged properly, the plan will not be considered to be complete. That does not mean that every local authority has a veto on its STP.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Following on from that point, the Minister has previously said that STPs will “not go ahead if councils believe they have been marginalised.” Given that seven councils in London and west Yorkshire have already rejected their STPs and, as we have heard, that council leaders from both main parties have expressed concerns about the Cheshire and Merseyside proposals, does the Minister have a plan B when it comes to rejected STPs?

David Mowat: In a previous answer, I made the point that every local authority should be engaging with its STP, and the NHS must ensure that that happens. That is not the same as saying that every local authority has a veto on the STP, which was the implication of the hon. Gentleman’s point.

Delayed Hospital Discharges

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of changes to local authority social care budgets on the level of delayed discharges from hospital.

Tom Blenkinsop: The Care Quality Commission has commented that social care is on the verge of collapse. The Government have had six years of warnings in relation to this matter, yet they have cut £4 billion from the social care budget. Will the Secretary of State for Health be talking to his colleague the Chancellor of the Exchequer to ensure that the £4 billion is replaced in the autumn statement?

David Mowat: The system is under pressure but we also know that the best way to achieve the best results is faster integration, and not just money. I will give the hon. Gentleman an example. There is a massive disparity between councils. The best 10% of councils have 20 times fewer delayed transfers of care than the worst 10%. It is not just about money, as the budgets are not 20 times different. Indeed, many councils have been able to increase their budgets, including Middlesbrough.
Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The Minister is aware of the Health Committee’s concerns about the effect of underfunding of social care on the NHS. He may also be aware that there are particular concerns in my area and in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) because of the recent Care Quality Commission rating of Mears Care as inadequate. Coming on the back of community hospital closures in Paignton, that gives grave concern to all our constituents. Will the Minister meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay to discuss this further?

David Mowat: My hon. Friend is right that there was an inadequate CQC rating for that care home. It is therefore right that the care home must either improve or go out of business. That is what the CQC regulatory environment will ensure. She makes a point about the issue with the hospital in Paignton; that is out for consultation at the moment, and I would expect the local care situation to be part of that consultation.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The National Audit Office report “Discharging older patients from hospital” said that “there are... far too many older people in hospitals who do not need to be there”.

Delayed discharges reached a record level in September. The Minister says that this is complex, but I can tell him that the main drivers for that increase were patients waiting for home care or for a nursing home place; those issues are both related to the underfunding of social care. Does he agree with NHS England chief executive Simon Stevens that any extra funding from Government should go into social care?

David Mowat: As I said earlier, we accept that the system is under pressure, but we also make the point that there is a massive disparity between different councils. Some 13% of local authorities cause 50% of the delayed transfers of care—DTOCs. The real point is that those local authorities that go furthest and fastest in integration, with trusted assessors, early discharge planning and discharge and patient pathways through hospitals to improve that performance.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Northern, Eastern and Western Devon clinical commissioning group is already consulting on the possible closure of community beds across Devon. The social care budget in East Devon, an area of elderly people, and the rest of the county is already under severe pressure. That pressure will inevitably increase if community beds are closed. Will the Secretary of State therefore commit to putting those points to the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the run-up to the autumn statement?

David Mowat: The Secretary of State has already made the point that we do not give a running commentary on the status of discussions with the Treasury, but I accept my right hon. Friend’s point about his local issue.

NHS England: A&E

9. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the performance of NHS England in meeting A&E waiting time targets in the last 12 months.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): Last year, the NHS in England handled 2.4 million more A&E attendances than when this Government took office. There has been a 4.6% increase in attendances, compared with only a 1.2% increase in Scotland. Despite that significant increase in demand the NHS has coped well, with nine out of 10 patients still seen within four hours.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for that answer, but the truth is it must do better and needs more support. In September, only 86% of patients were treated within the four hour target time in English A&E departments; by contrast, in Scotland it was 95%, for a record consecutive period. Given that winter is coming, what will the Minister do to ensure the service copes?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman should know that, according to figures for the most recent month available, 90.6% of A&E attendances were seen within the four hours. We are aware that the system remains under pressure, and are putting efforts into identifying steps through the A&E improvement plan, with five specific measures to improve front-door streaming, back-door discharge and patient pathways through hospitals to improve that performance.

19. [907217] Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Rural areas have high demand for primary and social care that increases the pressure on A&E if it is not met. Given the relationship between primary, secondary, A&E and social care, does the Minister also measure waiting times in primary and social care in the same way? That would give him a fuller picture of the demands on the system that need addressing.

Mr Dunne: The short answer is that at present we do not record waiting times in the same way. Tests are being undertaken in relation to waiting times for GPs, but at this point I do not have access to the data.

22. [907220] Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): As we are unlikely to reach my question on the Order Paper, perhaps the Minister could now direct his attention to the east midlands where we have problems with A&E, particularly for people in rural areas. For those of us who rely completely on the NHS, this is obviously a matter of vital concern. I just wonder whether we should not have an honest debate about this and recognise that we have an ageing population. Our A&E times are stressed and we may have to either tax people more or even think the unthinkable and charge people for—[Interruption.] See, it is unthinkable, but we have to concentrate on the essentials. Let us have an honest debate about the finances of the NHS.

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend will be aware that the sustainabilty and transformation plans discussed earlier today are designed to bring closer integration of health providers and commissioners within a health system area, such as the east midlands. The ambition is to integrate better health and social care provision to avoid some of the challenges he identifies.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The A&E target the Minister mentions is actually a measure of the entire acute system. Important in that is the flow
of patients from admission through treatment to discharge. In Scotland, delayed discharges have fallen 9% since health and social care were integrated. In England, they have gone up 30%. Does the Minister accept the need to fund social care properly to relieve the back pressure on A&E?

**Mr Dunne:** I listen with great interest to what the hon. Lady says, but I gently remind her of two things. First, as the result of the generosity of the Barnett formula, Scotland receives £1,500 per capita more to spend on health than England. Secondly, the Auditor General for Scotland recently reported that NHS Scotland was failing to meet seven out of eight key targets, including waiting times for A&E.

**Dr Whitford:** I wonder how many targets are being missed in England. The Royal College of Emergency Medicine report demonstrates that in the 176 emergency departments in England there are only enough consultants to provide the cover of one for 16 hours a day. On top of that, rota gaps among junior doctors are causing safety concerns. What exactly is the Minister going to do this winter and will he agree to lift his ban on locum agency staff to help to keep A&E functioning?

**Mr Dunne:** We recognise that there have been pressures on emergency departments for some years, which is why we have put particular effort into recruiting more consultants. There are, I believe, 50% more consultants working in emergency departments in England than there were in 2010, and 25% more doctors.

**Maternity Care**

10. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the safety of maternity care.

**Mr Hunt:** Last month, I launched the safer maternity care action plan, which is part of our ambition to halve the rates of stillbirths, neonatal deaths, maternal deaths and brain injuries by 2030.

**Henry Smith:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. In 2001, the then Labour Government closed the maternity unit at Crawley hospital. Longer journeys to East Surrey hospital have been a safety concern. Will the Department look at reintroducing midwife services to Crawley hospital and GP surgeries in Crawley?

**Mr Hunt:** I am happy to talk further with my hon. Friend. He knows that this is a local matter. It was, I think, looked into in 2014, but if the pattern of demand changes it should be kept under review.

**Local Authority Social Care Budgets**

11. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of changes to local authority social care budgets on the demand for health services.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat):** Social care plays a vital role in keeping people healthy and independent, which is why the Government are making a further £3.5 billion available by 2020—a real-terms increase over the lifetime of this Parliament. There is an overlap between care and health, which is why faster integration is our major priority.

**Jeff Smith:** The Secretary of State’s Conservative predecessor, Stephen Dorrell, has said this month that we are increasingly using our acute hospitals as “unbelievably expensive care homes”, and he described this as a “grotesque waste of resources”. Is it not the case that the Government have simply outsourced the hardest decisions on social care cuts to the hardest-pressed local authorities to ensure that councils get the blame, not the Government, and that ultimately it is the NHS that suffers?

**David Mowat:** As I said earlier, we agree that the social care system is under pressure, but we also make the point that there is a massive disparity between the performance of different parts of that system. For example, Manchester, the hon. Gentleman’s own patch, has a DTOC performance seven to eight times worse, per 10,000 patients, than Salford, in spite of the 15% increase in its budget this year.

**Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): A small-scale study by Professor Peter Fleming has recently made the press. It links cardiorespiratory compromise in new-borns with sleeping in car seats for prolonged periods—over 30 minutes. Given that for many Eastbourne babies, one of their first life experiences is the journey home from Hastings hospital, which is longer than 30 minutes, will the Department look at these findings, consider whether further study is required and offer reassurance to parents rightly concerned by the research?

**David Mowat:** This is a very difficult case. The Department will look at the evidence and revert to the House.

**Mr Speaker:** That was very dextrous handling of a very broad interpretation of the question on the Order Paper, but I hope that honour has been served.

14. **Helen Jones** (Warrington North) (Lab): The Cheshire and Merseyside sustainability and transformation plan relies heavily on more care in the community. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that this will not work while local authority social care is being cut to the bone, because it will merely send people back to their own homes, where their health will deteriorate?

**David Mowat:** The Cheshire and Merseyside STP will be published tomorrow, and we will all know better then what it says. The hon. Lady is right that there is an interaction between social care and health, but she and I, as Warrington MPs, must both be pleased that Warrington is one of the top performers in terms of delayed transfers of care, and on that we should congratulate our local authorities.

**NHS England: A&E**

12. **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): What discussions he has had with NHS England on the reconfiguration of A&E units.
The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It was this Government who first introduced key tests for service change, giving local people a say. We need an NHS that is ready for the future, and sustainability and transformation plans will help to ensure the best standards of care, with local doctors, hospitals and councils working together in conjunction with local communities for the first time. No decisions about service reconfigurations, including A&E units, will be made without local consultation, as is currently the case.

Jason McCartney: How can it be right that the disastrous private finance initiative deal at Calderdale is dictating that Huddersfield royal infirmary be bulldozed, leaving Huddersfield as the largest town in England without an A&E unit?

Mr Dunne: I am familiar with my hon. Friend's concern for the hospital in Huddersfield. We have discussed it previously. Calderdale royal hospital was an early PFI and is halfway to paying off its liabilities. The present proposal, put forward by the local CCGs, for moving to a full outlined business case would involve an A&E trauma centre on a single site, but there would continue to be emergency care in Huddersfield 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and it would maintain the capability to assess and initiate treatment of all patients, if it were to proceed.

Mr Speaker: Hoping for an un-lawyerlike brevity, I call Mr Alistair Carmichael.

Leaving the EU: Nurse Recruitment

13. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent assessment his Department has made of the effect of the vote for the UK to leave the EU on future recruitment of nurses to the NHS.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): The NHS currently employs 21,030 nurses from the EU—6.6% of the total number of nurses in the workforce—while a further almost 90,000 EU citizens work in the social care sector across the UK. They all do a fantastic job, and we have been clear that we want them to be able to stay post-Brexit.

Mr Carmichael: What is the Minister going to do to achieve that then?

Mr Dunne: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has discussions with Cabinet colleagues handling the negotiations, and I am sure that his messages are being well heard across Government.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) is in line for an award.

Topical Questions

T1. [907148] Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I am pleased to report to the House something I was not sure I would ever be able to say: last week, the British Medical Association called off its industrial action and committed to working with the Government on the implementation of new contracts for junior doctors. This will make a significant contribution to our commitment to a safer, seven-day NHS, and the Government will work constructively with junior doctors to address their concerns, because they are a vital and valued part of our NHS.

Paul Blomfield: The South Yorkshire and Bassetlaw STP sets out some very positive ambitions, but it warns that there will be a financial shortfall for health and social care services in our area of £571 million by 2020-21. Those ambitions are unachievable unless the Government address the shortfall. What is the Secretary of State going to do about it?

Mr Hunt: We are working very carefully with all STP areas to make sure that their plans are balanced so that we can live within the extra funding we are putting into the NHS—an extra £10 billion—by 2020-21. We will look at that plan and do everything we can to help to make sure that it works out.

T3. [907150] Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking Dr O’Toole of the Kirby Road surgery in Dunstable for representing all of the very best in a family doctor? Will he also explain what more we can do to encourage people to go into general practice rather than working for locum companies, which so many seem to want to do at the moment?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that, and I would like to pass on my congratulations to Dr O’Toole, who obviously does a fantastic job for my hon. Friend’s constituents. We are investing significantly in general practice, with a 14% increase in real terms over this Parliament and our ambition to provide an extra 5,000 doctors working in general practice. This will mean that the need for locums will become much less and we can have much more continuity of care for patients.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): The Secretary of State and the Minister will be aware that Capita has wreaked havoc in GP surgeries across the land, placing extra pressures on already overstretched NHS staff, compromising patient safety and breaching confidentiality. Last week, I met a group of practice managers who told me that some patient records have been missing for months, while others have turned up apparently half-eaten by mice. Given that this contract was introduced to save the NHS money, will the Minister tell us how much it is costing to rectify the mess and what steps she is taking to compensate GPs for the expenses they have incurred as a result of ill-conceived and poorly implemented contracts?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): The hon. Lady is right that the current delivery of this contract by Capita is unacceptable. I have met NHS England and Capita regularly to make sure that rectification plans are in place. We are assured that these steps are now in place and that the programme will improve.

T4. [907151] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Across north Northamptonshire there is an enormous appetite for the new urgent care hub to be built at the site of
Kettering general hospital, relieving pressure on A&E and improving services for patients. Will the Minister update us on progress?

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): As I said to my hon. Friend’s parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), we are aware that Kettering hospital has put forward a proposal. The outline business case is due to be discussed with NHS England in the coming weeks. In the meantime, we are looking at an interim solution for relieving pressure on A&E services in the area.

T2. [907149] Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Diabetes is a big problem in my constituency, and the number of unnecessary lower limb amputations due to diabetes is on the rise. Will the Minister ask clinical commissioning groups to provide fully staffed community podiatry foot protection services to avoid amputations, keep people in work and make huge cost savings?

Nicola Blackwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that diabetes is a major health risk in the UK. That is why we have rolled out the first ever NHS diabetes prevention programme this year on 27 sites, covering nearly half of England and referring nearly 10,000 people. Next year, the second wave of the programme will reach a further 25% of the English population. The aim is for the NDPP to be rolled out across the whole of England by 2020 to support 100,000 people at risk of diabetes each year.

T6. [907154] Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Proper integration of adult social care and health services requires co-operation on both sides. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is really not acceptable that in a borough such as Bromley, the CCG top-sliced only 3.5% of its funding to go into the better care fund—nowhere near enough to make a difference to hard-pressed local services?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing up that issue. Everyone recognises, on both sides of the House, that the health and social care sectors need to work together. That happens very well in some parts of the country, but not in others. I think all hon. Members have a job to make sure that people behave responsibly in their constituencies.

T5. [907153] Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Both Public Health England and Food Standards Scotland support restricted advertising of junk food to children, yet this was entirely omitted from the Government’s completely underwhelming obesity strategy. Given that we clearly cannot rely on the UK Government to take this forward, will the Secretary of State support the devolution of broadcasting powers to allow the Scottish Government to tackle the obesity crisis and its devastating impact on society?

Nicola Blackwood: The obesity plan is one of the most ambitious in the world. It will reduce obesity by a fifth by cutting the amount of sugar in our food, helping all children to engage in an hour of physical activity a day, and making it easier for families to make healthy choices. We already have some of the toughest advertising rules in the world, and we have consulted Scotland closely on these arrangements.

T7. [907155] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): The anticoagulation service at the Furnace Green general practice was recently moved to Crawley hospital, which has caused concern to some local patients. Will a member of the health ministerial team agree to meet me to discuss that further?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): I understand that the clinical commissioning group has provided an alternative which is no more than two miles away, but I should be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter.

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): Climbing obesity rates are expected to lead to increases in type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and the need for joint replacements, which will put even greater pressure on the NHS. Given such threats to health, does the Secretary of State really think that now is the time for timidity and sucking up to business?

Nicola Blackwood: As I have made absolutely clear today, I am determined not to allow the House to get lost in a debate about what the plan could or should have been. Our children deserve more from us. We should not politicise this debate; we should get on with delivering the plan that we have before becoming involved in a lengthier conversation about what a long-term obesity programme should be.

T8. [907156] Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): General practices in Winsford are being underfunded by 3.6% in terms of the formula that should apply to them because of the slow rate of change, while nearby Merseyside practices are being overfunded by 5%. That is resulting in a £30 million loss to my local surgeries. Will the Minister commit himself to looking into it and introducing a quicker rate of change, so that local residents can benefit from the funds that they should be receiving?

David Mowat: In 2016, the Government implemented a new formula for allocation, which means a better deal for underfunded areas such as Winsford. As my hon. Friend has noted, however, the extra money is being phased in over a few years to prevent distortions. This year her local CCG received an increase of more than 3%, and the funding will continue to catch up as a result of the new mechanism.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): The Minister rightly said that greater integration between health and social care was a prize worth striving for. Why do local government leaders on Merseyside feel that they have been excluded from discussions about the STP process? If we are to make progress, they need to be part of the solution.

David Mowat: As I said earlier, local engagement with all stakeholders is necessary. The STP for Cheshire and Merseyside will be published tomorrow. It is essential
Mr Jeremy Hunt: We have tried to speed this up with the cancer drugs fund, which helped 84,000 people in the last Parliament, but we always keep the NICE procedures under review and I take on board what the hon. Gentleman says.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): We recently had an excellent debate in Westminster Hall on the Government’s tobacco control strategy. When will they publish the new strategy, which was promised for publication this summer?

Nicola Blackwood: The UK is a world leader in tobacco control and we have a proven record in reducing the harm caused by tobacco. We should be proud of the fact that smoking rates among adults and young people are at the lowest ever level, but my hon. Friend is right to push for the tobacco control plan because there is unacceptable variation. We are working on developing that plan, which we will be publishing shortly.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): In Northern Ireland in 2014-15, 870 deaths were due to the cold weather. Will the Minister engage with other Ministers to ensure that fuel poverty is looked at by all Departments, so that the pensioners who raised this in Parliament do not suffer from the health matters that are killing them off?

Mr Dunne: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point. We do of course have the cold weather payment system in force across the UK, and later this week I will attend a meeting with other Government Ministers to look at winter preparedness across the board.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister will be aware of the concerns in Torbay about the impact on accident and emergency services from the potential loss of the minor injuries unit at Paignton hospital. Does he agree that it is vital that MIU services are kept within Paignton given that it is the second biggest town in Devon?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend is aware that a consultation is going on regarding services in south Devon. The point he makes has been well made and I am sure it will be taken into account by the clinical commissioning group and the local community hospital trust.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry but we must move on. Demand at Question Time tends to exceed supply. I recognise the intense interest in these matters, but it would help if questions and answers were shorter—or maybe the Government want to propose a larger allocation of time for Health questions. But there is much interest and only limited time in which to accommodate it.
**Prison Officers Association: Protest Action**

12.38 pm

**Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab):** (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if she will make a statement on today’s protest action by the Prison Officers Association.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Elizabeth Truss): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the chance to update the House on this important issue.

Prison officers do a tough and difficult job, and I have been clear that we need to make our prisons safer and more secure. I have announced that an extra 2,500 officers will be recruited to strengthen the frontline. We are already putting in place new measures to tackle the use of dangerous psychoactive drugs and improve security across the estate.

I met the Prison Officers Association on 2 November. Over the past two weeks, my team has been holding talks with the POA on a range of measures to improve safety. Those talks were due to continue this morning. Instead, the POA failed to respond to our proposals and called this unlawful action, without giving any notice. The chief executive of the National Offender Management Service, Michael Spurr, spoke to POA chairman Mike Rolfe this morning reiterating our desire to continue talks today. That offer was refused. The union’s position is unnecessary and unlawful, and it will make the situation in our prisons more dangerous. We are taking the necessary legal steps to end this unlawful industrial action.

The Government are absolutely committed to giving prison officers and governors the support that they need to do their job and to keep them safe from harm. In addition to recruiting an extra 2,500 prison officers, we are rolling out body-worn cameras across the prison estate and we have launched a £3 million major crimes taskforce to crack down on gangs and organised crime. In September we rolled out new tests for dangerous psychoactive substances and we have trained 300 dogs to detect these new drugs. We have set up a daily rapid response unit, led by the prisons Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), to ensure that governors and staff have all the support that they need.

Taken together, these measures will have a real and swift impact on the security and stability of prisons while we recruit additional front-line staff. I urge those on the Opposition Front Bench to join me in condemning this unlawful action, and in calling on the POA to withdraw this action and get back to the negotiating table.

**Richard Burgon:** The Justice Secretary has been told repeatedly that the prisons she presides over are dangerous and volatile. Assaults on staff and prisoners are rising. In the 12 months to June 2016, there were nearly 6,000 assaults on staff, 24,000 prisoner-on-prisoner assaults, and 105 self-inflicted deaths of prisoners. There are 6,000 fewer officers on the frontline than in 2010. Staff shortages are stark and morale is low, and officers and prisoners alike feel unsafe. The Government’s White Paper does not provide the rapid action that our prison system so urgently needs and has so long asked for.

The Secretary of State has consistently failed to acknowledge that this is a service in crisis. Today’s protest action by prison officers is the clearest sign yet of the fact that this is a crisis over which she and her ministerial colleagues have lost control. Will she confirm when she last spoke personally to representatives of the POA and when she will talk to them next? What solution was put to the POA to address urgently its concerns about safety? Does she accept that the increase in violence on staff and between prisoners is a direct result of her Government’s staff cuts? Does she regret her Government’s decision to cut 6,000 prison staff, and how does she intend to increase the number of prison officers now, not in two years’ time? This is a Secretary of State in denial. She has let down our judiciary, lost the confidence of our prison staff and failed to take effective action in the face of a crisis of violence in our prisons.

**Elizabeth Truss:** It is disgraceful that the hon. Gentleman refuses to condemn illegal industrial action that is putting our hard-working front-line prison staff at risk—it is completely irresponsible. I have made it absolutely clear ever since I was appointed to this role that safety is my No. 1 priority. That is why we are rolling out new tests for psychoactive substances and making sure that all staff have body-worn cameras. It is also why we are already recruiting new staff, for which we have announced a £100 million increase in the prison budget. The hon. Gentleman needs to act more responsibly. He needs to work with me, as does the Prison Officers Association, to make sure that our prisons are safer. Sanctioning illegal industrial action in our prison estate is actively putting people at risk of harm, and I ask him to reconsider his disgraceful stance.

**Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con):** Following the recent disturbances at Bedford prison, I put on record my thanks to the prison officers and members of the Tornado force for restoring order so rapidly and carefully, and to the prisons Minister for keeping me in touch with affairs throughout the evening a week last Sunday. It is a great shame that prison officers have been led into unlawful action today, but does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State not recognise that in addition to adding staff, she needs to look urgently at the retention of existing staff and the reasons for their disquiet? Please will she do so as part of her ongoing review?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is absolutely right about the importance of retaining our valuable officers with experience in our prisons, which is why we have given governors extra freedoms to take the measures they need to take, and why we need to increase safety across our prison estate. I have made a clear priority, and we have already put in place a number of measures to improve security and safety. Unlawful industrial action is not the way to improve the situation. We had been in discussions with the POA—I met its representatives on 2 November—but it has walked away from talks that were designed to deal with some of the issues. I urge the POA to come back to the negotiating table, to stop putting its members at risk and to work with us to make our prisons safer.
Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Given my experience on the Justice Committee over the past year, it is abundantly clear to me that this is a toxic mix of policy and resource. The policy is that we are sending far too many people to jail on shorter sentences, and the resource problem is that we have an ever-increasing ratio of inmates to prison officers. Officers are utterly demoralised. On the ground, inmates are being kept in cells for 23 hours a day because there are not enough resources in the prison estate to ensure that they have meaningful and purposeful work. Everybody agrees that meaningful and purposeful work is the way to better rehabilitation. Does the Lord Chancellor recognise the huge resource issue? If so, how many prison officers do we need to recruit to get to a 2,500 net increase, bearing in mind the retention problems that have been adequately articulated in the Chamber today? Is she inclined to look at reducing the number of young people who are sent to prison for short sentences which, quite frankly, do not achieve anything?

Elizabeth Truss: We are recruiting 2,500 officers across the estate, but we are also taking immediate action to stabilise the position and ensure that security measures are in place. In response to the hon. Gentleman’s question about young people, I want more early intervention to prevent those people from going into custody in the first place by dealing with issues such as mental health and substance abuse at an early stage. That is what we will be announcing shortly.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): There can never be any excuse for unlawful industrial action, which helps no one, so I join the Secretary of State in her condemnation. Perhaps she will update us about the form and timeframe of the legal action.

Does the Secretary of State concede that underlying issues of staff morale and a lack of retention, especially of experienced officers, have been highlighted repeatedly? Did the discussions that the POA unfortunately walked away from include suggestions from the management of NOMS about to how to improve retention? When will we bring forward a comprehensive scheme to deal with retention and the loss of experienced officers?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. The prisons Minister will be visiting HMP Lewes on Friday, when he will follow up some of the issues she raises.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I am a frequent visitor to HMP Lewes in my constituency, so I know what a fantastic job the prison officers there do in difficult circumstances. One problem they are facing is a rise in the number of sexual offenders in prison, either on remand or serving a prison sentence, which makes life difficult for prison officers to manage. Will the Secretary of State update us on what work is being done to help prisons such as HMP Lewes?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. The prisons Minister will be visiting HMP Lewes in my constituency, so I know what a fantastic job the prison officers there do in difficult circumstances. One problem they are facing is a rise in the number of sexual offenders in prison, either on remand or serving a prison sentence, which makes life difficult for prison officers to manage. Will the Secretary of State update us on what work is being done to help prisons such as HMP Lewes?

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): We have nearly 7,000 fewer prison officers in our prisons than in 2010. The Secretary of State is now desperately trying to recruit 2,500 prison officers, yet she comes to that Dispatch Box and attacks prison officers for taking desperate measures because their safety is at risk every day. How does she think that will help with recruitment?

Elizabeth Truss: I support prison officers, who do a fantastic job. The people I am attacking are those in the Prison Officers Association who have called this illegal action, despite the fact that we were in talks with them and there was an offer on the table, which has not been responded to. I wholeheartedly support the good work of prison officers across the country, and I want them to benefit from the improvements we are making on the frontline and to safety. We are launching a new apprenticeship programme to recruit more people, and we have a new programme encouraging the brightest and best graduates to become prison officers. Of course, these things will take time, but I have also talked today about the measures we are taking in the short term to stabilise the situation in our prisons.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Testing for psychoactive substances has the potential to be a game changer, so has there been an increase in the number of charges for possession? Has the message finally got through to people that if they take Spice, we will know they are doing it, they will be charged and they will take the consequences?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend clearly has much experience in this area and what he says is absolutely right. The prisons and probation ombudsman described psychoactive substances a game changer in our prison estate, and they are one of the reasons why we face the current situation. We rolled out testing in September,
and we have trained 300 sniffer dogs to detect those substances. That will have an impact, and we are already beginning to see it in some of our prisons.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Lord Chancellor should perhaps bear in mind that questions of what is and is not legal are to be determined by the courts, not by Ministers and not by this House. I say to her gently that she cannot praise prison officers in one breath and then condemn them for being reckless in the next without trying to achieve some understanding of how things have reached this point. If she really wants the POA to come back to the negotiating table, might she think about the tone she adopts in dealing with this dispute, so that it might have some confidence that if it does return, it will be listened to?

Elizabeth Truss: I respectfully say to the right hon. Gentleman that I have had a number of meetings with the POA and discussed issues of safety, on which I share its concerns. I am absolutely not attacking the hard-working prison officers on our frontline, but it is a mistake for the POA to call for unlawful industrial action in the middle of talks. I urge it instead to come back to the negotiating table, because that is how we will get a safer environment for our prison officers to work in; we will not get that through unlawful industrial action.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): When I was a very junior civil servant under a Labour Government, one of my first tasks was to get an injunction to stop the POA going on strike—we did that many years ago. Will the Secretary of State tell us the effects of the current unlawful industrial action, both on those who work in our prisons and those detained in them?

Elizabeth Truss: We have implemented our contingency plans across the prison estate, at local, regional and national levels, but clearly we will not be able to run full regimes and that puts people at more risk. We are managing as safely as we can, but I strongly urge the POA to come back to the table to start negotiations again, so that we can reach a solution that helps make our prisons safer.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I have three prisons in my constituency, two closed and one open, and a fourth prison is nearby in Doncaster. Therefore, for the past 20 years I have known only too well the stresses and strains that those working in the service are under, particularly because the people who end up in prison today are pretty nasty characters who have committed some terrible crimes. The Secretary of State has said that she wants to hear from those on the frontline about how we can make our prisons safer, so may I urge her to look at the charter of minimum safety standards produced by the Community union, which has worked with its front-line officers to identify practical ways forward to secure safer conditions in our prisons? Will she meet people from Community to discuss that document?

Elizabeth Truss: I visited HMP Bronzefield a couple of weeks ago, where I met members of Community and discussed these safety issues. We agreed on a great number of things, which, in the White Paper, the Government have announced are taking place, and I am keen to continue those discussions.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): May I welcome the measures that my right hon. Friend announced recently? I join her in condemning the action by the POA, which is not going to help it or the prisoners it is meant to be looking after. I, too, am concerned about retention, which affects the young offenders prison in my constituency. My local officers raise with me their fear that the courts do not have the sanctions available to impose tough enough sentences on those who assault prison officers—there is no deterrence. Will she examine that?

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that crimes committed in prison against prison officers need to be treated extremely seriously, and I am working closely with the Attorney General and the Home Secretary to make sure that that is followed through.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): We all welcome the Secretary of State's willingness to tackle violence in prisons by funding additional officers, but she must be honest with the House about how this does not extend to those people working in our prisons in the private sector. Prisoners do not choose whether they end up in a public or private establishment, and those who work in the private sector, including those from my Community union, perform a public service in guarding those prisoners, whether the contract is directly with the Government or not. What is she going to do to help ensure the safety of all in our prisons and give them the respect they deserve?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and I can confirm that those increases will also apply in the private sector as well as in the public sector.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): In response to concerns from prison officers, this Government criminalised psychoactive substances in prisons. My right hon. Friend has announced an increase in the number of prison officers, but will she inform the House what other steps have been taken to increase safety in prisons, including limiting the illegal use of mobile phones by prisoners?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; mobile phones and drones pose a serious security threat. We are working closely with the mobile phone companies to be able to block those mobile phones in prisons. We are also rolling out the use of body-worn cameras across the estate to give officers more protection, and we are offering prison governors specific support in dealing with the issues they face in their particular establishments.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Prison officers at Holme House prison in my constituency tell me that they, like others, have suffered cuts and seen increases in violence. The former Lord Chancellor and Education Secretary designated it an academy-type prison with new freedoms for the governor to do things differently. Assuming that these powers still exist, what difference are they making—or has that failed experiment also been abandoned?

Elizabeth Truss: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has read the White Paper in full, where we announced that further powers are being devolved to governors
right across the prison estate. This enables them to conduct their own recruitment campaigns and give special payments to retain officers, and it is working.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): The Secretary of State has talked about short-term issues, but if we are truly to see long-term reform of the Prison Service we need to empower governors to manage, lead and innovate. Does she agree with that and will she proceed on that basis?

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We are giving prison governors power over their education budgets, so that they can ensure that the offenders in their institutions are getting the skills they need to secure a job on release. We are enabling them to work with local employers and also to co-commission health services, so that there is closer work towards getting prisoners off drugs, which is a major cause of reoffending.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Parc prison in Bridgend has an enviable record of successful work in cutting intergenerational reoffending, reducing reoffending and of family intervention, which makes a difference. Does the Secretary of State understand the importance not just of staff numbers, but of appropriately skilled and trained officers, and, once we get them, of retaining them, because her record to date does not show that she does?

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree that retaining staff is vital, which is why we have given these additional freedoms to governors. We are also recruiting more staff to the frontline so that staff feel safer, which is a very important part of the job. By having more staff on the frontline, we will enable more time to be spent turning offenders’ lives around, which is why the prison officers to whom I speak wanted to go into the service in the first place. What is important is getting offenders into jobs and off drugs.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): When the former shadow Secretary of State for Justice, Lord Falconer, opened a debate on prison reform earlier this year, he rightly recognised that the problems in our prison system go back not one year or five years, but decades. Given that we have a situation in which more than half of adult males reoffend within a year of their release, should we not be focusing on rehabilitation rather than blame?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. Reoffending is a huge cost to society—£15 billion a year—but it is also a huge cost to the victims who suffer from those crimes. The prison system is not turning lives around in the way that it should, which is why our White Paper was a plan for prison safety and reform. We need to have safe prisons in order to be able to reform offenders, and by reforming offenders our prisons will become safer too.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): The tone of the statement from the Secretary of State today has been absolutely shameful. It is no wonder that relationships are at an all-time low. Will she take this opportunity to apologise to the House and to the officers for allowing things to get this far?

Elizabeth Truss: In my view, it is those on the Opposition Front Bench who need to condemn unlawful industrial action. I know that that will not solve the safety problems in our prison estate, but I want a constructive relationship—I want the POA to come back to the table.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Is not the real problem that we still lock people up in Victorian prisons, which is not good for the safety of the prisoner or of the prison officer? Is not the solution to build modern new prisons such as the one the Government are building in Wellingborough? Will the Secretary of State update the House on how that programme is being developed?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As well as recruiting new staff and retaining our highly valued existing staff, we also need officers to be able to operate in modern, fit-for-purpose buildings, such as the one that we are putting in place in Wellingborough. I would be delighted to update him shortly on the plans for that.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware of the level of demoralisation that exists right across the criminal justice system in members of staff such as prison officers? In my respectful view, her tone today has been entirely misplaced and ill-judged. Given the current crisis that pervades our criminal justice system, is it not about time that she changed her approach and began talking to the people who have served that system for many, many years and stopped taking unilateral action against them and their terms and conditions at work?

Elizabeth Truss: I have had many discussions with prison officers across the prison estate, and I agree that there are issues with safety, which I am seeking to address. I want the job of prison officer to be highly respected, as it is a very important role in our society. What I am saying today is that we have been having discussions with the Prison Officers Association, and that it has failed to respond to the offer that has been put on the table and, instead, called unlawful industrial action. It is very, very poor indeed that the Opposition refuse to condemn unlawful industrial action, because that is what we are talking about.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I was particularly interested to hear the Secretary of State’s comments about the measures to tackle psychoactive substances. Does she agree that the rise in psychoactive substance use in our prisons has been a contributory factor in the increased levels of violence that we are seeing today?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that psychoactive substances have played a large part in the violence issues, which is why it was so important that we rolled out those drugs tests over the past month or so and that we have trained dogs to detect those substances. We have also seen a rise in the use of mobile phones and drones, which poses a new security threat. Again, we are dealing with that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In order to get staff numbers up quickly before the fresh permanent recruitment kicks in, will the Government consider...
swallowing their pride and launch a programme to re-recruit prison officers who have recently left the service on temporary six or 12-month contracts?

Elizabeth Truss: We are absolutely willing to consider those people returning to the service. We want to recruit high-quality officers.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Justice Secretary says that she wishes to recruit high-quality officers. Does she agree that veterans of our armed forces have exactly the type of skills needed to deal with challenging situations in our prisons? Will she update me on what is being done to ensure that they are recruited into the Prison Service?

Elizabeth Truss: We have a specific programme to recruit former armed service personnel who are highly suitable to working in the Prison Service as they bring with them values of discipline and hard work, which are so important in turning the lives of offenders around.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the plans to ensure that prisoners are rehabilitated so that when they leave prison, they do not reoffend?

Elizabeth Truss: We are putting the role of the Secretary of State into primary legislation to ensure that we are not just housing offenders, but turning lives around, getting people the education that they perhaps have not had in the past, getting them into work once they leave prison and getting them off drugs. All those things lead to a reduction in reoffending.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I for one have enormous respect and admiration for our prison officers and for the difficult work that they do. A fortnight ago, the Secretary of State came to this House and committed to bringing on stream an additional 2,500 prison officers. What reaction has she had to that announcement from the Prison Officers Association?

Elizabeth Truss: We did announce an additional 2,500 prison officers. That will enable every single officer to be responsible for six prisoners, which we know will achieve the results of improving safety and ensuring that we reform offenders. I would like to see the Prison Officers Association support that change.

HS2 Update

1.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement about HS2.

One of my first steps as the new Secretary of State for Transport was to reiterate the Government’s backing for HS2. I did so from the conviction that it is essential to delivering a modern, vibrant economy for the United Kingdom.

This is a Government who deliver the infrastructure projects that the economy needs, which is core to delivering a country that works for everyone, wherever in the country they live. Last month, we announced support for a new runway at Heathrow, showing that Britain is a dynamic country that is open to the world.

Today I am announcing the Government’s preferred route for HS2 lines from Crewe to Manchester and from the west midlands to Leeds, known as phase 2b, which will help to rebalance our economy beyond London and the south-east, ensuring that economic prosperity and opportunities are shared throughout the country. That means that following on from the 2013 consultation and work that we have done since, I am today confirming the majority of the route. There are a number of cases, including the proposed route through south Yorkshire recommended by Sir David Higgins in a report earlier this year, where I am proposing substantial refinements. I am launching a consultation to seek the views of communities and other interested parties before reaching a decision on those sections next year.

The first phase of HS2 from London to the west midlands is just over 100 miles long, but phase 2 is significantly longer at 174 miles. The route that I am confirming today represents a huge commitment to the midlands and to the north. HS2 is not just about a faster connection between the south-east, the midlands and the north. It represents a bold vision for connecting up the great cities of the north of England and of the midlands, both east and west. Connectivity is central to HS2. Poor connectivity between the cities and regions of the midlands and the north has restrained their economic growth. High-quality transport allows businesses to grow, work together and access a wide range of customers, suppliers and skilled labour markets. By improving connections between our great cities, HS2 will generate jobs, skills and economic growth and help us to build an economy that works for all.

Today, only 4% of people who travel between Birmingham and Manchester do so by train—hardly surprising, when the journey takes around 90 minutes. But on HS2, it will take less than half that time—just 41 minutes—so at a stroke, those two regional capitals are much more closely linked and can deliver increased economic prosperity. The flow of people, ideas and opportunity will follow those new connections.

Work is also progressing to see how HS2 could help to deliver parts of a fast, frequent northern powerhouse rail network for Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, Hull and Newcastle. Where necessary, we will include passive provision for these services in the phase 2b hybrid Bill, subject to agreement of funding and the supporting business case. Just as important as connectivity is the uplift that HS2 will deliver to our transport system. It will not be a separate, stand-alone railway,
but an integral part of our nation’s future rail network and overall transport infrastructure. It will add to the overall capacity of our congested railways. Even those who never travel on HS2 stand to feel its benefits.

By providing new routes for intercity services, HS2 will free up space on our existing railways for new commuter, regional and freight services, while also taking lorries off our roads. It will provide new options for services to towns which currently do not have a direct connection to London. Tomorrow’s HS2 and east and west coast main lines could have 48 trains per hour to Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds. That compares with 29 today.

Even those who never travel by rail at all stand to benefit from the thousands of local jobs and apprenticeships created by the better connections that HS2 will bring and by the project itself. It will generate around 25,000 jobs during construction, as well as 2,000 apprenticeships. It will support growth in the wider economy, worth an additional 100,000 jobs. I recently visited the site of the new National College for High Speed Rail in Birmingham. Together with its sister college in Doncaster, it will open its doors next year to provide Britain’s workforce with the specialist training, skills and qualifications to build HS2 and future rail projects. It will deliver highly skilled, highly motivated people who will have the opportunity of a great career in a vital industry.

Today’s announcement represents an important step forward in delivering HS2, and with it the transport infrastructure essential to the economy of 21st-century Britain. However, I am well aware that there are those with the firmly held view that HS2 should not go ahead, and those who doubt whether the case has been made satisfactorily. Indeed, I know that many Members of this House have strong convictions on this issue. I am under no illusions; this is not an easy undertaking, but I believe that it is the right thing to do. The easy thing to do would have been to keep patching the existing railways, making do and mending a railway that the Victorian pioneers themselves would still recognise, and hoping to fit ever-increasing passenger and freight growth in the same pint pot. That is not what the people of this country deserve, nor is it what our economy requires.

In addition to publishing today a Command Paper and accompanying maps, setting out the full detail of my preferred route for the HS2 phase 2b route, I have written to those Members whose constituencies are affected, and the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), will make himself available to Members who wish to meet him later today.

In order to ensure that our case is robust and in line with the requirements of the Treasury’s Green Book, we have of course considered alternatives to the phase 2b scheme. We found no alternative that could deliver the same level of benefit for the country, stand the test of time and provide the same level of capacity, connectivity and service as phase 2b does. Over the past few months I have personally visited most places along the HS2 route. I have seen and heard for myself all the issues, and I remain convinced that through this project we are delivering the right solution to the country’s transport needs.

It is important to say that I recognise that building major infrastructure will always be disruptive and disturbing for those living nearby, and I am mindful of the concerns of the constituents of very many Members of this House. In proposing this route, I have listened to the views expressed in the consultation of 2013, as well as those of HS2 Ltd’s engineering and environmental specialists.

I am issuing safeguarding directions for the whole of the preferred phase 2b route today. That protects it from conflicting development, but it also means—this is extremely important—that the people who are most affected by these plans will be able to access statutory compensation straight away. In addition, I will be consulting on discretionary property schemes that will go over and above what is required by law and give assistance to those who will be adversely affected by the railway. These schemes are the same as those currently in operation for people living along the phase 1 route. I aim to be able to confirm next year the schemes on which I am consulting today.

Two of these schemes will come into operation from today. They are the express purchase scheme and the need to sell scheme. Express purchase allows owner-occupiers to apply to the Government to buy their home sooner than would be possible under statutory schemes. The Government will buy properties at their unblighted open market value, as if HS2 were not going to be being built, will provide a home loss payment of 10% of the property’s open market value up to £58,000, and will pay reasonable moving costs.

Need to sell is a purchase scheme for people who have a compelling reason to sell their property but cannot do so; other than at a significantly reduced price, because of HS2. There is no geographical boundary to this scheme. The Government will agree to buy property for 100% of the open market value if an application is successful.

As I say, I am mindful of the impacts that HS2 has on communities. I can assure every Member of this House that my Department and HS2 Ltd will continue to work with affected communities and local authorities up and down the line of route, and in that process I expect people to be treated with fairness, compassion and respect.

Today marks the end of a long period of uncertainty for communities, councils and businesses along the route of phase 2b. These have been complex and difficult decisions to take, but I make no apology for taking the time to get them right and making sure that the route we are proposing offers the best possible outcomes for passengers, communities, the environment and the economy.

I need to touch briefly on phase 1. I can report to the House that phase 1 from Birmingham to London is progressing well. Construction work is due to start early next year, subject to Royal Assent. Phase 1 will open in 2026. In a clear signal of how work is progressing, this morning I have announced the companies that have been awarded the phase 1 enabling works contracts. These works include archaeology, site clearance and the setting up of construction compounds ahead of the start of the main civil engineering work. These contracts are worth up to £900 million and cover the whole of phase 1 from London to Birmingham and the connection to the west coast main line at Handsacre. Work is due to begin in the spring.

Another aspect of the preparatory work on phase 1 is the considerable engagement with those on the line of route, some of whom have taken up our express purchase compensation scheme. We are continuing this offer of
[Chris Grayling]

support and will be writing to those people whose homes or business may be directly affected by construction. We have a general obligation to continue to seek further reductions to adverse impacts during the design, construction and operation of the scheme. This is something that I will be watching very closely. In keeping with that obligation, HS2 Ltd has continued to look at possible mitigations to come forward elsewhere along the route as the detailed design stage starts in earnest after Royal Assent.

HS2 is an ambitious and exciting project, and we must seize the opportunity it offers to transform our country for future generations. Local authorities and local enterprise partnerships are gearing up for HS2 and developing growth strategies, supported by UK Government growth strategy funding, to maximise the benefits of HS2 in their area. I am pleased to announce further funding today for Manchester, the northern gateway partnership, Leeds and the east Midlands, and the first tranche of funding for Sheffield, to support this important work.

This Government are planning for the future. We are taking the big decisions and investing in world-class transport infrastructure. We are ensuring that the UK can seize opportunities and compete on the global stage. But we are also aiming to deliver more capacity on our overcrowded railway, which could see a 65% increase in the number of trains on this part of the network.

The route decision I published today takes us an important step closer to realising the full potential of HS2. It means better transport connections and capacity, more jobs and more training opportunities. Just as importantly, it links centres of innovation and opportunity in the cities and regions of the Midlands, the north and our knowledge economy. I commend this statement to the House.

1.21 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for advance sight of it, for which I am most grateful.

Labour Members are pleased to finally have a partial announcement of the HS2 route, and it is to be very much welcomed, as the delay in getting to this announcement has been immensely stressful for the communities concerned. Labour supports HS2 because we recognise the need for not only faster journey times and improved connectivity but, most importantly, extra capacity—not just for the benefit of passengers, but to transfer freight from road to rail, as the Secretary of State mentioned in his statement.

The employment, and in many cases the lifelong career opportunities, that HS2 will bring will be immense, and we very much welcome all of that, but that does not mean that our support is without qualification, as considerable concerns still remain. There are significant details of the route that have not been confirmed in today’s announcement—most notably a decision on whether to site a station in or around Sheffield, which has been dodged, along with three decisions on the western leg and three on the eastern leg. This is not the first time we have experienced this Government dithering on key infrastructure decisions. While we welcome the consultation that is to follow, there is clearly a risk that it may cause the Government to overly delay decisions, as we have seen recently on a number of nationally important pieces of infrastructure. I ask for an assurance from the Secretary of State that that will not be the case in this instance.

During the consultation, it is imperative that the voices of local communities be heard—especially those communities that will be particularly disrupted by the route as we now know it. Among other things, we have seen the pain and anguish caused to many villages and communities in the south Yorkshire region and elsewhere, and while we need to study the detail of the proposals we must ensure that proper mitigations and comprehensive compensation schemes are in place. The arguments made to modify the alignment of the route in many cases, and those arguments will have to be given proper consideration.

Earlier this year, the National Audit Office reported that HS2 had an “unrealistic timetable” and faced major cost pressures, and that too ambitious a timetable meant that not all the intended benefits would be delivered. We have seen similar problems beset other rail projects, with the Government recently reneging on their manifesto commitment regarding electrification works on the Great Western route and refusing to commit to the already delayed timetable of electrification works on the midland main line. The Department for Transport has a track record of being unable to complete works on time or on budget, so there is understandable concern that HS2 will not be delivered to budget or on time, and I ask the Secretary of State to confirm unequivocally that the planned start dates will be met and the project delivered on the planned timescale and costings.

This is not solely about HS2. So-called HS3 has to be progressed, as do the paused and unpau sed enhancement works that are essential to bring greater connectivities to communities that are not directly connected to HS2. They cannot be forgotten, and they cannot be left behind. The benefits that HS2 can bring to the country are significant, but the Government must get a grip to keep the project on track and to avoid the concerns expressed in the National Audit Office report being realised.

The Government announced that a new rail franchise, the west coast partnership, which is scheduled to start on 1 April 2019, will combine the current inter-city west coast services with HS2, meaning that HS2 will be run in the private sector from 2026 and that Virgin looks set to be granted a further uncontested 12-month contract to run inter-city west coast trains. The Government seem determined to hand over vast swathes of our public services, and what should be our public services, to Richard Branson en masse. Billions of pounds of taxpayers’ money is being invested in HS2, so it is right that the revenues go back to the Exchequer and not into the hands of train operating companies. HS2 should be run in the public sector, as a public service.
Given the concerns about the cost of HS2, the Government should be looking to get the best deal for the UK rather than the shareholders of private train companies or the taxpayers of Germany, France or Holland. It is time to take back control of our railways. Labour is committed to the public ownership and running of our railways, and that includes HS2. A future Labour Government would bring any such franchise back within public operation at the earliest possible opportunity. We support HS2, but it has to deliver for taxpayers and passengers alike, and that will be the consistent challenge for Parliament in the years ahead.

Chris Grayling: First, let me welcome the hon. Gentleman’s support for the principle of the project, although we obviously have one or two areas of difference.

Let me start with the issue of the route through Sheffield. The hon. Gentleman accuses us of dithering. I would simply remind him that we have a statutory duty to consult. We are bringing forward a new set of proposals. He will not, I am sure, argue that I should break the law when it comes to the consultation process that we need to go through. I clearly want to give people as much certainty as possible, as quickly as possible, but I have a statutory duty, and I intend to fulfil it.

I recognise the issue that local communities face, and part of what we will need to do through that consultation process is listen to those local communities about the things we can do, large and small, to mitigate the impacts on them. That is a very important part of the consultation process.

The hon. Gentleman talks about an unrealistic timetable. I think many people in this country would share my frustration that, actually, it will take 17 years from today to complete the whole of HS2. If that is an unrealistic timetable—if it should take much longer—heaven help us. This project has taken a long time to get to this point and will take more years than I would wish to complete—and we need it to be completed—so the idea that it is an unrealistic timetable to complete this project by 2033 seems to me a strange one.

The hon. Gentleman raised the question of electrification. I would simply remind him that, through 13 years in government, Labour electrified 10 miles of railway line. It is small wonder, when we actually started to electrify key main lines, that the expertise was no longer there. It is all very well Labour calling on us to do this, but we are the ones who are undertaking the modernisation of our railways. Through all those years when Labour was in power, the investments in our railways were pitiful by comparison with what we are doing today.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the question of HS3. He will be aware that Transport for the North is working on proposals for what is now being called northern powerhouse rail. That will be much more than a single railway line, and it will build the connectivity we need from east to west. I am waiting with interest to see Transport for the North’s proposals for the future.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the west coast partnership. He will understand that, on the day before this line opens, there will be Pendolinos running up the west coast main line, and, on the day after, there will be express trains running up HS2 to Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool. I want that to be a smooth transition. We have to make sure the train drivers are trained. We have to make sure the staff are ready for the change. I do not envisage a situation where we sack all the staff one day and hire a new group the next. It makes sense to have a smooth transition, and that is what we are planning.

On the hon. Gentleman’s point about the private sector, let the Labour party hark back to the days of British Rail; we want a railway that is modern and progressive. Since the railways were privatised, after decades of decline, the number of passengers has doubled and new stations and railway lines have opened. This is a railway that is moving forwards, not backwards, as it would under Labour.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I welcome today’s announcement by the Secretary of State, not least because it gives a degree of certainty to all the poor people and businesses that are going to be affected by this project. Perhaps he will forgive me if I do not share his overexcitement about its potential, as no benefit accrues to the Chilterns. He is well aware of my criticism of how HS2 has conducted its operations. Will he therefore give me, and people beyond this Chamber, a personal undertaking that there will be generous, fair and rapid compensation, the highest environmental protection, and timely and thoughtful community engagement? I hope that there will also be a revision of the totally archaic hybrid Bill process, which has in itself added pain to the suffering that people along the line have had to experience so far. It is crucial that lessons are learned from phase 1 before we embark on phase 2a.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely echo the need to make sure that we do the right thing by people affected on the route. I slightly disagree with my right hon. Friend about the benefits in the Chilterns, although it is true that in her constituency, which is on a different line, the benefits are different from those a little further away on the other side of the Chilterns on the line that runs up through towns such as Tring, where there will be a benefit in extra capacity on commuter services—it is estimated that there will be twice as many seats on trains going to Euston station in the morning peak, and I think that will be very welcome to the people who use that line. Of course, I absolutely understand that we have to take great care. I share her concern about the hybrid Bill process. It is clear from the discussions we have had on this in the past that there is a widespread view in this House that we want a simplified and modernised process, and work is being done right now on how that might be achieved. However, I also believe very strongly that we need to invest in our future, and that is what this is about.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for early sight of his statement. I have studied all seven pages of it. He starts by saying that in making his decision he “did so from the conviction that it is essential to delivering a modern, vibrant economy for the United Kingdom”, and ends by saying that he is “ensuring that the UK can seize opportunities and compete on the global stage.” Yet in seven pages mentioning 34 places, including the future beneficiaries, not once does Scotland get a mention. There is nothing about connecting Scotland and there are no options for Edinburgh, Glasgow or any other Scottish city—no passing comment even. We
support high-speed rail, but not just to Birmingham, Leeds or Manchester. This announcement, unless followed by a commitment to speed up links to Scotland, means, in effect, our getting further away from London, in relative terms. When did he discuss this announcement with the Scottish Government, and what guarantee did he give for high-speed rail to be connected to Scotland?

Chris Grayling: Let me start by reminding the hon. Gentleman that I have made two very significant transport announcements in this House in the past month, the last of which was very specifically focused on ensuring that we had better aviation links both to London and internationally via our expansion of Heathrow airport. I was particularly keen to stress the importance of protecting connectivity particularly to Scotland and Northern Ireland, because the air links are so crucial to the economies of those nations. Let nobody suggest that I am not interested in connectivity to Scotland; it is a priority for us.

Let us be clear about what this project delivers for passengers travelling down the east coast and west coast routes, who will benefit as much as anybody else from the increased speeds at which they are able to travel over most of the route to Scotland. There is therefore a benefit to Scottish passengers as well. Let us also remember that this is much more than simply a transport project: it will generate a whole set of new skills and business opportunities for this country—for this United Kingdom. Indeed, the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), recently spoke at a suppliers’ conference in Aberdeen. I fully expect to see jobs created in Scotland and opportunities for business in Scotland. That is all part of how we seek to represent and support this entire United Kingdom.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the massive improvement programme for our railways—not just HS2 but the existing network—is a fundamental part of the Government’s programme to deliver economic success and economic rebalancing?

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend is right. It is very important to see today’s announcement in a broader context, because while we are investing in the long term we are also investing in the short term. To give just one example, £350 million is being spent on improvements to the rail network around Liverpool. There are many other examples around the country—indeed, there are improvements in Scotland and in Wales. Our Government strategy is about much more than this railway line; it is about delivering transport improvements across the whole United Kingdom.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Those of my constituents who are affected by this will be appalled that none of my proposals on the route has been taken into account, either on the route itself or on mitigation, and will, frankly, wonder why they bothered. There is a concern that the Government and HS2 are taking seriously the concerns and interests of cities but not those of towns and smaller communities, and that there is a willingness to invest in mitigation or tunneling for the south but not for the north. What can the Secretary of State say to my constituents to give them any good reason to carry on engaging with this process at all?

Chris Grayling: I would say to the right hon. Lady’s constituents that we fully intend to go through a process of detailed engagement. I am happy, as is my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary, to meet her to talk about these issues. I have travelled the route and seen for myself some of the issues and challenges. I have in mind some things that we might do to help improve the design of the route and reduce its visual impact. I will listen to her and to other Members. Fundamentally, though, she will understand, as a Yorkshire MP, the importance of this kind of connectivity to the economy of her region and the jobs it will create. We have to do this in the best possible way.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): As my right hon. Friend is aware, many of my constituents have been living under a great deal of stress for three years now. I am sure that residents and businesses alike will welcome the compensation package that he outlined, especially those directly on the route through Long Eaton, but will he reassure the whole of Long Eaton that it will not be cut in half by the track that will go through it?

Chris Grayling: I have been particularly concerned about Long Eaton, for which we have tabled two options for consideration: a high-level viaduct and a low-level viaduct. I am well aware of the issue that the town faces; this is a complicated piece of engineering. Of course, the jobs created by the new development around Toton will be of benefit to Long Eaton. We will do our best to get this right, and that is why we have tabled more than one option for consideration by the local community.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this statement, with its promise of much-needed increased rail capacity, together with the jobs that go with that. Will the Secretary of State tell us more about how this investment will benefit the whole network, and how the economic benefits will actually be achieved? In particular, how much is he working with Rail North in bringing maximum benefit to the cities of the north, including Liverpool?

Chris Grayling: We are awaiting the proposals of Rail North and Transport for the North on the connectivity that runs east to west, which I regard as very important. For a city such as Liverpool, there are two particular benefits. One of those will come through the part that this development has to play in that east-west connectivity, particularly with the routes around south Manchester. In addition—as the hon. Lady knows, I have been a regular user of the route from Liverpool over the years—there will be more trains to Liverpool and they will run faster from Liverpool to London than they do now. That will knock a significant amount off the journey time, making a real difference to her and her constituents when they travel not only to London but to Birmingham.
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Network Rail purchases much of its rail track from the Scunthorpe steelworks in the neighbouring constituency to mine. What efforts will my right hon. Friend make to ensure that British manufacturers are used in the production of most of the HS2 infrastructure?

Chris Grayling: I am pleased to say that the contracts announced today will involve very substantial British participation in the early works. The vast majority of steel used on our railways today comes from British plants. I do not expect that to change, nor do I want it to change. I am also very clear that the businesses that take part in this programme have to leave a skills footprint behind them. I am not interested in firms that just turn up and do not expect to invest in the next generation of skills that this country needs. We need to be very robust on that throughout the procurement process. Moreover, this will allow us to provide extra connectivity to towns that do not currently have direct services to London.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The Secretary of State should not airbrush history and the massive £8 billion upgrade to the west coast under the last Labour Government. There was a huge improvement in services and a huge increase in the number of passengers using them.

I want to ask a specific question about my constituency. The Command Paper states that there will be an additional train to Liverpool, so there will be two trains per hour. Will the Secretary of State confirm that they will also stop at Runcorn, as is currently the case?

Chris Grayling: I do not expect any changes to the service to Runcorn. It would be a big step in the wrong direction if that service changed. The Liverpool trains have always stopped at Runcorn and Liverpool, and I would not want that to change.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Whole new areas in my constituency will be blighted as a result of today’s announcement, although other parts of it will benefit from the hub at Crewe. Given the blight on my constituency, will the Secretary of State agree to visit Eddisbury to speak to my local residents and hear their concerns about how it will impact on them?

Chris Grayling: As my hon. Friend knows, I lived very close to the route some years ago, so I had advance knowledge of how difficult it will be for many of her constituents. Of course, we are very happy to engage with her and her constituents on the issue. As I have said, there is no easy way of delivering such a big infrastructure project without consequences for some people, but we will do everything we can to mitigate its impact wherever possible.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): HS2’s rejection of the Sheffield Meadowhall option—it said that there was a lack of consensus—is a stab in the back for the south Yorkshire economy. The reroute through the three villages of Wales, Aston and Bramley in my constituency will knock down homes and businesses. There is no consensus for that, either. Can we just have some common sense, instead of moving around all the time? If the decision was made about Meadowhall and compensation paid to householders as a result, why should there be a reroute?

Chris Grayling: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, Sir David Higgins did a lot of detailed work on that issue. Strong views were expressed in Sheffield about what worked best for the city. I have been to Aston and seen the potential impact. I will work to try to ensure that we get the maximum possible mitigation in such areas, but the right hon. Gentleman will understand that, if we are to deliver opportunities and prosperity for the northern part of the country, we need to make sure that it has the connectivity it needs.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend set out in a little more detail the additional inter-city and commuter services from which places such as Milton Keynes will benefit once HS2 is operational?

Chris Grayling: One of the benefits that will be experienced by towns on the existing west coast main line will be the potential for a significant increase in the number of services. For example, for those who commute from Milton Keynes to London, we expect twice as many seats to be available on suburban routes to Hertfordshire and beyond to Milton Keynes, and greater opportunities for semi-fast services. The route from the town of Coventry to Birmingham is two tracks wide and constantly congested, as freight, express and passenger trains jockey for position. The proposal will create a huge additional amount of much-needed capacity for commuters to Birmingham on that very busy route.

Andy Burnham ( Leigh) (Lab): I welcome the fact that HS2 has listened to residents in the Lowton and Golborne area and moved the depot off a site of special scientific interest to a more appropriate location. Is it not the truth, however, that the investment in HS2 will make sense to the majority of people in the north only when it is combined with investment in new east-west, high-speed lines linking the great cities? Our roads are full and cannot take any more, so will the Secretary of State press the Chancellor to use the autumn statement to set out a clear timetable for northern powerhouse rail, including a completion date to tie in with HS2? Will the Government make that investment a higher priority for transport investment than spending billions more pounds on London with Crossrail 2?

Chris Grayling: The right hon. Gentleman is, of course, a powerful advocate of the city that he hopes to represent as mayor. He is also a Liverpudlian, so he will be aware of the substantial amounts of money that we are spending on improvements in both Liverpool and Manchester. One of the benefits of the arrival of HS2 in Manchester will be to create much more connectivity on the suburban routes to Manchester Piccadilly, which is much needed. We are also poised to open links between Piccadilly and Victoria, so improvements are happening today and the right hon. Gentleman is right to say that more are needed for the future.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is prepared to listen to pleas for mitigation. In my constituency, three or four
communities are bisected by the rail. There are alternatives, such as tunnelling, and we need to continue to look at them.

Chris Grayling: I give my hon. Friend an assurance that that will happen. It happens, of course, as part of the consultation process for such proposals, and the hybrid Bill process that lies ahead will give his constituents every opportunity to seek change from this House, in the same way as they previously sought change from this Government.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): The original justification for the spur that goes through my constituency was the stock depot at Golborne. It has now been announced that that depot will move to north of Crewe, so why is the Secretary of State continuing with a spur that will devastate the village of Hollins Green in my constituency, have a huge environmental impact on Culcheth, even though the line has moved slightly, and does not even give Warrington a station so that it can profit from all that disruption? There are other places in the north-west besides Liverpool and Manchester, but the Secretary of State seems to have forgotten that, if we are going to have the HS2 line, they need to profit from it, to compensate for all the disruption.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady of all people should know that the last thing I would do is forget that places such as Warrington exist. The issue on the west coast main line north of Crewe is that much of the route through Warrington and up to Wigan is two-track. To try to fit the HS2 trains while meeting existing demand for freight and for passenger services from Liverpool and Manchester is almost impossible to engineer. We have, therefore, chosen the route that maximises rail capacity through Warrington. There will be HS2 services that serve Warrington and that, in addition, create the speed, connectivity and extra capacity that we need.

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): This is, indeed, good news for the city of Leeds, which is already starting to experience the economic benefits, with companies such as Burberry investing in it because of HS2. I welcome in particular the integrated approach to Leeds station. Does the Secretary of State agree that all the towns and villages across west Yorkshire have an opportunity to benefit from HS2 through a properly integrated station, and that the Secretary of State will no doubt have seen last Thursday’s ITV programme supporting the powerful case against HS2.

Chris Grayling: I am pleased that my hon. Friend makes an important point. Such investment builds economic strength in cities such as Leeds, and that ripples out across the whole region by creating not only jobs in Leeds, but opportunities for businesses in west Yorkshire. This will be of huge benefit to the economy of the whole area around Leeds, permeating into the rural areas, and it will deliver real improvements to the economy of the north as a whole.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): The Secretary of State will no doubt have seen last Thursday’s ITV programme supporting the powerful case against HS2. I am not alone in considering HS2 to be wholly unnecessary, and it will, indeed, be horrendously expensive. For much less than its likely eventual cost, essential modernisations, electrifications, additions and upgrades on our railways could all be funded. Would not that be a much more sensible investment?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman misses the central point, which is that this is a project about capacity. Whenever we have Transport questions, we hear about the pressures and congestion on, and the challenges for, our rail network. The west coast and east coast main lines, which are principal routes, are mixing together express long-distance trains, intermediate semi-fast trains, local community trains and freight trains. When things go wrong, they become congested and the trains are mixed and matched. We have to create extra capacity if we are going to be able to deliver solutions to the demands of the next generation. That is what this project is all about.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): May I start by thanking my right hon. Friend for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State? As one of my constituents put it to me, what has happened today, with the actioning of my proposed reroute of the branch line to Leeds at Woodlesford, shows that the political system does work. However, the main line past Swillington and Garforth in my constituency remains unchanged, so will my right hon. Friend meet me at the earliest opportunity to discuss mitigation and landscaping that will limit the impact on my constituents?

Chris Grayling: I am pleased that my hon. Friend’s constituents are happy with the change in his area. My hon. Friend the Minister will be happy to meet Members from across the House later today if they wish to raise specific issues, and of course we will have those discussions.

I want to mention something that I should have said in my earlier remarks. I cannot remember which Opposition Member’s constituency includes Crofton, where one of the depots is planned. I have been to the site and I am looking actively at whether we can find an alternative location for the depot. I hope to be able to bring forward an alternative, but I cannot provide guarantees today.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The Secretary of State mentioned Aberdeen. In 2013, KPMG found that the annual impact of HS2 on the economy of the north-east of Scotland would be £220 million a year. Can he update that figure, and will he tell the House what he is doing to mitigate the possible economic loss?

Chris Grayling: I do not have an updated figure for the hon. Gentleman, but to ensure that Aberdeen prospers, we are making sure: first, that we have a growing economy; secondly, that we continue to provide financial support to the Scottish economy from across the rest of the United Kingdom; and, thirdly, that we continue to look at ways of planning and funding to create job opportunities and business opportunities in this programme for people in Aberdeen. That was why my hon. Friend the Minister went there.
Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that to get the full benefit of HS2 in the east midlands, the midland mainline needs to be electrified right through to Nottingham, Derby and Sheffield? Will he therefore confirm that there will be no further delays in that project?

Chris Grayling: We are moving ahead now and work is being done on the next stage of electrification. I am very keen to ensure that, by 2020, we will be able to deliver improved capacity and the improved speed on trains, but we will make sure that all the benefits are delivered as quickly as possible.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): HS2 can be justified only if its full benefits are spread across the country and it is not simply a link between major city centres. For Cheshire, that means that we must proceed with the Crewe hub to spread those benefits around. The Secretary of State has not made his decision yet, so will he tell us when we can expect to hear about the Crewe hub? Will he also confirm that investment in HS2 will not detract from further electrification along the Chester and north Wales line?

Chris Grayling: The improvements that we are making to the rest of the network are separate from HS2. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we are doing a vast amount of work around the rail network—we will continue to do so. With regard to Crewe, we will have to put forward new proposals for consultation, but it is clear to me that Crewe station will have improved connectivity and will play a central part in our plans.

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Con): We would like a tunnel, please, at Strelley village, but HS2 enjoys widespread cross-party support in Bromsgrove and beyond, because we get the east Midlands hub at Toton sidings, Stapleford. HS2 delivers capacity and growth. To that end, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that at Toton we get a world-class business park, not just hundreds of homes and houses?

Chris Grayling: I have been to Toton. The site was once one of Britain’s great railway centres, so it is sad to see it overgrown, as it is at present. I fully expect that we will engender a real process of regeneration, with both residential and commercial development around the site. It will, of course, be for the local authority and Members of Parliament such as my right hon. Friend to shape exactly what that development should be. We want her region to be a major centre of economic regeneration, and the Toton site, large as it is, provides a real opportunity for that.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I have long campaigned for high-speed rail for Leeds, but the HS2, HS3, and phases 2a and 2b proposals are clearly flawed. Not to have a station in Sheffield is simply ludicrous. Why will the Government still not look properly at the alternative High Speed UK proposals, which are £20 billion cheaper and far more environmentally friendly? The scheme would also provide better connectivity and would not plough through the Chilterns. Why will the Government not consider that?

Chris Grayling: With all respect, I think that turning the clock back and starting the process all over again—going through the process of another hybrid Bill to get this project off the ground—would delay the project further and further into the future. We have taken a project that originated from the previous Labour Government and developed it further. We have put in place a clear plan, and next spring we start construction. I, for one, am not in favour of turning the clock back.

Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement. Does he agree that the project will have a significant impact for the midlands engine for growth, and particularly for Derby, which is known as a rail city?

Chris Grayling: Derby is one of the places that will benefit from the proposals. Having the new east midlands hub between Nottingham and Derby will give both cities the opportunity to benefit enormously from it. I will be surprised if the great rail industries of Derby do not play a pretty active part in the programme.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I extend an invitation to the Secretary of State to come to Bolton and travel with me on the trains during rush hour. He would see how my constituents are squashed like sardines, how short the trains are, and how many of my constituents miss their trains and are late for work. Why can the Government not find some investment—proper money—for Bolton and the surrounding areas?

Chris Grayling: I hope that the hon. Lady welcomes the new northern franchise, which includes longer and newer trains, more services and the electrification of key routes around Greater Manchester. It should deliver a much better travelling experience for the public of the north, because that experience has not been good enough for a very long time. We are taking the action that is needed to make it much better for the future.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): May I give the Secretary of State one more opportunity to confirm the huge investment in the great north railway? That is not instead of, but as well as, investment in our local and regional services. Does he agree that to win hearts and minds, we must emphasise the quality jobs and apprenticeships, connectivity between towns as well as cities, and a supercharged HS3 between Liverpool and the city of culture, Hull?

Chris Grayling: I agree with my hon. Friend. Part of the job of delivering the northern powerhouse is delivering connectivity that goes from east to west—or west to east, depending on which way we look at it. This is about not just rail but road improvements. In my work on how we shape the next generation of investments, I am mindful of the need to ensure that that east-west connectivity for the north is delivered.

Mr Clive Babb (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I have been open-minded about the right location for the Sheffield station, but may we have a clear indication from the Secretary of State of when a decision will be made? Many of my constituents have had their homes and lives blighted for many years. Will he give us some clarification about the possible Sheffield city centre station? Is it true that the trains that run there will be shorter and narrower than the full HS2 trains? In other words, is it true that they will not be full HS2 trains?
Given that it does not look as though the midland mainline electrification will happen, will HS2 now have to pick up the full bill for electrification from the HS2 line into Sheffield station?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman makes some assumptions on the latter point. The trains that operate off the HS2 network will be a different design from those that operate exclusively on the HS2 network—that is to do with platform widths and gauges. That does not mean that they are slower trains or that they are less good trains; they are simply trains that can operate both on HS2 and on a conventional network. Clearly, if those trains go through Sheffield midland station, which is on the conventional network, we will be using them.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): North Warwickshire has consistently suffered due to a lack of engagement from HS2, so I was alarmed to learn this morning that despite assurances given by HS2 to my local council just three weeks ago, there would be no changes to the line locally. The line will, in fact, move around 150 metres nearer to the village of Austrey, although that significant change was not even mentioned in the route refinement document. That the very first paper published on phase 2b directly contradicts information offered by HS2 so recently is cause for great concern. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give me that communication will actually improve? Will he meet me to discuss the impacts of the most recent changes on my constituents?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. I was not aware of the situation that he describes, and the Minister and I will talk to him about how we address it.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): Hitachi Rail Europe in Newton Aycliffe in my constituency is well placed to manufacture the rolling stock for HS2. It has a long track record of more than 50 years of building high-speed trains, such as the bullet train in the 1960s in Tokyo. Will the Secretary of State outline the procurement process—it will take place towards the end of this decade—but I cannot give him such a guarantee today, but Carlisle will benefit from faster services, and specifically from the HS2 rolling stock that will come up the west coast main line to Carlisle, which will improve connectivity for his area from north to south. I am looking forward to talking to him about the A69 connectivity from east to west.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): If HS2 is indeed to benefit the whole of the UK, it is important that areas such as north Wales, with its important routes to Ireland, receive investment and connectivity. May I therefore press the Secretary of State on their joined-up thinking on the west coast franchise and HS2, and welcome today’s announcement. Will the Secretary of State confirm that there will, in due course, be a third stage to take the route further north—arguably to the true north—and will he take Carlisle into account as a possible station?

Chris Grayling: I cannot judge future developments, but York will be one of the places that benefits from HS2 connectivity: trains will run up the HS2 line and on through York. The extra capacity and extra speeds—the extra capacity on the east coast main line, and the extra speed and connectivity to London—will very much benefit my hon. Friend’s constituents.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Having regularly buttonholed the Secretary of State’s predecessor, the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), to ensure that Chesterfield was included in HS2, I am highly delighted with the Secretary of State’s proposal. Will he, however, confirm that passengers boarding HS2 at Chesterfield will have single-train access to Birmingham and London, as well as north to Sheffield and Leeds?

Chris Grayling: It is certainly our intention that people who board at Chesterfield and Sheffield will have good connections to London. I expect that there will be through trains. I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a number at the moment, but I am expecting that to happen.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): I congratulate the Government on their joined-up thinking on the west coast franchise and HS2, and welcome today’s announcement. Will the Secretary of State confirm that there will, in due course, be a third stage to take the north W ales line and its importance to the economy of north W ales. I recently discussed that with the Secretary of State for Wales and, indeed, the Welsh Assembly Government. This is very much on my to-do list as we look to the future.

Chris Grayling: I am well aware of the issues about the north Wales line and its importance to the economy of north W ales. I recently discussed that with the Secretary of State for Wales and, indeed, the Welsh Assembly Government. This is very much on my to-do list as we look to the future.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. I was interested to read that high-speed rail services are being considered for can my right hon. Friend give that York will not be bypassed in any future development further north beyond the second phase of HS2?

Chris Grayling: I cannot judge future developments, but York will be one of the places that benefits from HS2 connectivity: trains will run up the HS2 line and on through York. The extra capacity and extra speeds—the extra capacity on the east coast main line, and the extra speed and connectivity to London—will very much benefit my hon. Friend’s constituents.
rail passengers in Macclesfield and, indeed, in Stoke-on-Trent. Will he tell the House the time within which these decisions are likely to be made, and will he confirm that, whatever the outcome, passengers from Macclesfield will continue to enjoy the same speed and frequency of rail services as they do today?

Chris Grayling: It is certainly our intention that HS2 services should not reach Manchester exclusively by the existing route. We have talked about Stoke-on-Trent, and Macclesfield is one of the places on the same line. The other benefits to my hon. Friend’s constituents, many of whom work in Manchester, is that this will provide far more opportunity for commuter services, and far more space on those commuter services, for them and people living further north on the way into Manchester, which in my view they very much need.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): As the Secretary of State is an avid Manchester United fan, may I ask him what first attracted him to extending the high-speed line from his home in the south-east to his beloved Old Trafford? Secondly, what discussions has he had with Transport for Greater Manchester about extending the light rail network out to the HS2 station at Manchester airport in my constituency?

Chris Grayling: On the latter point, there is an obvious logic in continuing to develop the Metrolink network. We have just announced additional routes to the west of the centre—indeed, passing pretty close to Old Trafford—so I am very open to discussing with the new mayor, when he or she is elected in the summer, the ways in which we can continue to develop the transport system in Manchester.

As for the direct route between Surrey and Old Trafford, although they say that most Manchester United supporters live in Surrey, I suspect that we might struggle to get the passenger numbers to justify a high-speed route all that way.

Mr Speaker: I hope I am a lot happier just after 2.30 this Saturday afternoon than the Secretary of State, who knows my allegiance in this matter.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Midland main line electrification has a better benefit-cost ratio than any other electrification scheme and a better benefit-cost ratio than HS2. For a fraction of HS2’s cost, it would deliver momentous line speed and capacity improvements for towns across the east midlands, including Kettering. Will the Secretary of State use this opportunity to commit to fulfilling the Government’s pledge to complete the electrification of the midland main line by 2023?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend will be aware that work has already started on the electrification process that will, in the next stage, go as far as Corby, as well as—this tends to be seen rather as the poor relation—one track improvements and extra tracks passing up through his constituency to Corby, which will enable us to have much faster trains and much more capacity. My goal is to deliver faster journey times and extra capacity by 2020—long before the date he mentioned.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): In the statement of funding policy that accompanied the comprehensive spending review, Wales was allocated a 0% Barnett rating, whereas Scotland and Northern Ireland both got a 100% rating. This means that Wales will lose out on a full Barnett allocation from HS2. As expenditure increases during the construction phase, so will the impact on the Welsh Government’s budget compared with those of Scotland and Northern Ireland. Will the Secretary of State look at this issue once again and ensure that this injustice is rectified?

Chris Grayling: My view is that this is about transport improvements around the country. I, of course, regard improvements in Wales as extremely important. I met the Minister responsible for transport in Wales last week, and we will work together to deliver the improvements that Wales needs.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for indulging a west country interloper on these proceedings. I very much welcome the improved connectivity to the midlands and the north that HS2 will bring, but an awful lot of the country lies to the west, so it is regrettable that key parts of the electrification programme on the Great Western railway have been deferred. As we build an economy that works for all parts of the UK, will the Secretary of State look again at the benefits of running fully electric trains all the way from Paddington to Bristol Temple Meads, which for so many rail users is the entry point to Somerset and the whole of the south-west of England?

Chris Grayling: I am as frustrated as anybody by the challenges we have had on the Great Western railway route. One of the great ironies is that while the Labour party attacks us on rail issues and talks about the need for renationalisation, one of its targets is the one bit of the rail industry that is in the public sector. The fact is that Network Rail has not been involved in electrification for many years. It did virtually nothing in Labour’s years in power. This first project has developed more problems and challenges than expected, but I still want it to be completed as quickly as possible.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I very much welcome what my right hon. Friend said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), but I will unashamedly ask for more. I want more services, both northbound and southbound, running to Corby. Our town is growing hugely and at a rapid rate, and we need more capacity to meet growing demand and to utilise the existing lines. How will phase 2b of HS2 help to unlock opportunities through the midland main line?

Chris Grayling: The more that we take express trains off the existing main lines and the more we move passengers on to the new capacity, the more capacity will be created for intermediate journeys. The big difference for my hon. Friend’s constituency is the unheralded one of just building an extra track to Corby. That will make more difference to his town than almost anything else.

By 2020, we need to have delivered much more capacity on the routes used by people represented by him and my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone). That will be essential to deliver a proper, effective commuter rail network, alongside what needs to continue to be a good express system to the midlands and the north.
Defibrillators (Availability)

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

2.9 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the provision of defibrillators in education establishments, and in leisure, sports and certain other public facilities; to make provision for training persons to operate defibrillators; to make provision for funding the acquisition, installation, use and maintenance of defibrillators; and for connected purposes.

The purpose of the Bill is to increase the rates of survival from non-hospital cardiac arrests across the UK. Currently, our record in this country for survival from cardiac arrest is dismal. According to the British Heart Foundation, almost 30,000 cardiac arrests a year occur outside hospitals, and less than 10% of the people who suffer those cardiac arrests survive. In fact, in parts of England survival rates are close to 2%. Behind those statistics are people, families and communities.

Cardiac arrests can happen for many reasons, from trauma right through to congenital heart defects. Even more frightening than the 10% survival figure is the fact that 12 young people each week will die from arrhythmia death syndrome, a hidden condition that can strike at any time—young people such as Oliver King, who died from a cardiac arrest aged 12. A young lad from Liverpool, he was popular and very sporty, and died after winning a swimming competition. When he died, no defibrillator was available. Paramedics took just 24 minutes to get to the scene. His father, Mark, is here in the Gallery today, along with other members of the Oliver King Foundation, because they are convinced that if a defibrillator had been available at the scene Oliver would be alive now. They have campaigned week after week in this place, with many Members, for defibrillators to be made available throughout the country. Today, we are just short of two months away from what would have been Oliver’s 18th birthday.

Let us be under no illusion about the difference defibrillators could make. A defibrillator can greatly increase survival rates from cardiac arrest, by almost as much as 80%. But for them to be successful, minutes count, and quick access to a defibrillator is crucial. A defibrillator needs a shockable heart rhythm; if too much time elapses, a shockable heart rhythm will turn into a non-shockable one, and the chance of survival decreases rapidly. If a heart is not started within four minutes of cardiac arrest, a person’s chances of living are reduced by almost 80%. Even the speediest paramedic in the country would struggle to get to someone in four minutes. That is why it is crucial that defibrillators are accessible everywhere in this country. We have laws that mandate smoke alarms, fire extinguishers, seatbelts and life jackets to save lives, but not a single law mandating a simple piece of equipment that could restart the lives of 12 young people each week.

The Young Mayor of Seaford in my constituency, Jessica Batchelor—she is also here in the Gallery—at the age of 15 witnessed first hand a close family friend die suddenly from a cardiac arrest when no defibrillator was available. As Young Mayor, she has raised thousands of pounds to put in as many defibrillators across Seaford as possible. She has lobbied me, as her local MP, to do something about this, and has worked with me on the Bill. I pay tremendous tribute to her.

The aim of the Bill is not to undermine the excellent work of existing charities, such as the British Heart Foundation with Heartstart or St John Ambulance, but to support it. I want to achieve two things. The first is to improve access by using key community facilities. We know that for survival after a cardiac arrest, time matters. Making sure that people know where their nearest defibrillator is, therefore, is key. The British Heart Foundation would like a national database, so that we can ensure not only that there is adequate defibrillator coverage but that the defibrillators are maintained and replaced where necessary.

In the Bill, we have suggested schools, sports facilities and public buildings as locations, so that there is somewhere in every town and village in the country where a local defib can be installed. But that is not enough. Defibs need to be accessible 24 hours a day. In rural communities such as my constituency, many villages do not have a school. It is therefore key that somewhere is designated and, more importantly, that people know where that place is.

Currently, there is a postcode lottery—even in schools, despite the Department for Education’s efforts, as it has pursued the option of defibrillators but has not mandated them. In England, we know of 1,389 defibrillators available in schools; in Northern Ireland, we know of one, and in Scotland we do not know of any. That is not to say that they do not exist; but without a register, no one is able to check. Although it is good news that only this month the Department of Health awarded the British Heart Foundation another £1 million to make defibrillators accessible across the country and provide cardiopulmonary resuscitation training, until provision is mandatory, defibrillator access will remain hit and miss.

The Bill’s second aim is to increase the use of defibrillators—it is important not just to have them but to make sure that they are used. That is why the Bill mandates training. I have talked to residents in my local villages. Many have seen their local defibrillator, but say they would be reluctant to use it, because they think that training is needed to do so. Although nothing could be further from the truth—all a person has to do is stick the two pads on someone’s chest and press the button, as the machine will tell them what to do—without training, people are afraid to use them. The Bill’s aim is not to state that only trained people should use defibrillators but to mandate training for local communities with every installation, so that people feel confident using them.

I wonder how many Members present know how many defibrillators there are on the parliamentary estate. There are 20 in total, in the House of Lords, House of Commons, Norman Shaw North and Portcullis House, with two in Big Ben. I am sure you know, Mr Speaker, where the nearest defibrillator is to the Chamber, in case one of us needed it in an emergency; Members will be reassured to learn that it is in Members Lobby.

I therefore move that the Bill be introduced, so that we can mandate that defibs are installed across the whole of the UK in publicly accessible places, and that training is available so that people know what to do in the event of a cardiac arrest, and are not afraid to use those defibs. It is crucial to support the work of our many charities, such as the Oliver King Foundation and
the British Heart Foundation, including the request for a live register to ensure that there is adequate coverage and that that coverage is maintained.

Twelve young people will die of a cardiac arrest this week, and 28,000 people will die this year. Those lives could be saved by the Bill. I urge Members to support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Maria Caulfield, Andy Burnham, Stephen Twigg, Mims Davies, Anna Soubry, Dr James Davies, Mike Wood, Mr Edward Vaizey, Dr Philippa Whitford, Douglas Chapman, Dr Lisa Cameron and Peter Aldous present the Bill.

Maria Caulfield accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 January 2017, and to be printed (Bill 91).

Investigatory Powers Bill
Consideration of Lords message

After Clause 8

2.19 pm

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I beg to move,

That this House disagrees with the Lords amendments 15B, 15C, 338B, 339B and 339C.

Two weeks ago, we considered Lords amendments to the Investigatory Powers Bill. In accepting unopposed all amendments that relate directly to the subject matter of the Bill, this House demonstrated the value we all place on legislative scrutiny in the other place, and recognised the many improvements made by their lordships to this important legislation. We welcome the spirit of cross-party co-operation on this crucial matter. I would like to put on record again my admiration for the approach taken by all parties in both Houses in contributing to this landmark Bill.

Together, we have created a world-leading framework for the use of investigatory powers by law enforcement and the security and intelligence agencies. We have strengthened the authorisation processes and safeguards around the use of those powers, and we have created a powerful new body that is responsible for the oversight of those powers.

During that debate, however, we also gave thorough and anxious consideration to the amendments tabled by Baroness Hollins, supported by others, which sought to use the Bill as a vehicle to change the law in relation to the regulation of the press. The amendments would introduce a presumption that a court should award costs against a publisher in cases of unlawful interception if it is not part of a recognised regulator, regardless of whether or not it won a case.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Did my hon. and learned Friend see the article in The Times last week by the noble Lord Pannick? He is not necessarily always a friend to the Government on these matters, but he very clearly said that the Lords amendments should be rejected, that this was an important and well thought out Bill, and that the sooner we got on with it, the better.

The Solicitor General: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. Lord Pannick played an important part in helping to refine other parts of the Bill, most notably on legal professional privilege. Lord Pannick said that we “should reject the Lords’ attempt to hold such an important bill hostage on issues of press regulation that are far from central to the bill’s purposes.”

The Bill does not, and never was intended to, provide for the regulation of the press. It is about providing vital tools for our law enforcement and security and intelligence agencies. The Lords amendments we are considering today differ slightly from those we debated last time. The noble Lady revised her proposal to remove the link to clause 8 in order to avoid any risk that it could have an impact on the provisions already in the Bill. She also added a six-year sunset, which she suggests means that the change could be allowed to fall away after the
The process of reform of press self-regulation is complete. I thank the noble Lady for her efforts to minimise the collateral impact of her amendments and I recognise the goodwill she is showing in doing so, but I am afraid that the fundamental problem remains. The amendments are simply not appropriate at this time, or in this legislation.

The public consultation announced by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who is on the Front Bench today, speaks directly to the concerns of those supporting the amendments. It provides everyone—whether a publisher or a victim of phone hacking, a parliamentarian, journalist, police officer or a member of the public—with their rightful opportunity to contribute to the debate on the issue of press self-regulation, which affects each and every one of us in this country. The consultation document not only sets out the position but asks a series of questions to consultees. The questions are wide-ranging and allow a number of options to be explored. As is proper with a consultation, they allow consultees to express their views fully and to provide evidence to support their contentions. A number of options are set out. It is not simply a question of commencement, but whether part of section 40 should be commenced to afford protection to members of a recognised regulator, whether to not apply the particular provisions to publishers outside a recognised regulator, and to consider whether section 40 should be fully commenced, repealed or kept under review. This is an important consultation. It allows adequate time for people who are either well versed in the issues relating to the Leveson process, which occupied this House some years ago, or come new to the issue and want to have their say, bearing in mind the passage of time since the introduction of section 40 pursuant to the Crime and Courts Act 2013.

The Government have been absolutely clear that they recognise the very serious intrusion and anxiety suffered by victims of press misconduct.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Will my hon. and learned Friend tell the House what the double lock for the most intrusive warrants will achieve, and why it is so very important?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to remind the House about one of the truly innovative parts of the Bill. The mechanism proposed by Government was refined in Committee by representatives from other parties, as well as the Government. It allows for not only a politician, a Secretary of State, to make a decision about authorisation, but for that decision to be then reviewed by a judge who will apply principles of judicial review—not just Wednesbury unreasonableness, but principles relating to proportionality and human rights matters that are properly engaged in considering what we accept are serious intrusions when it comes to this type of warrant.

The Bill is unprecedented and world leading. The double lock represents the Government’s commitment to maintaining the balance between the need for the security and intelligence agencies and other investigative agencies to be fleet of foot when it comes to investigating serious crime. It will ensure that, with judicial input, the interests of privacy and human rights are kept very much to the forefront of these decisions.

On press misconduct, we must ensure that victims have appropriate means of redress. The situation, however, is complex and the overall solution is far from clear. We must do our utmost to avoid unintended consequences of what I accept are well-intentioned actions.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The hon. and learned Gentleman was referred earlier by the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) to the words of Lord Pannick. Does the Minister also agree that Lord Pannick that there can be no doubt that the amendments are within the scope of the Bill, which was one of the Government’s previous objections?

The Solicitor General: The hon. and learned Lady will know that the interpretation of scope taken in the other place is somewhat different from the one both she and I understand in this place, having both served on the Public Bill Committee. I pay tribute to her for the considerable number of amendments she tabled in this House. I think we have to accept that the Lords’ interpretation allowed for the introduction of these amendments. The Government rightly had issues with some of the technical deficiencies in them. I paid tribute to the efforts made by Baroness Hollins to amend the provisions to meet some of the Government’s concerns. However—this is why we seek to reject the amendments—they have no place in a Bill that relates to the regulation of investigative powers. This is all about national security and dealing with crime, whether that be child abuse, trafficking, drug dealing or any other criminality we want to deal with in society. That is why the amendments are not only out of place but pre-empt the outcome of the consultation launched by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Would my hon. and learned Friend not go further and say that a Bill on national security is precisely the wrong place for restrictions on the press, as it would make it look as if we were really trying to hit them hard?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Bill is all about balance and the importance the Executive attach to the way they seek to interfere or intrude into the private lives of individuals and to setting out clearly the criteria that must be met before they can act. It would be wrong to take any measure that sends a message that the Government wish to ride roughshod over the interests of individuals and freedom of speech. He knows that the consultation launched two weeks ago will deal with the very issues that have caused him concern over a number of years, although it would be wrong for me to pre-empt the outcome of that open process.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that phone hacking, which we hear so much about, particularly from those who support these press rules, is already a criminal offence for which people can go to jail? In addition, we have the libel laws, so anything the press does, in a major regard, is already very much covered.
The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to remind us that where we have existing mechanisms—and the criminal law is, of course, there—they must be used. To be fair to both sides of the argument, the issues about redress of grievance and the mechanism of press regulation, which he knows from his experience as a journalist has existed for years, are important ones. I know that he would be as anxious as anybody in the House to make sure that, rather than the focus being on celebrities and the like, ordinary people who end up as victims—chiefly of inaccuracies reported in the media—have a reasonable and cost-effective means of redress. He is absolutely right, however, to talk about existing mechanisms and the criminal law, and of course the criminal law was used in a significant investigation by the Metropolitan police that resulted in several convictions.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that, in respect of the consultation that the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has set out, we have to get the balance right between respecting the freedoms of the press and the rights of innocent people who have never sought publicity but who find themselves on the wrong side of an investigation and need a low-cost method of arbitration to bring their grievances forward?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee puts it more succinctly than I did, and he is absolutely right about the balance to be struck and the need for ordinary people who might be the victims of misconduct to have access to meaningful redress of grievance, so I am grateful to him. Having been here in the previous Parliament, he and I will remember debating the Leveson process and the aftermath of the findings of Sir Brian Leveson. Turning back to the consultation to which my hon. Friend referred, the Government have set out a clear timetable, and we have committed to responding to that consultation in a timely manner.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Who exactly is going to be consulted?

The Solicitor General: It is a public consultation and invites comment from all members of the public, from whatever corner of the country they might come and whatever interest—it might be no interest—they represent. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to emphasise the important point that the Government would welcome as many responses as possible to the questions posed in the consultation—and not just responses but evidence to support the contentions made by those who take part.

Damian Collins: I should note that the Select Committee will be taking evidence from victims of phone hacking and press representatives and will make its own representations to the Government through the consultation process.

The Solicitor General: The Government warmly welcome that approach. The work of the Select Committee—indeed all Select Committees—is invaluable and carries real weight, and the Government will consider it carefully when the consultation responses are assessed by the Secretary of State and those who serve her in the Department.

After the Government’s response, there will be ample opportunity for the House and the other place to consider and debate it in due course. As I said earlier, however, now is not the time to do so. The Bill, which we have all recognised is so important to our collective security, should not, with the greatest of respect, be used to force that debate.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I am glad to rise in support, once again, of these very important amendments. I believe that any member of the public who just heard the Solicitor General’s speech will be puzzled about the Government’s resistance to implementing an aspect of Leveson that they agreed in principle some time ago.

Labour fully supports the Lords amendments and has consistently and genuinely called for the Leveson recommendations to be implemented in full. A new system of independent self-regulation was agreed by the three main political parties in 2013, following extensive consultation with victims of press intrusion, and Labour believes that the promises made to them should be honoured. If the best that the Government can come up with is that hoary old doctrine of unripe time—“It’s a good idea but not now”—they must be a little desperate. It is disappointing that we have to speak to the amendments yet again to get the Government to honour their agreements. It is a breach of the cross-party agreement, and breaks promises made by the House to the victims.

Lords amendment 15B would not be necessary had the Government fulfilled their stated commitment to implement section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, which they have promised to do innumerable times. Happily, the amendment goes further than section 40 and would not require ministerial approval, meaning that it would automatically implement section 40 in relation to phone hacking claims. This would restate the clear intention of Parliament as previously expressed in 2013. Ministers have talked about riding roughshod. The Society of Editors, the National Union of Journalists, with the backing of the TUC, and many others concerned with the freedom of the press, have said that there is the potential to ride roughshod over freedoms.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Will the hon. Lady explain one point about the amendment? Why should the press be punished if it is not in fact guilty of phone hacking?

Ms Abbtt: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will complete my next paragraph and then address his point.

The ability of journalists to protect their sources is a vital part of a functioning democracy. It means whistleblowers, important sources and others can divulge matters sometimes of the utmost public interest—there is a host of whistleblowers in the NHS, to take just one example, and there have been important whistleblowers in almost every area of public life. However, we have to once again flag up the powers in the Bill—although it is a Bill we support—and say that simply being able to identify internet records without ever examining the content would potentially allow the identification of whistleblowers in many cases. This represents a potential
infringement of civil liberties, a riding roughshod over civil liberties and a riding roughshod over the freedom that ultimately benefits us all.

As for the point raised by the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), if the Government do not want to implement this aspect of Leveson and if they do not think it necessary, why have they on so many occasions, including to the victims themselves, promised to do so?

The claim that these measures will impinge on the freedom of the press is factually inaccurate. Instead, they would allow for a low-cost and timely mechanism for redress on behalf of those who have been or believe themselves to have been mistreated or maligned by the press. I repeat the point that was made earlier: this is not about celebrities, but about ordinary people who through no fault of their own get caught up in the maw of the tabloid press and have to put up with seeing their picture appearing on the front page of tabloid newspapers day after day—often on the basis of misinterpreted tips from the police force. These people need to be able to get redress. That is why we support the amendments.

This amendment 15B, which the Government intend to vote down, was proposed and improved in the House of Lords by the Cross Bencher Baroness Hollins and overwhelmingly passed. It would implement the same provisions as are contained in section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 in respect of claims against media organisations over phone hacking and other unlawful interception of communications. While there is a free-for-all by ignoring Leveson and a failure to implement section 40, the most irresponsible practices of the press, which can ruin the lives of ordinary people, will go unchecked without any recourse—except for celebrities and the ultra-rich, who can afford libel lawyers.

It was always envisaged that as soon as pending legal proceedings were complete, we would see the second phase of the Leveson inquiry. The Minister had a lot to say about the consultation. Does he remember that Leveson lasted over two years and cost £5.4 million in total? Having spent so much money and so much time—and particularly the time of so many distinguished lawyers—why on earth do we need another consultation? Opposition Members believe that this is merely a stalling mechanism, and we think that the Government’s continuing to stall on this issue is disrespectful of, and inappropriate for, the ordinary victims of phone hacking.

Richard Drax: The hon. Lady mentions phone hacking again, so let me remind her that phone hacking is an illegal act. People go to jail for it. Will she acknowledge that this is already a criminal offence?

Ms Abbott: It may be a criminal offence, but the entire House knows that time after time, tabloid editors and their staff engaged in phone hacking, betting that the people whose privacy was being infringed would not have the money or the knowledge or the social capital to take them to court.

This consultation is the Government’s most recent attempt to kick this issue into the long grass. The victims of phone hacking—many of whose lives have been ruined—are being forced to relive the traumatic experiences of Leveson. The understanding was that so many millions of pounds were spent and so many top-flight lawyers engaged in order to arrive at a conclusion on these issues—not so that the Government could continue to stall.

Joanna Cherry: Does the hon. Lady agree that the virtue of Leveson was that it was an inquiry held in public with an independent judge in the chair? The problem with the Government’s consultation is that it will effectively put politicians—and Government politicians—in the chair to re-run these issues in private?

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for that very important point. Leveson was public and engaged, and it expressed widespread concern. With millions spent on Leveson, the Government now propose a private, secret consultation.

Sir Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I rise to support my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General in his resistance to the Lords amendments, which was based on principle rather than over-excitement or hyperbole. It seems to me that the motion put forward in the other place—which was well intentioned—does not entirely cover the justice of the case. Before I move on to the main part of my argument, I would like to declare an interest, in that I have some 40 or 45 years’ experience as a member of the media and libel Bar.

The first Lords amendment proposes a new clause to be inserted after clause 8, and I am particularly disturbed by one or two aspects of it. I fully appreciate that as a matter of policy and politics, we in the House, the Government and Parliament generally frequently make use of what I would call the nudge system of trying to encourage people to be of better behaviour. We introduce laws that seek to persuade people not to behave in an antisocial or criminal manner. Broadly, it is the use of incentives to encourage better behaviour, and I have a suspicion that that is what is behind the Leveson report and their lordships’ proposed new clause.

In some respects, the provision is in the wrong place. The Bill is about investigatory powers and although I accept and applaud the ingenuity of those who introduced the new clause in the other place, I believe that introducing it into this important Bill, though understandable, is not the best place for them to have done so. They risk imperilling the policy behind the Investigatory Powers Bill without advancing their own cause in respect of those grievously and adversely affected by phone hacking.

While the proposed new clause is, on the face of it, of course related to phone hacking, it seems to me that it is not limited to phone hacking. If we look at subsection (1)(b), we see that the defendant in question needs to be “a relevant publisher”—that is fair enough—but if we look at subsection (1)(c), we find that it deals with claims “related to the publication of news-related material.”
It may be that the news-related material has come as a consequence of phone hacking, and as my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) has correctly pointed out, phone hacking is already a crime and the criminal justice system is already able to get a grip on it. When it comes to the consequences of hacking someone’s phone, there could be a public interest defence to the criminal charge of phone hacking. The newspaper might publish material that a claimant says is in breach of his rights of privacy or a misuse of private information or a breach of confidence, or it could amount to a defamation. None of those additional civil claims is covered by this nudge or incentive proposal. I think that we need to be wary lest a legitimate exposure of misconduct on the part of, say, a public authority or a person in the public sphere might be inhibited by this no doubt well-intentioned new clause.

The first point that I would make to my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General is that subsection (1) of the new clause does not limit the nudging or the incentives to the misdemeanour of phone hacking. It goes beyond that, and in doing so, it seems to me, could put a defendant newspaper or publisher in danger of being penalised for doing what might turn out to have been the right thing. As I said a moment ago, it might well be that the initial phone hacking was on the face of it criminal, but there might be a defence for it, and, moreover, the product—the fruit—of that phone hacking, legitimised because it was in the public interest, might lead to a further claim in a cause of action under civil law.

The defendant publisher might win the case, because what had been written might be true, and it might not be against the public interest to publish the confidential information because it had exposed iniquity or something of that nature. The defendant newspaper—if it is a newspaper—should therefore be entitled to win the case and defeat the claim. Under the new clause, however, although the claim had been defeated and the publishing defendant had won the case, the defendant would be required to pay the undeserving claimant’s costs as well as its own because the defendant might not be a member of some approved regulator.

Joanna Cherry: I am listening with great care to what the right hon. and learned Gentleman is saying. May I suggest to him that the situation that he has just described is covered by the proviso in subsection (3)(b) of the new clause proposed in Lords amendment 1SC, which states that the court may take account of whether “it is just and equitable in all the circumstances of the case” to make a different award of costs? May I suggest that in the circumstances that he has described, the “just and equitable” exception would kick in, and a newspaper that had a valid defence and had revealed iniquity as a result of hacking could pray it in aid?

Sir Edward Garnier: It might if both new clauses became law, but it might not if the new clause to which the hon. and learned Lady has referred did not become law, and we were left with only the one with which I am dealing.

My second point is this. Why should a well-intentioned and successful defendant publisher have to risk the expense of successfully defending a claim and then having to pay the costs of the unsuccessful claimant? That strikes me as unjust. The House is famous for passing laws that are laden—replete—with unintended consequences. It seems to me, however, that when an amendment paper contains a proposal that will clearly lead to a problem—although I am not suggesting that it would be an insoluble problem—we would be foolish not to warn the Government against it. I am delighted to see that the Government seem to have mustered their forces and thinking processes in such a way that an unjust law will not be passed.

When I spoke in the House following the publication of the Leveson report, I was sufficiently pompous and self-confident to rebuke Members who thought that the inquiry, and the report that followed it, meant that there would be state regulation of the press. There will be no such thing as a consequence of the Leveson inquiry. However, I feel that I am entitled to warn Members who, like me, thoroughly disapprove of illegal phone hacking not to assume that once the words “phone hacking” have been uttered, that permits the House, the Government and the courts to rain down on successful, innocent and well-intentioned defendant publishers the burden of the costs of successfully defending a claim.

It should be borne in mind that defendants do not choose to be defendants. Of course they choose to publish the material that they have got hold of, but it is the claimant who feels obliged, or makes the choice, to sue the defendant. To be sued as a defendant is tedious enough, but to be sued as a defendant, to win, and then to be required to pay the costs of the unmeritorious claim must surely constitute even more of a punishment.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Is there not another choice that the media can make? Can they not choose to subscribe to a compliant regulator and thereby avoid the need for all the regulation and legislation that we do not want to see in the Bill?

Sir Edward Garnier: Of course I understand what my right hon. Friend has said. He is one of the most sophisticated proponents of the “nudge” or incentive system of lawmaking, and I salute him for that. I sometimes wonder, however, whether it is a good idea to use the force of what are essentially the punitive elements of the legal system to encourage innocent defendants to pay the costs of unmeritorious claims. Yes, in a perfect world we would all settle our disputes, and people would not even provoke disputes in the first place; but to be compelled, on penalty of having to pay out large sums in legal costs, to join an organisation of which one either does not approve for one reason or another, or does not wish to join for one reason or another, strikes me as unjust.

I have been a victim of, shall we say, stupid conduct by the press. It is very annoying. I have seen others, not only my friends and colleagues but people for whom I have acted, having to deal with the misconduct of the media. But I would rather have a system which recognised justice—

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman not see a difference between himself—as he has already told us, he is a leading advocate at the criminal Bar dealing with these matters
on a day-to-day basis to earn his crust—and someone who does not have those advantages and who is caught in the same snare?

Sir Edward Garnier: I do not wish to be rude to the hon. Lady, but I did not say any of those things. I am not a leading member of the criminal Bar. I happened for some little while to be a member of the media and defamation Bar, which may be a distinction without a difference as far as she is concerned. [ Interruption. ] She may disagree with me—she may disagree with me vehemently—but what we are trying to do is to pass good law. If my colleagues on the Front Bench, and those around me, disagree with me, fine: go ahead and disagree with me.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): We do.


Bill Wiggin: I absolutely disagree with my right hon. and learned Friend. I have been sitting here listening to him carefully, but I cannot think of any other industry that does not offer any sort of guarantee. If people make faulty washing machines, they replace them, but if they publish stories about people, they have already made their money by the time they end up being sued, and that is why the newspapers have to bear some of the cost.

Sir Edward Garnier: My hon. Friend’s intervention demonstrates to me that I have not made myself clear. What I am suggesting is that it is wrong for a claimant who has lost his case to demand the costs from the successful defendant. I am not suggesting that if I make a faulty washing machine, I should not be liable, under law or morally, to put the matter right. However, if I have made a good washing machine, the fact that my hon. Friend does not like the colour of it, or the fact that it revolves in any number of ways—[ Interruption. ] I am in danger, Madam Deputy Speaker, of reducing the level of the debate to something that it should not be. I will stop now, because I think I have made the points that I wish to make with sufficient clarity. Some will agree with me and some will not, but I urge the Government to be very wary about passing unjust laws for very well-motivated purposes.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) on behalf of the Scottish National party, let me say that we have 19 minutes left in this very important debate and I have noticed several accomplished and learned colleagues attempting to catch my eye. I know they are as capable of making a good argument in three minutes as in 15 minutes, and I implore them to take the former course.

3 pm

Joanna Cherry: I rise to support the shadow Home Secretary and her motion to accept these amendments. I will keep my comments brief. I will not go into the Scottish angle because I covered that in some detail last time.

The other place is clearly seeking to use these amendments to bring pressure on the UK Government to bring section 40 into line. The SNP are happy to lend its support to that effort, particularly as these amendments would afford protection and legal redress for those who suffer as a result of the most egregious sort of interception without legal authority when phone hacking is carried out by newspapers. Those who have not hacked, do not hack and do not intend to hack have nothing to fear from these provisions. Contrary to what has been said in the newspapers by many who advocate on behalf of wealthy newspaper proprietors and contrary to what has been said by some Government Members, there is a get-out clause in these provisions where a newspaper is sued unfairly and unjustly, and that is the just and equitable exception. We have to trust that the courts will implement that properly, as we trust them daily to implement justice and equity.

In the other place Baroness Hollins pointed out what this is really about. A widespread criminal conspiracy involving more than one newspaper group lasted, and was covered up, for many years. It was combined with unexplained failures in police and prosecution action and allegations of political involvement in a cover-up. As a result, there was a public inquiry, which came to conclusions that were supported cross-party in this House. The Government committed to implementing them; they are now failing to do so. As I said in an intervention, they are seeking to replace the public semi-judicial inquiry that was Leveson with a consultation in which the Government will consider proposals behind closed doors without the benefit of submissions and evidence being given in public, and that is not right.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Does the hon. and learned Lady recall that the reason we reached the agreement we did was a determination that politicians should have no role in this, so does she share my frustration that we are here again in November 2016 still discussing this?

Joanna Cherry: I agree. I was not here when these matters were previously discussed in this House but I followed that closely and it was all about taking politicians out of the mix. The Government’s consultation is putting politicians into the driving seat—and Government politicians at that. That is exactly what many of us did not want to happen, and it is what Leveson said should not happen.

I support these amendments because they now stand alone and do not impinge on the other provisions of the Bill. As Lord Pannick said in the House of Lords, these amendments are now in scope. They are supplementary to what is there already and they do not detract from the security issues in the Bill. I believe these two points meet many of the objections put forward by Ministers.

The amendments are on point and relate to the subject matter of the Bill because they deal with the consequences of unlawful interceptions of communications. At the risk of tooting the SNP’s trumpet too often, I simply remind the House again that new clause 8 came into the Bill as a result of a suggestion made by me and my colleague in the Bill Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands).
These amendments will apply to new and old phone hacking claims alike, but they are not objectionable, as being retrospective, because in considering how to deal with costs the court must look to the issue of whether the defendant was registered with an approved regulator at the time when the claim was commenced.

I believe the remaining objections to the amendments are misplaced. If the Government are concerned about these amendments causing delay to the passage of this important Bill, all they need to do is bite the bullet and implement section 40 and then we can forget about the amendments, and I invite them to do that.

Bill Wiggin: In all the years I have been here, I have never before found myself in agreement with the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), so I am deeply unhappy about this debate and the fact that I have been put in this position.

I also feel very uncomfortable with some of the things my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General has said, because I know that in his heart he, like me, would like to see low-cost arbitration. That is why I am so pleased with the Culture Secretary and the wonderful steps she has taken to keep people like me onside—people who passionately care about redress for ordinary people. This is the 21st century; it is the age of information and that is why the quality of information is so critical. We as a Government cannot police the media, and I believe my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) understood that when he put forward his royal commission proposals, but we must do our bit to ensure that the quality of information is good enough, and at the moment it is not.

Richard Drax: What plans does my hon. Friend have for the internet, which is not governed by these measures and on which reprehensible things are said every second of every day?

Bill Wiggin: The internet is not policed and that is as it should be, but my hon. Friend has to understand why people have stopped reading newspapers and take their news from the internet now. There is a choice, and the choice they can make is to favour the sources they trust, and whether that is the internet or not is a matter of personal preference. That presents a different set of challenges to the individual than having a quality media.

I absolutely believe in the freedom of the press, but not in the irresponsibility of the press. That is why I welcomed the conclusions to the Leveson inquiry and why I welcome the Secretary of State’s inquiries. We have to get the balance right between policing and responsibility, and while this Bill is about security and information, I do not agree that it is an inappropriate place to bring forward this debate. Given what the Government have agreed to do, I think we should take full advantage of that, but we must remember that the people who are most likely to contribute are those who write for a living and are therefore most likely to be journalists. It will be difficult for the Government to maintain that balance of common sense, but I have absolute confidence that they will achieve it.

Damian Collins: First, I echo what Members have said across the House about the importance of a free press and a press both acting freely and speaking with confidence to the powerful. We have seen the role of British investigative journalism in taking on corruption in international sport, where it could without fear or favour pursue its investigations and therefore brought down powerful and mighty people. We do not want that to be jeopardised in any way. At the same time we should be conscious that if we just implement the section 40 provisions as they currently stand, some of the biggest victims would be small newspapers and magazines that have never been part of these bigger things. We should also at this time reflect on the nature and purpose of section 40. That is why I believe the Secretary of State is right to have a further consultation.

The idea was not necessarily that the section would be required; the hope was that the press would seek recognition through a recognised authority and have a proper, robust system of self-regulation recognised by the press recognition panel. The press have decided not to do go down that path. Many of them have set up the Independent Press Standards Organisation as their own regulator. They do not wish to see recognition, which in itself would solve the problem; if IPSO had sought recognition we would not be having this debate about costs and extra damages, but it has not sought that. So this should be a time to see whether IPSO can become recognised, with public confidence, as being Leveson-compliant, meeting the standards and providing, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) said, the right level of proper low-cost arbitration. Section 40 is really about saying there must be a robust system of self-regulation and low-cost arbitration. If that cannot be put in place, the alternative is someone going to court and the industry having to pick up the costs in the courts, rather than paying for the arbitration system.

Sir Oliver Letwin: Does my hon. Friend agree that the demands that the nation puts on the media would be satisfied if IPSO were to establish the low-cost arbitration, even if it did not formally seek recognition? Does he agree that most Members would be satisfied with that as an answer?

Damian Collins: My right hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. If such an accessible arbitration system were to be established—which would involve going further than the pilot scheme—it would be churlish of the House to ignore that progress and to insist on the point of principle involving going before the recognition panel. This matter should be pursued, and that is why it is right to use the consultation process to explore what more can be done to ensure that IPSO is compliant, that it offers the access to low-cost arbitration that the public want, and that it can win public respect as an effective means of self-regulation for the press.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): I rise briefly to express my agreement with the Solicitor General and particularly with my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins). A vibrant, responsible local press that is able to speak freely and report stories within the law is a pillar of our democracy. It is something we should be proud of and always strive to protect. What concerns me, and the press, is the potential for the press to have done nothing wrong—having not misreported a story or wronged an individual—and yet to find itself on the receiving end of costs that threaten its existence.
As my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe has eloquently set out, no one disputes that there should be a way for people who have been genuinely wronged by the press to have access to affordable and effective redress. It is beyond doubt that this must be addressed. To that end, I fully support the approach put forward by the Solicitor General and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in undertaking a further consultation to see whether a way forward can be found that strikes the right balance. The Secretary of State has adopted an open, measured, sensible and appropriate approach to implementing our clear determination to provide redress while safeguarding the freedoms and viability of our hugely precious local press.

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is an absolutely dreadful amendment and it should be thrown out, rejected and sent back to the House of Lords. It is fundamentally wrong. It seeks to punish those who might be innocent and to fine them for telling the truth and for saying things that people in power do not like. This amendment goes to the heart of our free press, and it should be thrown in the bin. IMPRESS is already an organisation of ill repute, founded, funded and paid for by somebody who is known to us only because of his misdeeds. A degenerate libertine has provided all the money for IMPRESS, which only the most junior newspapers will sign up to. It is a dreadful body.

We should maintain the freedom of our press to help us with our liberties. We have only to look at the policeman who went to prison a few weeks ago. He successfully sued the press in the 1990s, but it turned out that he was in fact a child molester. Whenever we put constraints on the press, we help the powerful to get away with misdeeds. This House should stand up for freedom. It should stand up for liberty and it should reject the unelected House of Lords trying to prevent scandal from being reported freely.

Richard Drax: It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who was most eloquent. I have a disadvantage in following such eloquence with a short speech. I believe that I have just a few minutes left. I must declare an interest in that I was a journalist for 17 years. Perhaps I saw a little bit of the worst, but most of it was good. It is the local and regional press—the majority of our press today—that I am concerned about. It simply will not be able to take the risk of reporting at local level, albeit accurately and fairly, lest it should incur a costly exercise in court, and that is not acceptable.

In the first week of my career, the editor called me in and said, “Richard, you cannot go far wrong if you report fairly and accurately.” I agree with other hon. Members who have said that the message to the editors must be that they should report fairly, accurately and truthfully. Truth is the biggest sword of defence for the press. As my editor said: if in doubt, leave it out. I implore all editors who want a free press, as I and many other hon. Members do, to behave honourably, truthfully and in good faith. If they cannot report something that they long to report because they know it will result in a huge sale of newspapers, I suggest that they delay publication until they have the facts.

3.15 pm
I am here to defend the press, because the press in this country is one of the cornerstones of our democracy. I do not want IPSO to sign up to the royal charter, which represents state intrusion, not through the back door but quite openly. As I understand it—I hope that I am reporting the facts correctly here—IPSO is considering a system of low-cost arbitration. But what is low-cost arbitration? I suspect that local newspapers and those taking cases against them often employ expensive QCs. How do we cap the cost? I am not quite sure what “low-cost arbitration” means.

I agree that if a grievance is found to be justified, and the press is found to have got its facts wrong, it has a duty to publish that inaccuracy on its front page and to give it the same prominence as it gave to the original story on its inside pages or perhaps its front page. Any editor worth his salt should drag in the journalist responsible and say, “Enough is enough.” The free press: that is what we are here for and that is what I am fighting for. I totally back the Government in not supporting this Lords amendment.

The Solicitor General: We have heard many heartfelt contributions to this debate from Members on both sides of the House and I recognise the strength of feeling on this issue. Time does not permit me—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I think the hon. and learned Gentleman is seeking the leave of the House to respond to the debate.

The Solicitor General: I certainly am. I seek the leave of the House to respond to the debate, but time does not permit me to say much more.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I congratulate the hon. and learned Gentleman on his excellent brevity.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 295, Noes 245.

Division No. 78

[3.17 pm]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afnie, Adam
Addous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argr, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin

Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Caims, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, Neil
Cartledge, James
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House disagrees with Lords amendments 15B, 15C, 338B, 339B and 339C.

3.31 pm

More than one hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on consideration of the Lords message, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, 1 November).

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

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

That Ms Diane Abbott, Robert Buckland, Joanna Cherry, Nic Dakin, Andrew Griffiths, Andrew Stephenson and Matt Warman be members of the Committee;

That Robert Buckland be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee;

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(Andrew Griffiths.)

Question agreed to.

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.
Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. If Members are leaving the Chamber following the previous business, I hope that they will have the courtesy to be quiet while we begin the next business.

Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Bill
Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee.

New Clause 1
PREVENTION OF FRAUD AND ABUSE OF SMALL DONATIONS SCHEME
‘(1) The Small Charitable Donations Act 2012 is amended as follows.

(2) After section 16, insert the following—

“16A Prevention of fraud and abuse of small donations scheme

(1) Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs must, in respect of each tax year beginning with 2017-18, prepare an annual report specifying—

(a) the number of penalties imposed under this Act,
(b) the circumstances giving rise to the imposition of such penalties,
(c) its assessment of the extent to which charities have been established or operated for the primary purpose of securing benefits from the small donations scheme, and
(d) its assessment of the evidence available on the role of the gift aid matching rule in preventing fraud and abuse.

(2) A report prepared under subsection (1) must be laid before each House of Parliament by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

(3) In this section, “the gift aid matching rule” has the same meaning as in section 14(3).” — (Rebecca Long Bailey.)

This new clause requires HMRC to indicate how, each tax year, it has exercised its powers to impose penalties and in what circumstances and to provide an assessment of evidence on the role of the gift aid matching rule in preventing fraud and abuse.

Brought up, and read the First time.

3.34 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2— Review of operation of gift aid matching rule—

‘(1) The Small Charitable Donations Act 2012 is amended as follows.

(2) After section 16, insert the following—

“16A Review of operation of gift aid matching rule

(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer shall, no later than the end of the 2017-18 tax year, undertake a review of the operation of the gift aid matching rule.

(2) As part of the review of under subsection (1), the Chancellor of the Exchequer shall consult charities and other organisations that he considers relevant about—

(a) the role of the gift aid matching rule in preventing fraud and abuse, and
(b) the appropriateness of the Treasury exercising its order-making powers under section 14(2).

(3) A report of the review undertaken in accordance with this section must be laid before each House of Parliament by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

(4) In this section, “the gift aid matching rule” has the same meaning as in section 14(3).” — (Rebecca Long Bailey.)

This new clause requires the Chancellor of the Exchequer to review the gift aid matching rule and to consult charities and other organisations on the appropriateness of exercising the Treasury’s
powers to amend or abolish that rule which limits the amount of top-up payments to which a charity is entitled by reference to the amount of gifts made to the charity in respect of which it has made successful gift aid exemption claims.

New clause 3—Regulations on local branches and groups—

'(1) The Small Charitable Donations Act 2012 is amended as set out in subsections (2) and (3).

(2) After section 5(1) (general provisions on meaning of “connected”), insert—

“(1A) This section is subject to the provisions of regulations made under section 5A (regulations on local branches and groups).”

(3) After section 5, insert the following—

“5A Regulations on local branches and groups

(1) The Treasury shall by regulations prescribe organisations in which local or regional branches or groups may not be considered to be connected for the purposes of sections 4 and 5.

(2) The Treasury shall publish the first set of draft regulations made under subsection (1) no later than 31 October 2017.

(3) Before publishing draft regulations under this section, the Treasury shall consult—

(a) the Scout Association;
(b) the Guide Association;
(c) the Combined Cadet Force Association; and
(d) such other organisations as appear to the Treasury to be relevant.”

This new clause requires the Treasury to identify organisations with local or regional branch or group structures in order that those local and regional branches or groups can be separately eligible under the scheme, and to consult certain organisations about the regulations in draft.

New clause 4—Abolition of Gift Aid donations threshold—

'(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must carry out an assessment of the impact on charities and Community Amateur Sports Clubs of amending the Gift Aid Small Donations Scheme so as to remove the 10% Gift Aid donations threshold that must be met in order to access the Gift Aid Small Donations Scheme, including an assessment of the differential impact on different sizes of charities and Community Amateur Sports Clubs concerned.

(2) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay a report of the assessment before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.”

Charities and CASCs must give gift aid exemption claims on donations received in order to make a claim under the Gift Aid Small Donations Scheme. The total gift aid donations must be at least 10% of the amount of the small donations on which top-up payments are claimed. This new clause would require the Chancellor to conduct a review of the operation of the gift aid matching rule, which is the rule that the total gift aid donations operation for a charity must be 10% or more of the amount of small donations on which top-up payments are made. The new clause stipulates that the Chancellor should consult charities and other relevant organisations about the role of the matching rule in preventing fraud and abuse, and the appropriateness of exercising the Treasury’s powers to amend or abolish the rule. New clause 4, which was tabled by the Scottish National party, would also require the Chancellor to assess the impact of abolishing the matching requirement.

During the Bill’s passage through the House, we have had extensive debates about the matching requirement—rightly so, because it is the biggest issue affecting the efficacy of the scheme, according to the charities that use it. The sector thinks broadly that the requirement is arbitrary and is a significant barrier to charities being eligible for the scheme. A consultation with members of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations showed that it is the most significant barrier to access for smaller organisations. The survey found that 50% of respondents with an income under £10,000 wanted the removal or reduction of the matching requirement.

Ahead of Second Reading, the NCVO argued that the Government have presented no evidence to demonstrate the extent to which the matching requirement is a necessary mechanism to prevent fraud and error, or that the matching ratio of 1:10 is the minimum necessary to achieve this objective. Despite considerable debate on this matter, we have got all the way to Report and the Government have still failed to provide any evidence that the matching requirement works. I would welcome the Minister’s comments on that today.

New clause 2 would force the Government to produce evidence in the form of a review and report on the operation of the gift aid matching rule, and whether it should be changed or removed entirely. New clause 4 would require a similar review, so we will be happy to support that measure. I would rather not have to press our new clauses 1 and 2 to a Division unless we have to. They call for a review of something that the charity sector says is hindering the scheme. I hope for some movement from the Minister on the issue today, but if the SNP’s new clause is pressed to a Division, we will support it wholeheartedly, as it reflects many of the principles that we have outlined in new clauses 1 and 2.

I am sure that the Minister will repeat her argument that the matching requirement is necessary to prevent fraud. I agree that we need measures to safeguard against such abuses. The Charity Commission has provided figures showing the extent of fraud in the charity sector. In 2014-15, 417 serious incidents involving fraud and/or theft or the misapplication of funds were reported by charities to the commission, and 255 operational compliance cases were completed. As Members are aware, just last week the commission announced in a press release that it was investigating the charity Our Local Heroes Foundation. According to the commission, it had received information about a proposed disposal of land owned by the charity, concerns regarding the founder of the charity receiving significant personal benefit through the charity, and a complaint that the charity was receiving only 20% of funds raised through a fundraising company.

This is just one case, but it is a sad example of charities being used as vehicles for tax avoidance and fraud. It is therefore incumbent on us to make it as hard as possible to abuse charitable status. That is why we have tabled new clause 1, which would require a review.
of the prevention of fraud and abuse in the small donations scheme. As I said, the review would need to address the number of penalties imposed under the Small Charitable Donations Act 2012 and the circumstances giving rise to the imposition of such penalties. It should include Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs’ assessment of the extent to which charities have been established or have operated for the primary purpose of securing benefits from the small donations scheme, and HMRC’s assessment of the evidence available on the role of the gift aid matching rule in preventing fraud and abuse.

The Government’s guidance on the scheme explains that if a charity or community amateur sports club “incurs a penalty in respect of an incorrect Gift Aid claim or GASDS”—

gift aid small donations scheme—

“claim, it won’t be eligible for the scheme both for the tax year in which the incorrect claim was made and in the following tax year.”

I would argue that the link between gift aid and the scheme is stronger than the matching requirement. Charities claiming gift aid can still be, and indeed have been, fraudulent organisations, so simply having a monetary link to the gift aid is not enough. This provision—that if a gift aid claim is wrong, a charity cannot claim through the scheme for that tax year and the following tax year—seems to be a stronger safeguard against fraudulent organisations than the matching requirement. Things might be more complex than that, but a review would clearly be beneficial, because we could assess where the matching requirement actually works effectively. In that way, the Government and the charities sector would be able to see clearly which anti-fraud measures were most effective.

New clause 3 deals with a different matter. Members and the Minister will remember that we made the case in Committee that certain groups—the girl guides, the scouts, and the Army, Navy and Air Force cadet groups—were not able to get the full benefit of the small donations scheme. That was after feedback from the respective charities’ representatives that, because of the structure of the groups, they were able to make only one claim for the entirety of the group, even though individual groups within them fund themselves.

The Minister responded that the measure proposed in Committee was unnecessary because the Bill allowed for what it proposed. She neatly illustrated why she would reject it—because, at the time, it carved out a few selected charities—but we want provisions to benefit a broad range of charities, some of which were not named in the original new clause tabled in Committee.

New clause 3 attempts to address the Minister’s points by allowing the Treasury to make regulations to exempt certain organisations from the connected charities rules. The Government would have to consult the Scout Association, the Guide Association and the Combined Cadet Force Association, in particular, before publishing those regulations. The Minister said she would reflect on the points raised in Committee, so I hope that she will accept the new clause today. It would not carve out a few selected charities, but give the Government the power to consult organisations that are mistakenly affected by the connected charities rules. It would, therefore, make the scheme run more smoothly, which is, after all, the point of the Bill.

I hope that the Minister has listened carefully to the rationale behind the new clauses and recognises that we are genuinely trying to achieve the same end: to make the gift aid small donations scheme work as well as possible for as many charities as possible. I hope that the new clauses will be accepted. We will not press new clauses 1 and 2 to a vote, but we will divide the House on new clause 3, and we will support new clause 4 should the SNP choose to press it to a Division.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I speak in support of the points made by our shadow Minister about new clauses 1 and 2, which deal practically with the issue of fraud and put the onus very simply on HMRC to establish the extent of the problem. The difficulty facing the voluntary sector is that even with the £15 million of additional support in the Bill, the gift aid small donations scheme will distribute roughly £40 million, which is only about a third of the £115 million that was, according to Government opinion, projected to be distributed next year. This scheme could and should be growing. It is important because it helps and develops the smallest charities, and that must continue.

3.45 pm

In speaking to new clause 2, my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) referred to the matching arrangement. I stand here with a certain amount of hope, because I remember that four years ago, when the first version of this Bill was born, the Government proposed 1:1 matching, and now we see matching of 1:10. All we—and, more significantly, many charities and charitable bodies’ organisations—respectfully ask is that the Government consider how sacrosanct that 1:10 matching rule is. That is well put in our new clause 2 and in new clause 4, which was tabled by the SNP.

I hope that the Minister will consider these points. A few years ago in this Chamber, we were told that such provisions could not possibly include contactless payments. The Government moved on that, and they moved on the rate of matching. To be optimistic, as we all want this Bill to work, I very much hope that the Government will shift a little on these issues too.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I rise to speak to new clause 4, which stands in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin), although I shall touch on the other new clauses in the group.

New clause 1, which would require HMRC to present an annual report, is reasonable and sensible. I was surprised by the amount of discussion we had in Committee and elsewhere about the possibility of charities using such a scheme for fraudulent purposes. Perhaps I was being naive as that had not crossed my mind a great deal, but apparently people are genuinely concerned about it. If the Government were to take on board Labour’s proposal in new clause 1, it would help to allay the fears of the general public about how charities are acting. I think that only a very small minority of charities are set up to act fraudulently, and the publication of such information would help to ensure that the public are aware of that.

New clause 2, not dissimilarly from a number of measures that we discussed in Committee, deals with the matching requirement. I will come on to that later. I understand why Labour Members have tabled new clause 3,
which addresses local organisations that, unfortunately, are caught by some aspects of the way in which the Bill is written. I appreciate that that is an issue, so my colleagues and I will support Labour Members if they press it to a vote.

New clause 4 relates to the matching requirement and the associated threshold. When the first draft of the Bill was introduced in the previous Parliament, the Government supported a different matching requirement from what was eventually approved. During the consideration of that Bill, they also changed the proposals on the matching requirement so that they could edit it in the future, if necessary. That was a result of pressure by charities and organisations that had raised concerns about the arbitrary nature of the level that was chosen for the matching requirement.

I appreciate that the Government have moved on this in the past, but charities are now asking them to move further. As the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) said, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, the Charity Finance Group, the Institute of Fundraising and the Small Charities Coalition produced a paper saying that it was vital that the matching requirement was changed or removed. That is why we have brought the proposal before the House. Although we discussed this in Committee, we still feel that the Government need to look at it, while appreciating that they have the power to do so outwith this Bill.

If the Government do not accept the new clause, I would very much appreciate it if they considered the proposal in the future. This is not just about the SNP; our proposal is widely supported, including by the Labour party and by charities across the UK such as the Churches Legislation Advisory Service and the Charity Tax Group. If fears can be allayed about fraud, in particular, it would be reasonable for the Government to take some steps towards change. I do not want to talk for long, but I would appreciate it if the Government would seriously consider taking up this proposal. If they do not agree to the new clause, I hope that they will at least commit to looking at it at some point in the future.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison):
I appreciate the spirit in which the new clauses have been spoken to, because we are all here for one purpose, which is to make sure that the Bill works as well as possible for the benefit of as many charities as possible. In responding to this short debate, I will try to offer evidence of the reasons why we cannot, or do not think that it is right to, accept the new clauses.

New clause 1 would require Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to publish every year an analysis of the number of penalties imposed; the circumstances giving rise to the imposition of those penalties; an assessment of the number of charities set up with the primary purpose of accessing the small donations scheme; and an assessment of the efficacy of the matching rule in preventing fraud. That relates to the general debate that we have had throughout the Bill’s progress about how we prevent fraud and a minority of people from exploiting the rules.

New clause 2 would require the Chancellor to undertake a review of the matching rule—the same is true, as we have just heard, of new clause 4—in consultation with the charity sector, and to lay a copy of the report by the end of the 2017-18 tax year.

New clause 3 seeks a power to prescribe by regulations an exemption for certain charities from the connected charities provision. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), is right to say that we debated that proposal in Committee and that I undertook to reflect on it. I will tell her where I have got to shortly. The new clause would require the Treasury to consult the scouts, guides, military cadet groups and other organisations before publishing draft regulations on or before 31 October 2017.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): On consultation, the Minister has mentioned the scouts and a number of other organisations, but has she considered consulting the Brethren? I am sure that she will recall that, during the last Parliament, the Brethren lost its charity status for a while and there was a large number of debates on it.

Jane Ellison: Obviously, I was not in this post at the time, but I recall someone in my constituency drawing my attention to that. As I will come on to say, the consultation process leading up to the Bill was exhaustive, but I also hope to reassure the House that the ongoing consultation with people who have an interest in the issue is significant on the part of HMRC and the departmental team led by the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Mr Wilson), who has responsibility for civil society. It is fair to say that we have a good, constructive and ongoing dialogue with the charity sector and those affected by the provisions, but I acknowledge that there was a slightly different concern in relation to the group mentioned by the hon. Gentleman.

New clause 4 proposes that an assessment be put before the House within six months of the passing of the Bill, and it centres on the gift aid matching requirement and its impact on charities of different sizes. We debated similar amendments in Committee and, although I accepted that they were well intended, I decided that they were unnecessary, so it will probably not surprise the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles and the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), who spoke on behalf of the SNP, that I will make some of the same points again today, but I hope to build on what I said in Committee.

New clause 1 concerns fraud—a vital issue that we have discussed a number of times and that we take very seriously. I am grateful to Opposition Members for giving us the opportunity to return to this important subject. I welcome, as I did in Committee, the fact that we have a cross-party consensus on protecting the gift aid small donations scheme from fraudulent attack. Opposition Members have raised on several occasions the efficacy of the matching scheme as a deterrent against fraud, and they asked us on Second Reading and in Committee to prove that the matching rule prevents fraud. At each stage, particularly in the debate on the matter in Committee, I drew the House’s attention to a few examples of the shocking abuses of charitable
status that have resulted in criminal convictions this year alone. Sadly, I have a reasonably extensive list of quite recent events, but I sense that I do not need to persuade people that fraud does happen in a minority of cases.

I am not sure exactly what further evidence Opposition Members would like me to provide. As I said in Committee, the Government are, in essence, being asked to prove a negative. That is a risky proposition, and I will illustrate why. If the suggestion is that the Government should adopt a wait-and-see approach, remove all the protections and then attempt to close the loopholes when fraudulent attacks take place, I cannot agree that that is the right approach. Opening up the scheme to abuse would be irresponsible, could waste a large amount of public money and—probably most importantly—could cause untold damage to the reputation of our fantastic charity sector. I cannot recommend that course of action to the House.

To be clear, we know that the majority of charities are honest. They are run by dedicated and trustworthy people—the sort of people whom we all know in our constituencies. For the fraudsters, however, nothing is sacred. It is a sad fact that if they are presented with an opportunity, they do not hesitate to exploit it. I gave examples on Second Reading and in Committee of fraudulent activity seen by HMRC, and I am sorry to say that, as I have mentioned, further examples are easily provided. It is not just HMRC and the Treasury that recognise that fraud in the charity sector is a problem; there is wide acknowledgment in the sector that fraud is a costly issue, particularly because of the reputational damage it causes. Some Members may be aware that last month saw Charity Fraud Awareness Week and the launch of a new “Charities against fraud” website, which is a joint initiative between the Charity Commission and the Fraud Advisory Panel to help trustees and volunteers to recognise the risks and take action to prevent fraud in charities.

There is also recognition from charity umbrella bodies that charity fraud can be incredibly damaging. The Charity Finance Group noted in its guide “Countering Fraud”, which was published during Fraud Awareness Week:

“Fraud is a problem that can affect any charity from the very large to the very small. Falling victim to fraud can undermine a charity’s reputation, damage donor confidence and reduce a charity’s ability to help its beneficiaries. On occasion fraud has even led to the forced closure of a charity.”

The Government will not tolerate the abuse of charitable status, for the reasons so eloquently expressed by the Charity Finance Group. The Government will continue to take action to tackle and disrupt the dishonest minority who attempt such fraud.

I am simply not convinced that it would be helpful to publish an annual report detailing the compliance activity that HMRC has undertaken. Indeed, I fear that doing so could have the unintended consequence of assisting the very people whom HMRC is attempting to weed out. HMRC’s operational performance in this and every other respect is, quite rightly, the subject of independent scrutiny by the National Audit Office and Parliament, through the Treasury Committee and the Public Accounts Committee. For that reason, I believe that new clause 1 is unnecessary, and I hope that the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles might consider withdrawing it.

### Kirsty Blackman

None of us has suggested, at any stage of the proceedings on the Bill, removing all the anti-fraud measures. In fact, we were quite clear and measured in everything that we moved; it was about an assessment. New clause 1 is about responding to our concerns about the actual level of fraud and providing us with the relevant information to enable us to have a much more knowledgeable debate next time the matter comes up—specifically around the level, the percentage and the money that is involved—rather than about removing the measure entirely.

### Jane Ellison

I understand that point, but my real concern is that the matching rule is the only remaining condition on this particular scheme. Obviously, there are other aspects to wider gift aid, but on the scheme that is the subject of this Bill, we are down to a simple last remaining condition that we believe helps to avoid the scheme being exploited fraudulently. I just do not accept the premise that it is sensible to remove it, to see what happens and then to come back to Parliament and say, “We removed it and, as we thought, it was exploited, so now we have to close that loophole again, but in the meantime we have lost public money and, more importantly, charities have lost their reputations.”

4 pm

### Susan Elan Jones

I accept that the Minister may want to keep the matching rule to some extent, but what is so sacred about 1:10?

### Jane Ellison

I will say a little about that. As other hon. Members have said, there was movement on this during the passage of the original legislation. The figure is reasonable and strikes a sensible balance. A ratio of 1:10 is an easy one for those administering this to remember. If hon. Members accept that the matching rule is sensible in principle, I am prepared to say that it is something we would anyway keep under review in the normal course of events. The civil society Minister and I were saying to each other on the Front Bench a moment ago that, given hon. Members’ interest in this, we will keep an eye on it in particular and draw it out in the ongoing dialogue that we naturally have with charities. However, I cannot accept that removing it entirely is a good idea. These things are kept under constant review, and both the Treasury and the civil society parts of Government have a very good relationship with the charities sector, so we will have plenty of opportunities to continue to have such a dialogue with charities and to understand where this comes in. In a few moments, I will say a little more to demonstrate that it is not the barrier that some hon. Members have suggested it is.

Let me turn to new clauses 2 and 4. New clause 2 is a request for a review of the matching rule in consultation with the charity sector. As I have said, the Government have already undertaken a full review of all aspects of the gift aid small donations scheme, including the matching rule, and the Bill is a result of that review. However, I will always be happy to keep an eye on this issue. The Government’s review was comprehensive and open, and it was carried out in full consultation with the charity sector and, indeed, with anyone with an interest in the scheme or in charity tax reliefs more generally. Some hon. Members will recall that, as I have said, back in 2012, the Government committed to reviewing the operation of the scheme after three years, so the Government have made good on that promise.
We recognise how important the scheme and the promised review were to charities. We listened to the sector, and that is why we announced in the autumn statement last year that we would bring forward the review of the scheme to December 2015. To inform the review, HMRC published a call for evidence in December, seeking charities' views about the operation of the scheme, including its eligibility rules and processes. The call for evidence asked five questions about the scheme’s eligibility criteria, including two questions specifically about the gift aid matching requirement. The call for evidence closed on 2 March. HMRC received 197 responses from charities, representative bodies and other interested parties. The Government reviewed all the submissions and published a response on 20 April.

In the responses document, which is available on the Government’s website, we explain that the vast majority of—indeed, almost all—the respondents to the call for evidence did not identify the matching rule as a major barrier to accessing the scheme. The Government recognise that many of the responses reflected the experience of charities already successfully using the scheme and may not necessarily be representative of the sector as a whole.

We take that point, so HMRC has supplemented the data provided by charities with an analysis of its own data. As I explained in Committee, the data showed that 92% of charities claiming gift aid for the tax year 2014-15 claimed on donations of £500 or more, entitling them to the maximum small donations allowance at that time of £5,000. HMRC’s analysis also showed that 98% of charities claiming gift aid in 2014-15 claimed on donations of £500 or more, entitling them to the maximum small donations allowance at that time of £5,000. HMRC’s analysis also showed that 98% of charities claiming gift aid in 2014-15 claimed sufficient amounts to receive a small donations allowance of at least £1,000.

The Government also considered data produced by the charity sector. A survey carried out by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, the Charity Finance Group, the Institute of Fundraising, the Small Charities Coalition and the Association of Independent Museums found that just 5% of respondents claimed no gift aid at all, and only 10% did not feel that their charity claimed enough gift aid to make the small donations scheme worthwhile.

Following the call for evidence, HMRC published a further consultation on reform options on 20 April, which was yet another opportunity for stakeholders to put forward reform ideas for consideration. That consultation closed on 1 July this year. It received 46 responses. Again, interestingly, the matching rule was not raised as an issue by the vast majority of respondents.

Quite simply, none of the available data, whether produced by the Government or the sector itself, support the assertion that the gift aid matching rule is a significant barrier to accessing the small donations scheme. The Government have already collected data on the matching rule, carried out a full objective review of the whole scheme and consulted the charity sector. That is why we believe that repeating the consultation process again, so soon after the last consultation, would not produce a different outcome, and why, therefore, I urge the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles not to press new clause 2 to a Division.

As I have said, given the clear interest in the House, we will continue to take a keen interest in this matter, and will listen to the views of the charity sector. The civil society Minister and I are already talking about how we can do more to publicise some aspects of the scheme, and in particular how to get those that do not take advantage of the small donations scheme at the moment to do so. There is a charities day on 16 November, about which we will say a little more later; that will be an opportunity to say and do more to promote the scheme to that small minority not already using it.

I appreciate that in tabling new clause 4 the hon. Members for Aberdeen North and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Rogier Mullin) are seeking to understand the differential impact that abolishing the matching rule would have on charities of different sizes. I have already set out why we do not support the removal of the gift aid matching rule, but I have to tell Opposition Members that it is simply not possible to provide them with the level of analysis that they are seeking. Although HMRC holds data on charitable tax reliefs, it quite rightly collects and retains only those data that are necessary to support its function of administering gift aid and other reliefs. Size and turnover are not relevant for gift aid purposes; HMRC therefore does not routinely collect data on the size or types of charities claiming gift aid or small donations top-ups.

As I explained in Committee, HMRC is transparent with the data it holds, and publishes a national statistics package every year that provides a wealth of information about the take-up and use of charitable tax reliefs, including the gift aid small donations scheme. Hon. Members may also be interested to know that HMRC makes many of its datasets, including those relating to charitable reliefs, available—suitably anonymised, of course—to academics and other individuals who approach it with a suitable research proposal. I can tell the House that a number of organisations have recently made use of HMRC’s charities data for research purposes. That is a good example of open government and open data being put to good use.

I hope I have reassured the hon. Member for Aberdeen North that where HMRC possesses data, those data are transparent and, where appropriate, open to outside scrutiny. New clause 4 is not appropriate, because it would require, in legislation, the Government to do something that we simply cannot do. On that basis, I hope the hon. Lady will consider not pressing the new clause to a Division.

Let me turn finally to new clause 3. As I have explained in previous debates, the connected charities rules are intended to protect the gift aid small donations scheme from abuse. They work in conjunction with the community buildings rules to deliver fair and broadly equal outcomes for charities structured in different ways. Without the connected charities rules, larger charities would be faced with a perverse incentive to splinter into artificial groups of smaller charities to increase their entitlement to small donations allowances. New clause 3 would grant the Treasury the power to exempt specific named charities from the connected charities rules. It would also require the Treasury to publish draft regulations, following consultation with the scouts, the guides and others.

The new clause is unnecessary. As we have heard, the Government have just concluded a full and open review of all aspects of the gift aid small donations scheme. That review included the gift aid matching rule and the connected charities rules. In that very open consultation,
many representations included the scouts and other uniformed groups. The Government listened to the representations from the uniformed groups. They told us that they welcomed the gift and small donations scheme, but were unable to benefit fully from the current community buildings rules because most of their fundraising, as Members will know, takes place outside in their local community. The Bill will therefore relax the community buildings rules to allow donations collected outside the building to be counted for community buildings purposes. As discussed on Second Reading and in Committee, this will help bob-a-job work and so on that is done outside the scout hut or other building.

The intention is to allow groups such as the scouts to benefit more fully from the scheme without the need to specifically exclude them from the connected charities provision. We debated a similar amendment in Committee and had a thorough and thoughtful debate on the implications of the Bill for the youth groups in question. The shadow Chief Secretary raised a number of good points and I undertook to reflect on them and look at them more closely. Having done so, I confirm to the House that a scout hut is an eligible community building and there is no requirement for the hut to be rented out or for access to be granted to other community groups. That means that the scouts and other similar uniformed groups will benefit from the changes contained in the Bill. Whether it is bag-packing at the local supermarket or bucket collections at the local fetes, donations in the local community will count for the supermarket or bucket collections at the local fete, in the Bill. Whether it is bag-packing at the local uniformed groups will benefit from the changes contained in the Bill. Whether it is bag-packing at the local uniformed groups will benefit from the changes contained in the Bill. Whether it is bag-packing at the local uniformed groups will benefit from the changes contained in the Bill.

Rebecca Long Bailey: With the leave of the House, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 3

REGULATIONS ON LOCAL BRANCHES AND GROUPS

'(1) The Small Charitable Donations Act 2012 is amended as set out in subsections (2) and (3).

(2) After section 5(1) (general provisions on meaning of “connected”), insert—

“(1A) This section is subject to the provisions of regulations made under section 5A (regulations on local branches and groups).”

(3) After section 5, insert the following—

“5A Regulations on local branches and groups

(1) The Treasury shall by regulations prescribe organisations in which local or regional branches or groups may not be considered to be connected for the purposes of sections 4 and 5.

(2) The Treasury shall publish the first set of draft regulations made under subsection (1) no later than 31 October 2017.

(3) Before publishing draft regulations under this section, the Treasury shall consult—

(a) the Scout Association;
(b) the Guide Association;
(c) the Combined Cadet Force Association; and
(d) such other organisations as appear to the Treasury to be relevant.”—(Rebecca Long Bailey.)

This new clause requires the Treasury to identify organisations with local or regional branch or group structures in order that those local and regional branches or groups can be separately eligible under the scheme, and to consult certain organisations about the regulations in draft.

Brought up, and read the First time.
Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Bill

15 NOVEMBER 2016

Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Bill

Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinahan, Danny
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
MacTaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCaig, Callum
McCarty, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McGarry, Natalie
McGurk, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Morden, Jessica
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Salmond, rh Alex
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherrill, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiqi, Tulip
Simpson, David
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thew, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thompson, Owen
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turney, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, rh Mr Mark
Wilson, Phil
Wilson, Sammy
Winnick, Mr David
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

Nick Smith and
Vicky Foxcroft

 заявивших, названных:

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Burns, Sir Oliver
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Cartlidge, James
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chisholm, rh Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Donwen, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Sir Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Evans, Graham
Evans, rh Mr Nigel
Evetts, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fulcher, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garner, rh Sir Edward
Garner, Mark
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Haffon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinsrake, Kevin
Hollobone, rh Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkyns, Andrea
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Divisions 80-89

A Yeas 256, Noes 287.

New Clause 4

Abolition of Gift Aid donations threshold

'(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must carry out an assessment of the impact on charities and Community Amateur Sports Clubs of amending the Gift Aid Small Donations Scheme so as to remove the 10% Gift Aid donations threshold that must be met in order to access the Gift Aid Small Donations Scheme, including an assessment of the differential impact on different sizes of charities and Community Amateur Sports Clubs concerned.

'(2) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay a report of the assessment before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.'—[Kirsty Blackman.]

That the clause be read a Second time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 256, Noes 287.

Division No. 80

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Clegg, rh Mr Nick

Tellers for the Noes:
Gay Opperman and Chris Heaton-Harris

Chris Heaton-Harris
Guy Opperman and

AYES

Chwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
crawsbys, Mr David
crawley, Angela
creagh, Mary
creasy, Stella
cryer, John
cummins, Judith
cunningham, Alex
cunningham, Mr Jim
dakin, Nick
danczuk, Simon
david, Wayne
davies, Geraint
day, Martyn
debbonaire, Thangam
docherty-Hughes, Martin
dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
dorries, Nadine
doughty, Stephen
dowd, Peter
dromey, Jack
durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edward, Jonathan
Eford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Ferrier, Margaret
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiellio, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline  
Flynn, Paul  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Furness, Gill  
Gapes, Mike  
Gethins, Stephen  
Gibson, Patricia  
Glass, Pat  
Glindon, Mary  
Godsiff, Mr Roger  
Goodman, Helen  
Grady, Patrick  
Gray, Neil  
Griffith, Nia  
Gwynne, Andrew  
Haigh, Louise  
Hanson, rh Mr David  
Harman, rh Ms Harriet  
Harris, Carolyn  
Hayes, Helen  
Hayman, Sue  
Healey, rh John  
Hendrick, Mr Mark  
Hendry, Drew  
Hepburn, Mr Stephen  
Hermont, Lady  
Hiller, Meg  
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
 Hollern, Kate  
 Hopkin, Kevin  
 Hosie, Stewart  
 Howarth, rh Mr George  
 Hunt, Tristan  
 Hug, Dr Rupa  
 Hussain, Imran  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Johnson, rh Alan  
 Jones, Gerald  
 Jones, Graham  
 Jones, Helen  
 Jones, Mr Keven  
 Jones, Susan Elan  
 Kane, Mike  
 Keeley, Barbara  
 Kendall, Liz  
 Kerevan, George  
 Kerr, Calum  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kyle, Peter  
 Lamb, rh Norman  
 Lammy, rh Mr David  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Law, Chris  
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Lewis, Mr Ivan  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 Lucas, Caroline  
 Lucas, Ian C.  
 Lynch, Holly  
 MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan  
 MacTaggart, rh Fiona  
 Madders, Justin  
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Mann, John  
 Marsden, Gordon  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Matheson, Christian  
 McCaig, Callum  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Stuart C.  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McGarry, Natalie  
 McGovern, Alison  
 Mclnnnes, Liz  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McLaughlin, Anne  
 Meall, Sir Alan  
 Mearns, Ian  
 Monaghan, Carol  
 Monaghan, Dr Paul  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Mulholland, Greg  
 Mullin, Roger  
 Murray, Ian  
 Newlands, Gavin  
 Nicolson, John  
 O’Hara, Brendan  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onurwah, Ch  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Oswald, Kirsten  
 Owen, Albert  
 Paterson, Steven  
 Pearson, Tracya  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Perkins, Toby  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Phillipson, Bridget  
 Pound, Stephen  
 Powell, Lucy  
 Pugh, John  
 Quereshi, Hasmin  
 Rayner, Angela  
 Reed, Mr Jamie  
 Rees, Christina  
 Reynolds, Emma  
 Reynolds, Jonathan  
 Rimmer, Marie  
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret  
 Robertson, rh Angus  
 Robinson, rh Geoffrey  
 Rotheram, Steve  
 Salmond, rh Alex  
 Shah, Naz  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Sharma, Mr Virendra  
 Sheerman, Mr Barry  
 Sheppard, Tommy  
 Sherriff, Paula  
 Shuker, Mr Gavin  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Simpson, David  
 Skinner, Mr Dennis  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew  
 Smith, Angela  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smith, Owen  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Spellar, rh Mr John  
 Stephens, Chris  
 Stevens, Jo  
 Streeting, Wes  
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela  
 Tariq, Mark  
 Thompson, Alison  
 Thomas, Mr Gareth  
 Thornberry, Emily  
 Adams, Nigel  
 Afryie, Adam  
 Aldous, Peter  
 Allan, Lucy  
 Allen, Heidi  
 Amess, Sir David  
 Andrew, Stuart  
 Ansell, Caroline  
 Argar, Edward  
 Atkins, Victoria  
 Bacon, Mr Richard  
 Baker, Mr Steve  
 Baldwin, Harriett  
 Barclay, Stephen  
 Barwell, Gavin  
 Bebb, Guto  
 Bellingham, Sir Henry  
 Benyon, Richard  
 Beresford, Sir Paul  
 Berry, Jake  
 Berry, James  
 Bingham, Andrew  
 Blackman, Bob  
 Blackwood, Nicola  
 Blunt, Crispin  
 Bone, Mr Peter  
 Borwick, Victoria  
 Bottomley, Sir Peter  
 Bradley, rh Karen  
 Brady, Mr Graham  
 Brazier, Mr Julian  
 Bridgen, Andrew  
 Brokenshire, rh James  
 Bruce, Fiona  
 Burns, Conor  
 Burns, rh Sir Simon  
 Burrows, Mr David  
 Burt, rh Alistair  
 Cairns, rh Alun  
 Carmichael, Neil  
 Cartlidge, James  
 Caufield, Maria  
 Chalk, Alex  
 Chihtli, Reham  
 Chope, Mr Christopher  
 Churchill, Jo  
 Clark, rh Greg  
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth  
 Cleverly, James  
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey  
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse  
 Collins, Damian  
 Colville, Oliver  
 Costa, Alberto  
 Courts, Robert  
 Cox, rh Geoffrey  
 Whittford, Dr Philippa  
 Williams, Hywel  
 Williams, Mr Mark  
 Wilson, Phil  
 Wilson, Sammy  
 Winnick, Mr David  
 Wishart, Pete  
 Woodcock, John  
 Wright, Mr lain  
 Zeichner, Daniel  
 Tellers for the Ayes:  
 Marion Fellows and  
 Owen Thompson  
 NOES  
 Crabb, rh Stephen  
 Crouch, Tracey  
 Davies, Byron  
 Davies, Chris  
 Davies, David T.  
 Davies, Glyn  
 Davies, Dr James  
 Davies, Mims  
 Davies, Philip  
 Davis, rh Mr David  
 Dinenage, Caroline  
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  
 Dorries, Nadine  
 Double, Steve  
 Dowden, Oliver  
 Doyle-Price, Jackie  
 Drax, Richard  
 Drummond, Mrs Flick  
 Dudtridge, James  
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain  
 Dunne, Mr Philip  
 Ellicott, Tom  
 Ellis, Michael  
 Ellison, Jane  
 Elwood, Mr Tobias  
 Elphicke, Charlie  
 Evans, Graham  
 Evans, Mr Nigel  
 Evennett, rh David  
 Fabricant, Michael  
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael  
 Fernandez, Suella  
 Field, rh Mark  
 Foster, Kevin  
 Francois, rh Mr Mark  
 Frazer, Lucy  
 Freeman, George  
 Freer, Mike  
 Fuller, Richard  
 Fysh, Marcus  
 Gale, Sir Roger  
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward  
 Garnier, Mark  
 Ghani, Nusrat  
 Gibb, Mr Nick  
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl  
 Goodwill, Mr Robert  
 Gove, rh Michael  
 Grant, Mrs Helen  
 Gray, Mr James  
 Grayling, rh Chris  
 Green, Chris  
 Green, rh Damian  
 Greening, rh Justine  
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic  
 Griffiths, Andrew  

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 2

**MEANING OF “SMALL DONATION”**

**Rebecca Long Bailey:** I beg to move amendment 1, page 2, leave out lines 1 to 6 and insert—

“(a) in the heading after “small”, delete “cash payment” and insert “donation”;

(b) in sub-paragraph (1) omit the words “in cash”;

(c) after that sub-paragraph insert—

“(1A) The gift must be made—

(b) by cheque;

(c) by electronic communication; or

(d) by a contactless payment.”

“cheque” means a written order instructing a bank to pay money from the account of the person who draws it; or the to the person possessing it, a certain sum of money;

“electronic communication” means a payment made via the internet or text message.”

This amendment would extend the range of methods by which payments can be made under the Gift Aid Small Donations Scheme.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment 2, page 2, line 6, at end insert—

“or

(c) by a comparable method prescribed by the Treasury by regulations.”

This amendment would give the Treasury a power to prescribe by regulations other methods of payment comparable to contactless payment in the future.

**Rebecca Long Bailey:** Opposition amendments 1 and 2 relate to the types of payment eligible for the gift aid small donations scheme. Amendment 1 would extend the range of payment methods to include cheques and electronic communications—that is, texts. The Bill itself extends the methods to include contactless payments. Amendment 2 would give the Treasury powers to prescribe by regulations other methods of payment comparable to contactless payments in the future. I will keep my remarks on these two amendments relatively brief as we had an extensive debate on this issue in Committee, although I did not push it to a vote.
Currently, cash donations under £20 are considered eligible for the scheme. The Bill brings contactless payments into the scheme, and we support that measure. However, the charity sector has said that it would be more beneficial for other types of payment, particularly cheques, to be eligible as well. When this was discussed in Committee, the Minister said that amending the Bill in such a way was “contrary to the stated policy intention of the scheme.”—[Official Report, Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Public Bill Committee, 18 October 2016; c. 10.]

I want to take this opportunity to disagree.

The intention of the scheme is to allow charities to get a gift aid-style top-up on donations made in situations where it is infeasible, but not impossible, to get a gift aid declaration. I would argue that donations made by text are a prime example of such a situation. The Minister has said that receiving gift aid declarations on donations via SMS is a straightforward process: the donor simply needs to reply to a follow-up text message giving their name and address and confirming that they are a taxpayer. It might be straightforward, but people tend to be wary of disclosing personal information. I certainly would not feel comfortable sending my address and other details to an unknown number.

The hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) helpfully alerted us to paragraph 1.8 of the Treasury consultation “Gift Aid and Digital Giving”. I am sure that the Minister has had time to check it out, but I can remind her that the document states:

“Individual donations online or by text are often small. In these cases the donor it may not seem worthwhile to go to the trouble of filling out a Gift Aid declaration for a small additional amount to go to the recipient charity.”

It is therefore clear that getting a gift aid declaration via text is not as straightforward as the Minister would have us believe.

Similar situations can arise with cheques, as detailed in Committee by my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley). Elderly people in particular often send cheques in the post, making it impossible for charities to track them down and get a gift aid declaration—it is probably not worth it if it is a small amount. Amendment 1 would simply allow such donations to be eligible for the scheme. I hope the Minister will offer some movement on this area as I simply cannot see the logic in saying that extending payments in that way would somehow encourage charities to move away from traditional gift aid claims.

Amendment 2 would allow the Treasury to make regulations to tweak the legislation to allow types of payments similar to contactless payment to come under the scope of the scheme. It was argued in Committee that technology is moving forward at an incredibly fast pace and that next year people might be using a new type of card or gadget to donate to charity. The Opposition are convinced by that line of reasoning and the amendment would simply give the Government the power to make changes to allow Oyster cards, for example, to come within the scope of the legislation without having to create a brand-new Bill. It is not often the Opposition’s desire to give the Government more powers, but it would be worthwhile in this scenario.

In conclusion, the Opposition strongly support the move to include contactless payment, but we do not see the logic in singling it out when the sector is saying that other payment methods would provide a greater boost to the scheme. I look forward to the Minister’s response. I will be pushing amendment 1 to a vote should she not see fit to accept it.

Jane Ellison: As we have just heard, amendment 1 would extend the gift aid small donations scheme to include donations made via cheque, online or SMS. Amendment 2 would give the Treasury the power to amend the Small Charitable Donations Act 2012 through secondary legislation to include other unspecified methods of payment in future. As the shadow Minister said, we debated this area in some detail both on Second Reading and in Committee, so I am afraid that I will be making many of the same points.

When I opened the Second Reading debate, I told the House that it is a Government priority to maximise the gift aid claimed by charities on eligible donations. It is worth reflecting on that because during the Bill’s passage through the House we have quite rightly focused on the gift aid small donations scheme, but the scheme—in which it is forms just one part of the package of generous tax reliefs the Government use to support our charity sector. Gift aid was worth over £1.3 billion to the charity sector last year—a significant amount—but we want to see gift aid claimed on even more eligible donations, and we want charities to claim gift aid because it is a much more beneficial scheme and has many advantages for charities over the longer term. The shadow Minister said that she was not seeking to undermine gift aid, but it is worth reminding ourselves that it is the more beneficial scheme, so we want to encourage people to take it up.

One reason is that gift aid is not capped—relief can be claimed on individual donations worth hundreds or thousands of pounds. There is no annual limit—charities can claim on as many eligible donations as they are able to solicit. The act of obtaining a gift aid declaration provides charities with the opportunity to build a relationship with their donors, leading to a more sustainable and resilient funding stream.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr Rob Wilson): Exactly.

Jane Ellison: As the Minister for civil society indicates from a sedentary position, that is absolutely key to the long-term health of many charities.

We fully accept that there are situations in which, with the best will in the world, charity fundraisers cannot stop donors to ask them to complete a gift aid declaration. The gift aid small donations scheme is therefore intended to be used for those small, low-value, spur of the moment donations when contact between donor and charity is fleeting and it is not practical or feasible to solicit a gift aid declaration. Those will primarily be the small cash donations that the small donations scheme was originally designed to cover, but we also accept, following discussions with the sector, that this should also apply to contactless donations. However, the Government are not persuaded that this is the case with other methods of donations such as those made by text, online or by cheque, and I set out reasons for that on Second Reading and in Committee.
4.45 pm

I have listened with interest to the arguments advanced by right hon. and hon. Members, including the shadow Minister, and I completely understand the points they are making. However, if the argument is that the process for claiming gift aid on electronic donations, such as those by SMS, is too onerous, that is a separate issue and the solution is not to try to shoehorn methods of donation into the gift aid small donations scheme which it was never intended to cover.

The Government completely agree that the process for claiming gift aid on SMS and online donations made through digital intermediaries should be simpler. We have discussed this issue in detail with the sector and have published several consultation documents. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) made reference to one such document in Committee, and it has been referred to again today. I am pleased to tell him, the shadow Minister and other hon. Members, that we have made progress on this issue. Primary legislation was included in the Finance Act 2015 and the Finance Act 2016, and draft regulations were published for technical consultation earlier this year. The Government intend to lay those regulations shortly, and they will simplify the process of gift aiding donations through digital intermediaries. Instead of completing a gift aid declaration for every donation made, donors will be able to sign a one-off authorisation allowing the intermediary to create gift aid declarations and claim gift aid on the donor’s behalf for all subsequent donations made in that tax year.

Just last year, HMRC introduced a new, shorter model gift aid declaration to make it easier for donors to understand their obligations under the scheme, and it worked in close collaboration with the Charity Retail Association to simplify and clarify the Government’s guidance on the retail gift aid scheme. Earlier this summer, the Treasury published a consultation exploring ways of simplifying the gift aid donor benefits rules, and we looked carefully at the responses received before publishing a response.

Of course, we will keep looking for ways to simplify and improve gift aid, but these are questions about the wider gift aid scheme, not the gift aid small donations scheme. My hon. Friend might be pleased to note that one reason I foresaw difficulties with his proposal is that people’s tax status can change from year to year—for example, when they move from work into retirement—and this would make things difficult. I hope that that response is helpful, but I will follow up with him in more detail.

Amendment 2 would grant the Treasury the power to amend the Small Charitable Donations Act 2012 in the future in the event that new donation technology develops. Members who were present at the original Bill discussion reminded us in Committee that they had made points about future-proofing the scheme in terms of technology at that time. My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley and the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) are nodding. It is an interesting point, which we have debated.

The Government have consulted fully on the changes to the scheme, and as part of the consultation that we have just undertaken, the extensive nature of which I outlined earlier, HMRC officials went out and met charities and other groups to discuss contactless donations and other technological developments. They considered methods of donation that are not currently in use but might be in the pipeline. I understand that there was no suggestion from the stakeholders that there are other imminent technological developments in the pipeline that would be suitable for the small donations scheme. In any event, we have deliberately drafted the definition of “contactless payment” quite widely.

As I explained to my hon. Friend, the Member for Amber Valley in Committee, the definition in the Bill would cover donations from, for example, Oyster cards, as the shadow Minister mentioned, or other smart cards. It would also cover new payment services similar to Apple Pay and Android Pay. We believe that the definition in the Bill is sufficient to cover most of the technological developments that we are likely to see in the reasonably foreseeable future.

James Duddridge: My hon. Friend will not be surprised by the amendment that I have tabled. I am reassured about the extension of contactless payments, particularly to Oyster cards, as was mentioned from the Opposition Front Bench. However, I do not support the amendment because of its wording. It refers to “comparable method”. The shadow Minister used the word “similar”, and my hon. Friend the Member used the term “unspecified”. That is all unclear. There will be further technological changes and we will probably look back and say, “Wasn’t there a formulation that we could have used to include this new technology?” The wording of the amendment is not satisfactory and unfortunately I cannot offer a suggestion to improve it.

James Duddridge: My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley and the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) are nodding. It is an interesting point, which we have debated.

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Jane Ellison: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. Learning, perhaps, from the time when the predecessor Bill was before the House, we have tried to look ahead, consult widely, and future-proof this Bill against forms of payment that are not yet widely used. It is sensible to try to provide a definition of those, rather than leaving the Bill overly vague. We have done a sound job of future-proofing the Bill as much as is reasonably possible.

I fully accept that at some future stage, perhaps some years from now, a new donation method could be developed which would not be covered by the current definition. We cannot know whether that future method might have implications for other parts of the Bill. That is why I am nervous about writing a woolly definition into the Bill. If and when there is a new donation method not foreseen or covered by the Bill, it is important that the Government come before the House with primary legislation, explain their decision and allow Parliament to scrutinise the proposed changes properly. As this Bill has proceeded relatively uncontroversially through the House, it would be hard to argue that the scrutiny of it and the attention that it has allowed us to focus on the scheme and on gift aid more widely have not been a good thing. The Bill demonstrates that we keep matters under review and that, when there is a case for change, we come back before Parliament and engage in a full and proper debate.

Gift aid is hugely beneficial for charities and we want as many charities as possible to benefit from gift aid on the eligible donations that they receive. I have given an undertaking that the Treasury will work with the Minister for civil society to publisce the charities day on 16 December and to look more widely at what we can do to make sure that take-up continues to grow. The small donations scheme is a separate scheme intended to bridge the gap caused by small, fleeting donations. It is not a replacement for or an alternative to gift aid, and if charities can obtain a gift aid declaration, they should do so because it is in their best interests, for reasons that I have touched on.

This Bill will improve the gift aid small donations scheme. Separately the Government are taking action to improve the wider scheme, and I hope that that action will address a number of the concerns raised in the debate by hon. Members. The small donations scheme is not the right vehicle to bring about the changes that have been suggested and that the shadow Minister is seeking. I hope that, having heard these reassurances, she will withdraw her amendments.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 248, Noes 279.

Division No. 81] [4.55 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tamsina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bardell, Hannah
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Mr David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cryer, John
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
Debbonaire, Thangam
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elliott, Tom
Elliott, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Fernier, Margaret
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flyn, Paul
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gethins, Stephen
Gianson, Patricia
Glass, Pal
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, rh Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grady, Neil
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hilger, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendal, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinahan, Danny
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewin, Clive
Lewin, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McGarry, Natalie
McGovern, Alison
McHines, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
Meaile, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Monaghan, Carol
Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Bill

Brazier, Mr Julian
Bradley, rh Karen
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Braun, Mr Graham
Brazzini, Mr Marian

Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, r Mr John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Tami, Mark
Thomas, r Mr Gareth
Thompson, Owen
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, r Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Tigg, Derek
Tigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Weir, Michael
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Phil
Wilson, Sammy
Winnick, Mr David
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, r Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Double, Steve
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Dudbridge, James
Duncan, r Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, r Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ephicke, Charlie
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, r David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, r Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, r Mark
Foster, Kevin
Francois, r Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fulcher, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, r Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillian, r Mrs Cheryl
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, r Michael
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Graying, r Chris
Green, Chris
Green, r Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, r Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, r Ben
Halfon, r Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, r Matt
Hands, r Greg
Harper, r Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Haris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, r Sir Alan
Heald, r Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, r Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloway, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, r Mr Jeremy
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, r Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenyns, Andrea
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kazimzyan, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Knight, r Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, r Sir Oliver
Lewis, r Brandon
Lewis, r Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, r Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintoosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Matheson, Alison
Marr, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, r Mrs Maria
Milring, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, r Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, r Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, r David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, r Priti
Paterson, r Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philp, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shellbrooke, Alec
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Souby, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Ian
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vazey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy

**Tellers for the Noes:**
Stephen Barclay and
Mark Spencer

5.9 pm

**Jane Ellison:** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

It is a pleasure to move the Bill’s Third Reading. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken the time to scrutinise and engage with the Bill so constructively during its passage through this House. It is a short and technical Bill, but it is nevertheless important and it delivers real benefits to our vibrant charity sector and for working families.

I am very pleased that during its passage through this House, the Bill has received broad cross-party support and provided an opportunity for Members on both sides of the House to highlight and champion the wonderful work that local charities do right across the country. On Second Reading, we heard from the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) about the volunteers in her constituency shovelling snow to keep the pavements clear in winter. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) spoke of the work done by a charity in his constituency to help people living with HIV/AIDS. We heard about the work of animal welfare charities, including Waggy Tails Rescue in Mid Dorset and North Poole, and of course I took the opportunity to mention Battersea Dogs and Cats home in my constituency.

It is not just charities that will benefit from the reforms to the gift aid small donations scheme. As several hon. Members pointed out, community amateur sports clubs will also be able to access top-up payments sooner, and we heard examples of local sports clubs in Taunton Deane, Chippenham and Congleton that could benefit. The small donations scheme is a good thing for charities. It allows them to claim a gift aid-style top-up payment of 25p in the pound when it is not practical or feasible to obtain a gift aid declaration from a donor.

The Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Bill will make it even easier for charities to access those top-up payments by removing entirely two of the existing eligibility criteria. The Bill will also simplify and clarify the rules, ensuring that the scheme remains fair and delivers broad parity of treatment for charities structured in different ways. We are reforming the community buildings rules to make the scheme much more generous for local charities that operate out of community buildings. I sought to reassure the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) about organisations such as scouts and guides by confirming the eligibility in their case. In Committee and again on Report the Opposition Front-Bench team tabled probing amendments on that point and others, and we have had a couple of thorough debates. I reiterate what I said earlier to the House: a scout hut is an eligible community building, so scouts and other uniformed groups will benefit from the changes in the Bill. I hope that all Members here will join me in supporting this enabling reform. We have heard from some Members about their yesteryears in the scouts, and anything that helps scouts to continue with “bob a job” and all their other community fundraising schemes can only be a good thing.

We are also taking action through this Bill to future-proof the gift aid small donations scheme by extending eligibility to contactless donations, so that charities can continue to benefit from the scheme for many years to come. The message that the Bill sends is clear: the Government want a strong, vibrant and resilient charity sector and we will do all we can to support it through the tax system.

In addition to celebrating the work of our charities and sports clubs, the Bill’s passage through the House provoked an important wider debate about the threats that the sector faces, and particularly the importance of a robust regulatory regime to protect the reputation of charities from the dishonest minority who seek to abuse charitable status. It is not necessarily a pleasant issue to have to contemplate, but we have had an important debate. It is good that we are continually pushed to think about how we can protect our charities further. The sector is one of our great assets. It is very important, and we need to do all we can to protect it. I have argued consistently that the Bill strikes the right balance between simplifying the gift aid small donations scheme, making it easier for charities to claim top-up payments and protecting the Exchequer from abuse and charities from reputational damage.

During the Bill’s passage through this House, hon. and right hon. Members have expressed some concern about take-up of the gift aid small donations scheme.
As my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Mr Wilson), the civil society Minister, told the House on Second Reading, last year 21,300 charities benefited from the small donations scheme, claiming a total of £26 million of Government support. That is a lot of charities, but we accept that it is fewer than forecast. That is why we are simplifying the scheme by removing two of the main eligibility criteria and relaxing the community buildings rules.

I can also tell the House today that once the new rules take effect, HMRC will undertake a broad communications exercise to promote greater awareness of the gift aid small donations scheme. I have also asked what targeted activity can be undertaken. I encourage charity sector bodies and representative groups to work with the Treasury and HMRC to make the reformed scheme a success. I thank them and the officials concerned for the constructive approach that they take and the work that is done to bring this legislation to the House.

Let me say a quick word about the tax-free childcare portion of the Bill, which makes a small number of minor and technical, but important, amendments to the tax-free childcare scheme. That fact has not limited the interest shown in the scheme during the debates, and tax-free childcare continues to enjoy cross-party support. A number of speakers have looked forward to being able to use the scheme for their own children, and such a prospect draws ever closer as the scheme is set to commence next year.

For many, this will be the first time they will be able to access Government support with childcare costs as tax-free childcare will be available to all working parents, regardless of whether they are employed or self-employed. HMRC is about to begin inviting parents to test the new service in trials. As in bringing forward these changes, HMRC will again listen to parents to ensure that it provides the best possible service. The responses made in the Bill, with the minor and technical changes, will help HMRC to ensure that it is quick and easy for working parents to access the support they need with their childcare costs.

The Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Bill is a short and, it is fair to say, uncontroversial, yet important Bill. Its passage through the House has seen thoughtful and constructive challenge that has allowed us to debate a number of important principles, as well as to praise some of the vital charities that are forces for good in our communities and our wider society. The Bill is therefore a positive Bill. We are making life easier for small charities and for working parents, and I commend it to the House.

5.16 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey: Hon. Members will be pleased to hear that I will keep my comments very brief in this stage in the proceedings. The Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Bill as a whole makes positive changes to the gift aid small donations scheme and very minor changes to the tax-free childcare scheme.

The Opposition have welcomed the Government’s aim throughout the passage of the Bill to make sure that the gift aid small donations scheme is more accessible, and to encourage charities to take part. The scheme has not been as successful as the Government had hoped, and the Bill certainly makes changes to improve that situation. In particular, the abolition of the two-year eligibility rule and the two-in-four years claims rule will open up the scheme to new charities, while bringing contactless payments into the definition of a small payment will bring the scheme into line with how donations can be made in the modern day.

However, as the Minister is aware, the Opposition think the Bill could have gone further; as do representatives of the charity sector. Indeed, the Charity Finance Group has said that the Government were “locking in future failure” by not introducing wider reforms. We have tried to improve the Bill after receiving feedback from the sector. Along with SNP Members, we have tried to address the key issue coming out of the feedback, which is the matching requirement. Our amendments in Committee and on Report would have forced the Government to conduct a specific review of the rule and of how the scheme fits within the framework of anti-fraud measures in the scheme. Unfortunately, the Government have not made any movement on this issue, which is a barrier to entry to the scheme, according to charity representatives. However, I note the comments that the Minister made earlier, and I look forward to receiving any further updates from her on this matter in due course.

We have also tried to widen the payment methods eligible for the scheme beyond cash and contactless payments. Our amendments would have included cheques and donations via text and online. Again, unfortunately, the Government have not seen fit to work with us on this part of the Bill, simply using flawed logic, as it were, to prevent the changes that the charity sector wants from happening. I hope that the Minister will reflect on the comments made during the passage of the Bill, and consider whether amendments can be made in due course to make the use of cheques and, in particular, of text messages more accessible to the gift aid sector.

Finally, we have tried to address what appeared to be a flaw in the original legislation, preventing the scouts, guides and cadet groups from gaining the full benefits of the scheme. For the benefit of hon. Members who are not aware of the issue, the connected charities rule means that the scouts, guides and cadet groups are each treated as one charity, despite the fact that local groups are individual and self-financing, and that means only one top-up payment can be received. As I highlighted when we discussed this amendment in the Public Bill Committee, the Charity Finance Group has suggested that such treatment means they receive only 17p per individual group a year.

The Minister had a few issues with our amendment, as drafted, and we listened to her concerns and modified it to reflect them. I particularly appreciate the comments she has made in relation to scout groups and their bases. However, she will recognise that the comments made in Committee related to the need for the scope of our amendment to go further to include groups beyond the scouts and girl guides. I hope she will consider that very carefully and see whether she can put in place any future amendments or provisions to deal with any other groups in a similar position that are not, as it were, mopped up by the Bill.

To conclude, perhaps once the Government have reviewed the scheme’s effectiveness in the light of the changes the Bill makes we may have an opportunity to come back to some of those changes, as I have said. Overall, however, the Opposition support the Bill and
its aims. I hope it will succeed in making the small donations scheme more accessible and in supporting smaller and new charities. I look forward to an update on the impact of the revised legislation in due course.

5.20 pm

Kirsty Blackman: It is nice to speak on Third Reading of a Bill when there has largely been agreement on many of the measures it contains.

The Government’s measures on the gift aid small donations scheme are sensible and logical steps forward, and it is good that more charities will be able to benefit from the scheme as a result. We were very clear that we would have liked the Government to go further, but we appreciate the steps they have taken, and the wide-ranging consultation they have undertaken.

We raised the matching requirement a number of times. My understanding is that the Government have the power to make changes to that requirement without the need for primary legislation anyway. It is useful to know that the Government can consider that if they receive future representations on the matter. Our concerns related in particular to volunteer-led charities—the very smallest charities, which perhaps do not have the administrative capacity to access some of these schemes. But I appreciate that the Government have committed to undertake a wider publicity effort on the gift aid small donations scheme and on how charities can access tax reliefs. I hope that charities across the UK will benefit from those changes.

The changes to the way that people will access childcare payments are sensible and seem more accessible than the current system. Having used the current system and struggled with some of its administrative impacts, I think the new scheme will iron out some of those flaws, and am pleased that even before the new scheme comes in the Government are re-evaluating it and looking to make it as accessible and as easy for parents to navigate as possible. I understand that a pilot will take place and that, by the end of next year, pretty much everyone should have moved over to the new scheme. I hope the Government will commit to re-evaluating the scheme as it goes forward, to ensure that it is as accessible as possible.

On that re-evaluation, in Scotland we are making changes to the early learning and childcare system, and are looking at a mass expansion so that as many families as possible can access free, good quality childcare that is easily accessible in local communities. In my local community, at Manor Park Primary School, 20 two-year-olds will take part in a trial that is taking place in my area and in a number of other places across Scotland. I am sure that the UK Government will be keen to learn from Scotland’s experience of the expansion of free childcare and will be looking at it for the future.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to speak on Third Reading. As I have said, we are broadly supportive of the Bill but would have liked it to go further in some areas. However, we will not oppose its Third Reading.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.
Leaving the EU: NHS Funding

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

5.25 pm

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): On 23 June, our country voted to leave the European Union. The result was not a landslide: 48% voted to remain; 52% voted to leave. London, Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain; the majority of England and Wales voted to leave. The young overwhelmingly voted to stay; older voters opted to go. Socioeconomic classes and ethnic groups also voted in different ways.

I was immensely proud to play a leading role in the “Labour In for Britain” and “Britain Stronger in Europe” campaigns during the EU referendum. To my core, I still believe that by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more together than we do alone, not only as individuals but as a nation state, as we seek to amplify Britain’s role in the world and achieve as much for our community of nations around the world as possible. However, I accept the result. Before the vote, remain campaigners accepted the rules under which the referendum was fought. I do not think that, having had a referendum conducted under those rules, which we debated in the House, we can now reject them because we do not like the outcome. Either you are a democrat or you are not, Mr Speaker, and I am a democrat.

Various promises were made by each side in that referendum campaign. Now it is over, it is important that we hold to account the winning side for the policies and claims that were made and upon which people voted. I say “hold to account” deliberately. We on the remain side would not want all of Vote Leave’s promises to be delivered, but it is right and proper, for the sake of our shared values of democracy, accountability and transparency—the foundations upon which this House is built—that Vote Leave campaigners who are Members of the House should be tested on whether they deliver what they pledged to the people. If they do not, they should explain why not to their constituents and the nation in this House. Thousands of people agree—they have joined the Vote Leave Watch campaign because they care about this, too. I chair that campaign, and I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

One promise that the overwhelming majority of people—both the 16 million who voted remain and the 17 million who voted leave—want to see kept is the Vote Leave campaign’s pledge to put £350 million extra per week into the NHS. That was the key pledge of the Vote Leave campaign. Prominent members of the current Cabinet—the Foreign, Environment, International Development, International Trade, and Transport Secretaries—went around the country in a big red bus that said, “We send the EU £350 million a week. Let’s fund our NHS instead”. They gave speeches in front of a sign saying, “Let’s give our NHS the £350 million the EU takes every week”. None of them disowned that pledge during the campaign—not a single one. The clear message they sought to give to the people was that if we leave the EU, £350 million a week extra will be put into our national health service. No qualification was given to that pledge.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. This is such an important point for our economy, as we know in my part of London, where the Barts trust has the largest predicted overspend in NHS history. Does he agree that it is vital that those who campaigned on the pledge that this money would be provided are held to account, because communities such as mine are suffering without investment in the NHS?

Mr Umunna: I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend. When I had the pleasure of visiting her constituency the other week, I saw for myself the situation that she describes.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the claim of £350 million a week for the NHS was at the centre of Vote Leave’s campaign. Leave campaigners were given a number of opportunities to review, qualify or disown the claim, including following strident criticism from all members—remainers and leavers—of the Treasury Committee. The fact they chose not to distance themselves from the claim surely demonstrates that this is a promise that ought to be delivered. If it is not delivered, they will have some explaining to do.

Mr Umunna: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. As he said, it was significant that the Treasury Committee came to its conclusion, since it is a cross-party Committee whose members include leavers and remainers.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) said, we know that the NHS needs extra cash. The Minister also knows this. As members of the Health Committee pointed out last month, the deficit in NHS trusts and foundation trusts in 2015-16 was more than £3.5 billion.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a powerful argument for extra NHS funding, but does he share my concern that our NHS could actually be worse off as a result of the decision to leave the EU, given that the reduction in our exchange rate will make it more expensive to purchase products from abroad? Does he also share my concern that, when I asked the Secretary of State for Health how much and from abroad? Does he also share my concern that, when I asked the Secretary of State for Health how much and what proportion of the total NHS budget was spent on imports, the Department was unaware and therefore unable to give me that information?

Mr Umunna: It is outrageous that Ministers were unable to give my hon. Friend those figures. Ministers themselves exacerbated the knock-on impact on the economy of the depreciation of the pound. It depreciated in value by 6% before October, and then by a further 15% because of uncertainty around our trading arrangements that was triggered by comments made by the International Trade Secretary that differed from those of the Chancellor to the Treasury Committee and in other forums. The knock-on effect is not, however, just on household budgets. As the cost of things increases, of course the NHS will take a big hit. Public services in general will be affected if growth reduces and Exchequer receipts fall.

Ministers’ claimed increases in NHS funding, which the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), might mention, are actually being funded by reductions in other areas. 
of health spending that fall outside NHS England’s budget. Reductions in spending on social care are having a serious impact on the NHS, and that is translating into increased accident and emergency attendances, emergency admissions and delays to people leaving hospital. I have talked about what Select Committees, Ministers and Members of Parliament are saying, but we have also heard from third parties. The King’s Fund, the Nuffield Trust and the Health Foundation are clear that current Government spending plans through to 2019-20 will not be enough to maintain standards of care, to meet rising demand from patients and to deliver the transformation in services outlined in the NHS five year forward view.

I and more than 40 Members from different parties, including all my hon. Friends in the Chamber for the debate, have written to the Chancellor asking that when he presents his first autumn statement on 23 November, he have written to the Chancellor asking that when he presents his first autumn statement on 23 November, he sets out how he will put the Government on a path to increasing national NHS spending by that promised £350 million extra a week once we have left the EU. To be clear, that additional funding must be over and above the amount currently planned to be spent on the NHS. The British Medical Association has made the same demand.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman saying that the Government have to honour a promise made by others to the tune of £350 million a week extra for the NHS? My hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and other notable leavers have now conceded that the actual figure was £120 million. Would it not be unfair to say that the Government have to deliver that pledge, given that they never made any such promise to the British people?

Mr Umunna: I am grateful for the right hon. Lady’s intervention; I shall come on to those precise points shortly. I note, however, the public statements she herself made when she was a member of the Government. She criticised the way in which her fellow Ministers were going around making these big promises, perhaps on her behalf.

Anna Soubry: We must be very clear about this. During the referendum, we campaigned individually, not as Ministers on behalf of the Government. The hon. Gentleman is right that some Ministers campaigned for leave and made this promise—and indeed many other promises that I do not think they will be able to deliver—but there is a distinction to be made between the promises of the Government and those of people who now happen to be in government. It is really the leave campaign that must be held to account, not the Government.

Mr Umunna: The right hon. Lady pre-empts what I am about to say; I shall come on to that precise point. To be clear, I want the Minister, on behalf of his Department, to give the same commitment that we are asking the Treasury to make, and to outline how his Department will make good on this pledge. I shall explain why this is a pledge that the Government should deliver. The Minister might give a number of reasons, perhaps echoing the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), to explain why this is a pledge that the Government should deliver—but there is a distinction to be made between the promises of the Government and those of people who now happen to be in government. It is really the leave campaign that must be held to account.

Anna Soubry: We must be very clear about this. During the referendum, we campaigned individually, not as Ministers on behalf of the Government. The hon. Gentleman is right that some Ministers campaigned for leave and made this promise—and indeed many other promises that I do not think they will be able to deliver—but there is a distinction to be made between the promises of the Government and those of people who now happen to be in government. It is really the leave campaign that must be held to account, not the Government.

Mr Umunna: The right hon. Lady pre-empts what I am about to say; I shall come on to that precise point. To be clear, I want the Minister, on behalf of his Department, to give the same commitment that we are asking the Treasury to make, and to outline how his Department will make good on this pledge. I shall explain why this is a pledge that the Government should deliver. The Minister might give a number of reasons, perhaps echoing the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), to explain why the promise given by his ministerial colleagues during the referendum should not be treated as such. I will deal with each of the main possible reasons in turn.

First, there are those who claim that this was not a pledge at all. Nigel Farage, the interim leader of the UK Independence party, said that it was one of the mistakes that he thought the leave campaign made. The current Transport Secretary, who was also a member of the Government at the time of the referendum, has said that Vote Leave’s specific proposal was, in fact, to spend £100 million a week of the £350 million for the NHS that was originally hoped for, commenting that that would be an “aspiration” to be met. Let me tell the Transport Secretary that the poster that the Vote Leave supporters all stood next to did not say that this was an “aspiration”; it was a pledge—pure and simple. There was no qualification on the poster or on the big red bus. This statement was made, and the people who made it should be held to account for it.

Secondly, many leave campaigners deny ever using the £350 million figure. One of them said:

“I always referred to Britain’s net contribution of nearly £10 billion—some £200 million a week…rather than £350 million.”—[Official Report, 5 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 20WH.] It is true—my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) touched on this—that the Office for National Statistics said that the £350 million figure was misleading, but the head of the Vote Leave campaign said: “the £350 million figure is correct and we stand by it.” Vote Leave, whose banner Government Ministers campaigned under, carried on citing the figure, as my hon. Friend said, and those Ministers must now be held to account.

Stella Creasy: I take my lead from the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), who sadly does not appear to be in this Chamber. He was one of the most prominent members of the Vote Leave campaign and said that Brexit must give the NHS a boost. In my part of town, a boost to the NHS is the vital funding that we need to get our NHS back on track. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should listen to the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip about that point?

Mr Umunna: I shall come on to him shortly. A further thing that is said—again, I think this has been touched on—is that not all the people who made these pledges were members of the then Conservative Government. Perhaps that could be said of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). Well, of the five current members of the Cabinet whom I mentioned, three were members of the then Government and one—the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip—attended the political Cabinet at the time. Yes, the Secretary of State for International Trade was sitting on the Back Benches, but countless other Ministers from outside the Cabinet at the time who are now serving more than make up for that—for instance, the hon. Members for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) and for Stockton South (James Wharton), I could go on. Those are just a few of the people who posed by those posters and next to that big red bus, and they must be held to account.
Finally, it is said—this is the crux of the argument advanced by the right hon. Member for Broxtowe—that the commitment was given by one side in a referendum campaign, not by a Government. I am sorry but that simply will not wash. Many of those people were put up to appear in the media and to campaign on Vote Leave’s behalf precisely because they carried the authority that attaches to Government Ministers. That was why they were used. That was why they were asked to stand by that red bus, and to stand by those posters.

All those key Vote Leave campaigners, whether they were Ministers or not, were Members of this House. If our democracy is to mean anything, it must mean that Members are answerable to the electorate for their policies, and held to account in the House for the things that they say. People cannot go around the country casually promising the world and betraying people by that they say. People cannot go around the country policies, and held to account in the House for the things our democracy is to mean anything, it must mean that were Ministers or not, were Members of this House. If that red bus, and to stand by those posters.

That was why they were asked to stand by that red bus, and to stand by those posters.

Mr Umunna: My hon. Friend for giving way again. He is being very generous with his time.

Is this not dangerous and damaging not only to parliamentary democracy, but to the morale of workers in our national health service? I was told by the chair and chief executive of my local NHS trust, Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, that they are frequently stopped by members of staff who ask, “When are we going to get the extra money?” Those people will surely be not just incredibly disappointed but doubly disappointed, given the difficulties that they are facing because the trust has a huge deficit and is struggling to provide the services that they know that patients require.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again. He is being very generous with his time.

Either those Ministers made this pledge to the people in the expectation of delivering on it, in which case they must now show us the money, or they made it in the sure knowledge that their promise would never be fulfilled, in which case they will never be forgiven for their betrayal of those who, in good faith, relied on them. Perhaps the Minister can tell us which it will be.

5.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): I congratulate the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) on securing the debate, and on the points that he made. Like him, I voted and campaigned for the remain side, and, like him, I accept the result. I am now part of a Government who are responsible for delivering what was democratically decided by the British people. I should say at the outset, however, that I am speaking today for the Government and not for the leave campaign. If the hon. Gentleman feels that he is taking part in the wrong debate, I apologise for that in advance.

I will, however, address some of the points that have been made about the impact of Brexit on the NHS, because valid points were made about staff morale, the level of funding and the exchange rate. All those are variables, and I think it is good for us to spend a bit of time talking about them this evening. I will also talk about what stage I think we have reached on the pledge and the amount of money that we will no longer be giving to the European Union when we leave—although, as the hon. Gentleman knows, that depends on how we leave, and on the nature of the agreement that we eventually reach.

Let us begin by agreeing on one point. The single most important thing that the NHS needs to be properly funded is a strong economy. To the extent that Brexit may have positives and negatives, that fact is relevant, but the NHS is properly funded at the moment. We have heard some stuff about budgets and all the rest of it, but let me tell the hon. Gentleman that the OECD’s analysis of health and social care spending in every OECD country shows that we are now above average, although that has not always been the case. We are possibly 1% lower than the best of class, including France and Germany. That figure was for 2014, and the gap is likely to have been filled because this year we gave an increase to NHS spending of three times the rate of inflation and we have pledged that NHS England’s budget will increase in real terms by £10 billion between now and 2021. I do not believe Brexit will make any difference to that; indeed it is a commitment and priority of this Government that it will not.

We do know, however, that there are issues in how that money is allocated within the NHS. We are broadly at the average point of the OECD, and we do and could spend that money more efficiently and effectively. We could spend more on primary care, cancer and mental health than we do, and those are Government priorities, and we hope the sustainability and transformation plan process will help to deliver that because at the moment we spend too much on acute care.

Of course we can find efficiencies, too. Agency staffing is too high and we need to address that. There is a lot we can do on procurement—Carter and new care models and all that go with that.

Stella Creasy: The Minister could also work to renegotiate the private finance initiative loans that are crippling our NHS, and not use PF2 to do that. In order to do that, we need money in the NHS to be able to renegotiate. Surely the £350 million would help get us to that place; it would help us to renegotiate our debt, get our constituents back into work and get our NHS fit for purpose in the 21st century?

David Mowat: Nobody in this House would be more pleased than me if we did not have the PFI millstone around our neck. The hon. Lady talks of renegotiation; this is real money, and these are real contracts that were signed more or less entirely by the last Labour Government. There is no magic wand that enables us just to set those PFI contracts aside, although I wish there was; that is not how the commercial world works.

Mr Umunna: I am sure the Minister will be aware that the £10 billion figure for increased funding he has just cited is rejected by the cross-party Select Committee on Health. It is also very well him referring to what he alleges are increases in NHS funding, but the other cuts his Government have made over the last five to six
years, in particular to local authority budgets, have put huge pressure on social care, which has led to a knock-on impact on the NHS and its funding.

David Mowat: The hon. Gentleman mentions social care, and that is fair. It is funded separately to the NHS, and the budgets are separate. During the course of this Parliament the social care budget will increase in real terms. I do accept that the social care system is under pressure, but there is a massive disparity in performance in social care between councils. The top 10% of councils are about 20 to 25 times better in terms of outcomes for delayed transfers of care and so forth than the bottom 10%. There are many facets to this, therefore, but I accept the basic point. I think that, all other things being equal, Members on both sides of the House would like the NHS to have more money; let us agree on that and see how we make progress on it.

Brexit introduced a number of variables that may not have been there before. What will be the impact of Brexit on our economy? Our GDP in three or four years could be higher, but also could be lower, because of Brexit. The truth is that neither the hon. Gentleman nor I knows the answer to that. There are different views on that in this House, too, although some with other views may not be here today. This is important and relevant because if the economy were to have a significant difficulty, that could impact on spending commitments.

The second variable is a very substantive one and was mentioned earlier: the exchange rate. Our exchange rate went down about 15%; principally, it would seem reasonable to say, as a consequence of Brexit. That is a good and a bad thing for the economy. Many countries in the world are trying to get their exchange rate down. I represent a constituency in the north of our country where we have a more manufacturing-based economy. Frankly, a lower exchange rate will help the economy there. That may not be the case in other parts of the country and in the City.

The exchange rate has an impact on the NHS. In fact, it has two impacts. As the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) mentioned, it will be more expensive to import products such as scanners and, potentially, to import drugs. She asked what the figure was, but I cannot give her an exact figure. My understanding is that it is considerably less than 5% of the total NHS expenditure of about £100 billion. Nevertheless, this is a relevant factor and it makes a difference.

The other impact of the exchange rate, which the hon. Lady did not mention, is that this Government will not meet that pledge. All I can say is that this Government have yet to decide how they will spend any bonus that comes from any rebate we get. This will all depend on the precise negotiations that take place and the precise type of exit that we make from the EU. Nobody in this Chamber knows the answers to those questions. For example, we could get a Norwegian-type deal that could entail paying money to the EU. I am not a member of the Department for Exiting the European Union and I do not know where the current thinking is on that, but this is of course a variable.

David Mowat: Just for the record, I am not saying that this Government will not meet it. All I can say is that this Government have yet to decide how they will spend any bonus that comes from any rebate we get. This will all depend on the precise negotiations that take place and the precise type of exit that we make from the EU. Nobody in this Chamber knows the answers to those questions. For example, we could get a Norwegian-type deal that could entail paying money to the EU. I am not a member of the Department for Exiting the European Union and I do not know where the current thinking is on that, but this is of course a variable.

Mr Umunna: Given what the Minister is saying, does he believe that it was wrong to go around giving people the impression that all they needed to do was vote to leave the European Union in order for £350 million a week to be dished out to the NHS?

David Mowat: Had I been writing something on the side of the bus, and had I been campaigning on that cause in the referendum, I might have been more circumspect. I might have said that £350 million could become available and could be spent on whatever the Government’s priorities were, one of which was very likely to be the NHS. I hope that that satisfies the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I regret that I seem to have stumbled into a sort of elongated primal scream therapy session involving refighting last June’s referendum. The hon. Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) would have a more persuasive and cogent argument if he saw the other side of the equation. Yes, EU workers have a massive impact on and are committed to the NHS, but unrestricted EU migration over a number of years has put massive strains on the delivery of our health services. He has never conceded that point.

Mr Umunna: That is not what I am talking about.

David Mowat: I want to make some progress in the debate, although I understand that I have until 7.30.

We have mentioned the payments to the EU, and there is also the point about staff. Another point that has not been mentioned—I shall mention it for completeness—is that there will be an impact on EU institutions. For example, the European Medicines Agency is located in London, which is of benefit to our pharmaceuticals
industry. Where it ends up should be an issue for the people negotiating this deal, because of the potential impact involved. From my point of view, we talk too often about the conditions in relation to the EU for the City of London and passporting and all that goes with it, but not enough about other world-class industries, one of which is pharmaceuticals. I hope that those responsible will listen to that.

We have talked about the economy, which is a big variable. To be frank, neither I nor the hon. Member for Streatham knows whether the economy will be better or worse as consequence of leaving the EU, but it is true that the 15% fall in the value of the pound is helping manufacturing firms in the north and will have an effect on GDP, but it will also have some effect on imports of, for example, scanners, accelerators and drugs.

The NHS is hugely reliant on staff from the EU. Some 58,000 people from EU countries work in the NHS, and another 90,000 work in social care. I want to take this opportunity to reiterate the Government’s position that we understand that massive contribution and know that it is important to our NHS that it continues. The Secretary of State said exactly that to the Health Committee and the Prime Minister has said that she hopes and expects citizens from the EU to stay in our vital services. I would like—perhaps the hon. Gentleman and the group he is speaking for today can help with this—some of our EU colleagues and friends to make a similar commitment about people from this country who are working in EU countries, because that has not yet happened.

Mr Umunna: I speak for my constituents above all others whenever I speak on such issues in this House. On that specific point, will the Minister explain why the Government do not simply guarantee the right to stay of EU citizens working in our health service? I understand the demand for the reciprocal right to be given to UK citizens living in other EU countries, but they should not be used as a bargaining chip. When the Immigration Minister appeared before the Home Affairs Committee, he admitted that we do not know where most of the EU citizens are in this country or who they are, so if we were not to deliver on the promise to guarantee them the right to stay we would have no way of removing them.

David Mowat: It is not for me to make that specific guarantee. The Prime Minister clearly said that she hopes and expects them to remain. It is disappointing that a similarly strong statement has not been made by any Head of State in any other European country.

It is also right that we do more to train more of our own nurses and doctors—not because we need to replace people from the EU, but because it is the right thing to do. We should try to become self-sufficient in these matters, and that will happen.

We have knocked around this point quite a lot during the debate and have talked about variables such as the exchange rate, GDP and the EU bonus or payment that we will get, but there is one thing that is not a variable and it is probably the single most important constant: the extent to which this Government give priority to the health service in their spending commitments. That constant is absolutely clear. The previous Prime Minister treated the NHS as his No. 1 commitment, as does the current Prime Minister. Many of the points we have discussed this evening are things that should properly form part of the negotiation that we are going to have after we trigger article 50, as we hope to do by the end of March, and I am certain that that will be the case. What is not negotiable is that our commitments to NHS funding and social care funding are unmoved by any of these things; this is the No. 1 priority for this Government.

Mr Jackson: Is it not the case that in the future dispensation after Brexit we might have a fairer system of recruitment and retention of NHS staff? In all our constituencies, we have staff from outside the EU—my constituency has Nigerian, Ghanaian and, in particular, Filipino nursing staff—who have hitherto been discriminated against inadvertently vis-à-vis those from the European Union, and we will have a much fairer system in reaching out and getting the brightest and best to work in our NHS in the future.

David Mowat: My hon. Friend uses the word “fairer”, and of course we do have staff from other parts of the world. I will be honest and say that part of me has difficulty with this country taking large numbers of doctors and nurses from places such as Nigeria and other parts of Africa that need them more than we do. So it is right that we try to train more of the people that we need in these vital public services, but it is also right that we make it absolutely clear how important the people who currently work in our NHS and in social care are—those from the EU and from outside it, as my hon. Friend reminded us. That is important.

I make the point again, because I will not go on until 7.30 pm, that the NHS is this Government’s No. 1 spending priority and it will continue to be so.

Question put and agreed to.

6 pm

House adjourned.
Jeremy Lefroy: There are more than 2.6 million displaced people in the area, 6.4 million people are facing food insecurity, and a public health emergency has been declared in four countries, together with the Central African Republic, in response to a polio outbreak, yet United Nations appeals are only one third funded or less. What more can the UK Government do to bring this crisis to the world’s attention?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right about the power and the support of the Anglican community and Churches in Nigeria in particular. We have to work with grassroots organisations and religious organisations as well. We welcome the support and the focus on capacity building in particular, and the awareness-raising that is required on many of these challenging issues.

James Duddridge: Aid without security in northern Nigeria is meaningless. I welcome the deployment of British troops to support the Nigerians in the north-east. Will the Secretary of State review official development assistance rules to make sure that that type of deployment is ODA-eligible for the people of northern Nigeria?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend will be clear about ODA rules from his previous role in the Foreign Office. He highlights the importance of a united and strategic approach, which can be seen in the UK’s work to support the Nigerian Government in their overall undertaking. The cross-Government work that is taking place is the right approach to tackle the severe issues that Nigeria is trying to cope with.

Mr Nigel Evans: Looking at the immunisation of children in northern Nigeria, it appears that the coverage is very thin. In the past, some of the figures for coverage have been shown to be completely false. Can the Department work with the Government of Nigeria to ensure that there is total transparency, and work more with NGOs to ensure that more children are immunised throughout northern Nigeria?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right about the importance of immunising children. I recognise the outstanding work that the agencies undertake in very difficult conditions as they try to reach communities to immunise children. More data and more transparency are needed, and we are driving much of that data transparency requirement through the support that we provide to organisations on the ground delivering those vital immunisations.
Education (Girls)

2. Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support education for girls in the developing world.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (James Wharton): Providing education for girls is a priority for this Government and this Department. In the last Parliament, we helped over 5 million girls to get the education that they need and deserve. In this Parliament we continue that work. The girls' education challenge is the largest programme of its type in the world. Over the course of this Parliament, we will see 11 million children or more supported into education because of the work of the UK.

Antoinette Sandbach: In Afghanistan, adult women are more than twice as likely as men to be illiterate, with a literacy rate of just 24%, compared with 51% for men. Does the Minister agree that there is much work to be done to close the gap between girls and boys in developing countries, and that it is in Britain’s interests that we continue our world-leading efforts to close that gap?

James Wharton: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We will continue our efforts and continue our commitment. The UK Government are supporting 300,000 girls in Afghanistan to complete a full cycle of education. The drop-out rate for girls in Afghanistan is running at around 50%. We have to do what we can to tackle that—to help countries develop, to help address these imbalances and to secure a better future for those who live there, but for UK interests as well.

15. [907187] Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Seventy-five per cent. of girls enter primary school in sub-Saharan Africa, but only 8% finish secondary school. What can DFID do to change that?

James Wharton: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. We need to ensure that people get the education they need and can benefit from, so that those economies can grow and those countries that have often suffered so much can develop their way out of poverty with our support. In this Parliament, the Government will be supporting over 11 million children—including, separately, 6.5 million girls—into education, including in sub-Saharan Africa. There is more work that needs to be done, but we are focused on the task at hand, and we shall ensure that we get the maximum value and benefit from the work that UK taxpayers contribute to.

Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): HIV/AIDS continues to be the largest killer of girls in the developing world. If they cannot go to school because they are ill, they cannot fulfil their potential. What more can the Government do to ensure that girls stay healthy?

James Wharton: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I met him only a few weeks ago in his capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS, and we discussed the contribution the UK makes to the global health fund. I was delighted that, shortly thereafter, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced a significant contribution from the UK. We remain a world leader in combating HIV/AIDS, as well as many other terrible diseases that affect girls and boys, and we are determined to play our part in ensuring these diseases are tackled, and ultimately eliminated, in the best and swiftest way possible.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): This morning I was with Monir Mustafa of the White Helmets, who was absolutely clear that Assad’s bombs are targeting schools in Syria and the girls inside them. Has the Minister made representations to the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary to come to this House and bring forward a strategy to protect schools, hospitals and civilians?

Mr Speaker: We are discussing education for girls in developing countries, which was, I am sure, what the hon. Lady had very much in the forefront of her mind.

James Wharton: Whether it is in developing countries or those that are, sadly, impacted by some of the terrible conflicts we see across the globe today, I am proud that the Government are working with their international partners and the global community to fight those who look to do ill, and to protect those who need protecting. In no small part, that includes those girls and boys who, so often, are the innocent victims of conflict. We are continuing to do what we can to support those who are suffering in Syria. The Department is making a very significant contribution, as is the UK taxpayer, but there is so much more that needs to be done, and I accept the point the hon. Lady makes.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): When the Secretary of State appeared before the International Development Committee in September, she said she was working across Government on the implementation of sustainable development goals, but she was unable to give any details. Can she now provide an update on how her Department is leading the way to ensure that that important international framework is being fully implemented through DFID’s development work and here in the UK?

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): I have, indeed, as I mentioned at my last appearance at the IDC, been working across Government—I am working with the Cabinet Office as well—to ensure that all Government Departments, via their single departmental plans, will be meeting all of the SDGs. There will be an update forthcoming; I cannot give a date, but it will be quite soon, and I am sure it will be of interest to the hon. Lady when we publish it.

Mosul

3. John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support the people of Mosul; and what plans her Department has for such support once the Iraqi-led counter-Daesh operation has concluded.

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support the people of Mosul; and what plans her Department has for such support once the Iraqi-led counter-Daesh operation has concluded.

[907175]

[907177]
The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): The UK is at the forefront of efforts to tackle Daesh and has led the way in supporting the Government of Iraq with humanitarian and stabilisation work as part of the response in Mosul. It is not enough simply to defeat Daesh on the battlefield; we have to ensure that we support the victims of barbarous regimes to get access to humanitarian support as events unfold in Mosul.

John Glen: In such a complex and sensitive environment, how will DFID use its leadership role to ensure that other aid providers work together and take a united approach, to maximise the effectiveness and value for money that we can achieve from investment in this critical area?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the issue not only of Mosul and stabilisation, but of the humanitarian response. DFID and the British Government are leading the way and working through our membership of the humanitarian country teams. We are working closely with the UN, donors, NGOs and, of course, the Iraqi and Kurdish Governments, to deliver a co-ordinated, targeted and effective response.

Craig Williams: I welcome my right hon. Friend’s response to the urgent humanitarian needs. What are the UK Government doing to support the Government of Iraq in preparing for securing the peace and stabilising the city of Mosul once we get it back?

Priti Patel: Stabilising newly liberated areas and helping people to return to their homes in a safe and secure environment is a central priority of the Government of Iraq. We are working alongside them and the UN coalition. Britain’s support for the stabilisation efforts is helping the UN to clear lethal explosives, repair water supplies, restore power networks and reopen schools. Those stabilisation efforts have already helped more than 700,000 people to return home across Iraq.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): There is concern across the House about Daesh’s brutal treatment of minorities, including Yazidis and Christians. What approach will DFID take on that question, and will the Secretary of State speak to the Home Secretary about the potential for a medical evacuation or resettlement programme for Iraqi minorities, similar to that which we have for Syria?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the persecution of minorities by brutal regimes such as Daesh. He is also right to highlight the cross-Government approach that we have taken. I absolutely acknowledge his points. I will reflect on them and work with my colleagues across Government to pick up on them.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State agree that women have a key role to play, and that we need to do whatever we can to support them? Women have been doing so much to help protect civil infrastructure in Syria. If the Government do not have a plan, will they kindly consider putting in place a women-specific plan?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the role of women. Not enough attention is given to the role that they play in peacekeeping and stabilisation. We hear much about the consequences of conflict for women, but they can play a significant role and that will be part of our ongoing dialogue with the Government of Iraq.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): As winter creeps in across Iraq, thousands are expected to be exposed to temperatures close to zero as they flee for their life from Mosul. This is the worst time for the UNHCR to experience a funding shortfall in its winter assistance plan. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to guarantee that the UK and other Governments meet their humanitarian obligations and address that shortfall?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise not only the humanitarian issue, but the contributions required. The UK’s efforts are meeting in full our commitments to Iraq. The hon. Gentleman will recall that, at the UN General Assembly, we were the first, in terms of our pledges and commitment, for preparedness before the operation in Mosul. On the question of what more can be done, I and other colleagues in the donor community need to step up. I constantly engage with the donor community, pressing for a greater sense of urgency in getting funds, preparing for winter and, importantly, ensuring that shelter, food and emergency equipment are put in place sooner rather than later.

Third-party Aid Providers


The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): As the hon. Gentleman knows, almost all our Department’s work is done in partnership with third-party providers. Our Department provides the policy and the monitoring. In a humanitarian situation, it will be UN agencies delivering on the ground, and in a development situation, NGOs and partner Governments will work alongside us.

John Mann: How exactly are we going to promote our democratic values in cases where our aid budget is being delivered by a third party, such as a foreign Government, and neither the people nor the Government in the recipient country have a clue that it is UK money going in?

Rory Stewart: I absolutely agree that we need to make sure that when UK taxpayers are contributing, that is clear to the people receiving the money. That is also why the Secretary of State has focused hard, with all these third-party providers, on securing value for money and ensuring that the UK national interest is served and UK taxpayers get the credit.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): Isn’t it great that we have so many excellent NGOs in the UK to help us to deliver our aid programme? Does the Minister agree, however, that there is still too much competition, overlap and duplication between some of our NGOs, and that a measure of streamlining and collaboration would be most welcome?
Rory Stewart: That is absolutely right. Co-ordination is vital, particularly in an extreme humanitarian situation. It is terrible when people require assistance if we are wasting money duplicating effort. That is why DFID staff and UN staff are working so closely together, and that is why co-ordination is central to our multilateral aid review.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does the Minister recognise the role of civil society organisations in delivering the sustainable development goals, which the former Prime Minister helped to draft? If so, why do the sustainable development goals not even appear in the recent civil society partnership review?

Rory Stewart: The sustainable development goals are central, and the UK Government played a very important role in bringing them forward, but this is a cross-Government effort and we will be bringing forward a cross-Government response.

Africa (Economic Development)

6. Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to promote economic development in Africa.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): Last month in Kenya, I saw the life-saving impact of UK aid on the ground when it comes to combating drought, hunger and disease. I also saw how innovation can only not result in UK aid reaching more people, but help people to look at the long-term economic opportunities to tackle poverty and bring economic growth.

Andrew Bridgen: Does my right hon. Friend agree that working in partnership with Governments, businesses and investors around the world to transform economies and trading relationships, particularly in developing countries, should be a vital part of our UK diplomatic effort and our long-term prosperity strategy, especially as we approach Brexit?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. No country can defeat poverty without economic growth. Jobs, trade and investment are central to that, and the United Kingdom will be at the forefront of championing economic development and helping the poorest in the world to work their way out of poverty.

9. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The current inquiry by the all-party group on Africa into trade and economic development has highlighted the critical role of agriculture and agribusiness in supporting economic development, and the importance that many African Governments place on that. What is the Department doing specifically to support that and to encourage British manufacturing to support Africa’s growing agribusiness?

Priti Patel: I am delighted that the hon. Lady raises these important sectors. She is right to do so, because of the youth dividend across Africa and the enormous potential for those sectors. DFID is leading the way when it comes to agri-development and investing through CDC and other organisations. British firms are playing a strategic role here, too. This comes back to the point that no country can defeat poverty without economic growth, and these are the core sectors that are crucial to the delivery of prosperity and jobs across Africa.

14. Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Economic development in Africa is very reliant on tourism. What does the Secretary of State feel about the continued slaughter of elephants and the fact that it will have a devastating effect on the tourist business?

Priti Patel: Economic development in Africa is a priority for the Government, and we have a strategy to address it. Tourism is of course important across Africa. I have visited not just Kenya, but Sierra Leone, another country that needs to get back to investing in tourism, and that is something we can help with in the long run.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that UK taxpayers are reassured about the way in which our money is spent, and that accountability mechanisms are in place to ensure proper value for money?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the whole issue of value for money, which we in DFID will champion on behalf of British taxpayers. It is right that money goes to the right countries and the right people, because every pound that is not spent in the right way means that people do not get access to life-saving treatment or poverty reduction. Our mission in the Department is to ensure that we can eradicate poverty, but also to make sure that the money goes exactly where it needs to go.

Topical Questions

T1. Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): No country can defeat poverty without sustained economic growth. Later today, the Government will introduce the Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill, which will raise the limit on the level of financial support that the Government can provide to the CDC. By doing so, we will be able to help to create more jobs and to boost economic growth in Africa and south Asia, so that people can lift themselves out of poverty and leave aid dependency behind. I will write to colleagues with further information.

Amanda Milling: Will my right hon. Friend outline what humanitarian relief the Government are providing to support those affected by the conflict in Yemen?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the appalling scenarios we are seeing in Yemen right now. There is a deteriorating situation and a humanitarian crisis, with an increasing number of Yemenis facing food shortages and suffering malnutrition. There has been a recent outbreak of cholera as well. The UK is
the fourth largest donor, and has committed to spending £109 million in Yemen, helping more than 1.3 million Yemenis—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There are far too many very noisy private conversations taking place while we are discussing the fate of some of the most vulnerable people on the planet. The message is quite clear: hush or, alternatively, leave the Chamber.

Priti Patel: Last year, we helped more than 1.3 million Yemenis to get access to food, medical supplies and water. My hon. Friend will know that we have recently helped to raise over £100 million, via the UN, to strengthen humanitarian support for people in Yemen.

T3. [907190] Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State understand the frustrations felt by DFID’s partners in civil society organisations and in the wider world about the continued delay in the publication of the bilateral and multilateral aid reviews? When will they be published, and will there be a statement or a chance to debate the proposals in this place?

Priti Patel: I have recently spent much time with civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations and the great organisations doing life-saving work on the ground. We have recently published the “DFID Research Review” and the “Civil Society Partnership Review”. With regards to the development aid reviews—the bilateral and bilateral aid reviews—I can tell the hon. Gentleman that they will be coming by the end of the month.

T2. [907189] Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I welcome the work the Secretary of State is doing to ensure that UK aid to the Palestinian Authority does not directly fund payments to terrorist prisoners, but will she assure the House that she is doing everything possible to ensure that the aid does not indirectly fund such payments by freeing up resources that would otherwise be spent on day-to-day PA activities?

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): We have made it clear that our focus will be very much targeted on health, education and co-existence projects. We ensure that any support going in is carefully vetted, with an independent auditor, and directed to what will provide value for money; and, above all, that it will benefit the Palestinian people.

T4. [907192] Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State agree to put people before profit, following the publication of her Department’s “Civil Society Partnership Review”, and therefore ensure that any private sector involvement in the provision of UK development aid is driven by operational necessity, not the pursuit of profit?

Priti Patel: As I have mentioned, we have published the “Civil Society Partnership Review”, on which I spent time speaking to many of the great organisations involved in the delivery of aid and humanitarian work around the world. We make sure that British aid—UK taxpayers’ money—goes to the right causes via the right organisations, and DFID will continue to pursue that. We are championing taxpayer value, while delivering poverty reduction and humanitarian support and assistance.

T7. [907195] Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The scenes of the war crimes committed by Daesh in the Assyrian capital of Nimrud are, on top of their human carnage, truly depressing and a wake-up call to the world that we need to work together to protect the world’s cultural heritage. Will the Secretary of State commit to continuing to play our part within UNESCO, notwithstanding the reservations she may have about the organisation’s finances?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend raises an important point about the destruction of cultural and heritage sites around the world. I have been clear that, in funding international organisations, we wish to see reform in the system to make sure that money is spent in the right way. We will continue to deliver value for money. DFID will publish the reviews that reflect on UNESCO towards the end of the month and he will see the approach we are taking.

T5. [907193] Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Further to an earlier question, will the Minister commit to fast-track the review of aid for the families of Palestinian prisoners, in the knowledge that any reduction in that aid will bankrupt the Palestinian Authority, undermine politicians who are working for a peaceful solution and play into the hands of those, like Hamas, who want to pursue a course of violence?

Rory Stewart: The Department remains entirely committed to the following principles. First, anything we do must encourage a two-state solution by ensuring that the Palestinian people are served with proper services. Secondly, we must make sure that the money goes in the right way to the right people. That is all about auditing, vetting and making sure that the real beneficiaries are there. Of course we will ensure that the review is done as efficiently as possible to serve the interests of the Palestinian people and the stability of the region.

**PRIME MINISTER**

The Prime Minister was asked—

**Engagements**

Q1. [907158] Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 16 November.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure that the whole House will join me in expressing our condolences to the families and friends of the seven people who lost their lives and to those who were injured in the tragic tram incident in Croydon last Wednesday. We all thank those involved in the rescue operation.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.
Wendy Morton: Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming today’s news that the unemployment rate has fallen to an 11-year low? Will she join me in thanking all those businesses that create jobs, such as Jennifer Ashe & Son, whose funeral home on Brownhills High Street in my constituency I was kindly asked to open last weekend?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I am pleased to say that in the last year, employment in her constituency of Aldridge-Brownhills has gone up by 88,000. It is good to hear of companies that are providing new jobs. The employment figures show the strength of the fundamentals of our economy: the employment rate has never been higher and the unemployment rate is lower than it has been in more than a decade. I am sure that Members from all parts of the House will welcome yesterday’s news that Google will create another 3,000 jobs.

Jeremy Corbyn: (Islington North) (Lab): I concur with the remarks the Prime Minister made about the disaster in Croydon last week. We send our sympathies to all those who lost loved ones and express our solidarity with the emergency workers who went through such trauma in freeing people from the wreckage.

It appears from press reports that the Chagos islanders who were expelled from their homes over 40 years ago will suffer another injustice today with the denial of their right of return. Yesterday, the Foreign Secretary told European media that Brexit would “probably” mean leaving the customs union. Will the Prime Minister confirm whether that is the case?

The Prime Minister: I think the right hon. Gentleman was trying to get two issues in there. On the issue of the Chagos islanders, there will be a written ministerial statement to the House later today, so everybody will be able to see the position the Government are taking.

On the whole issue of the customs union and the trading relationships we will have with the European Union and other parts of the world once we have left the European Union, our plan is to go out there across the world and negotiate free trade agreements around the rest of the world. This Government are absolutely united in their determination to deliver on the will of the British people and to deliver Brexit. The right hon. Gentleman’s shadow Cabinet cannot even decide whether it supports Brexit.

Jeremy Corbyn: Well, the word does not seem to have travelled very far. I have to say. I sympathise with the Italian Government Minister who said this week, about the Prime Minister’s Government:

“Somebody needs to tell us something, and it needs to be something that makes sense.”

Is not the truth that the Government are making a total shambles of Brexit, and nobody understands what their strategy actually is?

The Prime Minister: Of course those in the European Union whom we will be negotiating with will want us to set out at this stage every detail of our negotiating strategy. If we were to do that, it would be the best possible way of ensuring that we got the worst result for this country. That is why we will not do it.

Jeremy Corbyn: Talking of worst results, the Foreign Secretary has been very helpful this week, because he informed the world that “Brexit means Brexit”—we did not know that before—and that “we are going to make a Titanic success of it.”

Taking back control, if that is what Brexit is to mean—[Interruption.] The Prime Minister is getting advice from the Foreign Secretary now; can we all hear it? Taking back control clearly requires some extra administration. Deloitte has spoken, saying:

“One Department estimates it needs a 40% increase in staff to cope with its Brexit projects”,

and that overall expectations are of an increased headcount of between 10,000 and 30,000 civil servants. If that estimate is wrong, can the Prime Minister tell the House exactly how many extra civil servants will be required to conduct these negotiations? Her Ministers need to know—they are desperate for an answer from her.

The Prime Minister: I repeat for the right hon. Gentleman that we are doing the preparations necessary for the point at which we will start the complex formal negotiations with the European Union. I have set up a Department for Exiting the European Union, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is doing an excellent job there in making those preparations.

I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that from the confusion that he has on his Benches in relation to the issue of Brexit, it seems to be yet another example from Labour of how where they talk, we act. They posture, we deliver. We are getting on with the job, he is not up to the job.

Jeremy Corbyn: Well, Mr Speaker—[Interruption.] That was exciting, wasn’t it? Mr Speaker—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber. I say to the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry), calm yourself, man. You should
Mr Speaker: Order. It is always interesting to hear the thoughts of the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) but they should not be articulated from a sedentary position and will have to wait for another occasion.

The Prime Minister: Before I answer my hon. Friend’s question, may I wish his wife all the very best in the treatment she is going through at the moment? The thoughts of the House are with her.

My hon. Friend is right. We have a manifesto commitment to increase the personal allowance. By increasing it from £6,475 in 2010-11 to £11,000 in 2016-17 and £11,500 next year, we have cut income tax for more than 30 million people and have taken 4 million people out of paying income tax altogether. That is important. It has helped people at the lower end of the income scale.

Angus Robertson: On the day we hear that “post-truth” has become the international word of the year, we have a running commentary from the Foreign Secretary. He is prepared to tell the media in the Czech Republic that the United Kingdom is likely to leave the EU customs union post-Brexit, but that it still wants to trade freely afterwards. In response, his colleague from the Netherlands said that that option “doesn’t exist” and is “impossible”. Both those things cannot be correct, so will the Prime Minister confirm today, to Parliament and to the country, whether the UK is likely to leave the EU customs union post-Brexit—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman does not actually seem to understand that the customs union is not just a binary decision, but let us set that to one side. Let us look at what we need to do: get the best possible deal for access to, trading with and operating within the single European market. He stands up time and again in Prime Minister’s questions and says to me that he wants access to the single European market.
I might remind him that it was only a couple of years ago that he wanted to take Scotland out of the single European market by making it independent. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. [Interruption.] Order. Mr Docherty-Hughes, you are in a very emotional condition. I normally regard you as a cerebral denizen of the House. Try to recover your composure, man!

Q15. [907172] James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): In Southend, crimes such as burglary and vehicle theft are down, but knife crime is on the increase, particularly that perpetrated by drug dealers and drug users. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that this will be a priority for Her Majesty’s Government? Specifically, is there anything more that she can do to help police and crime commissioners such as Roger Hirst to deal with this very big challenge?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising an issue that is very important for everybody in the House. Certainly the Government will do all they can to support police and crime commissioners such as Roger Hirst, who is already doing an excellent job in Essex. Since 2009, knife crime figures have fallen overall, but I recognise my hon. Friend’s concerns. That is why the Home Office has been supporting police forces such as Essex in conducting weeks of action against knives under Operation Sceptre. We have legislated to ban dangerous knives, including zombie knives. We are putting tough sentences in place and making sure that offenders are punished. We should send a very clear message that we will not tolerate knife crime in this country.

Q2. [907159] Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Many people in this country visit the United States every year to study, on business, or simply to enjoy one of the greatest countries on earth. What action will the Prime Minister take if the new President-elect carries on this tradition, and what role can the UK play in building on it, as was clear from the conversation that I had with President-elect Trump shortly after his election, and of course we want to ensure the dignity of our citizens. It is up to the United States what rules it puts in place for entry across its borders, but we will ensure that the special relationship continues, and does so in the interests of both the UK and the US.

The Prime Minister: I am happy to say to the hon. Gentleman that our special relationship with the United States is, I think, very important to both the United States and the United Kingdom. We will continue to build on it, as was clear from the conversation that I had with President-elect Trump shortly after his election, and of course we want to ensure the dignity of our citizens. It is up to the United States what rules it puts in place for entry across its borders, but we will ensure that the special relationship continues, and does so in the interests of both the UK and the US.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Last Tuesday, I attended an infection prevention and control summit that highlighted the great work done by the Department of Health, the NHS and other organisations dramatically to decrease MRSA infection rates, yet also raised the growing threat of E. coli and sepsis. Will my right hon. Friend join me in commending such events and outline the Government’s strategy for combating superbugs?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely join my hon. Friend, who raises a very important issue, in commending such events. It is true that the DOH, Public Health England and the NHS are doing vital work to decrease infection rates. We have already seen some very good results—a 57% reduction in MRSA bloodstream infections since 2010 and a 47% reduction in C. diff infections—but of course there is more to do, which is why we are setting bold objectives to halve gram-negative blood infections by 2020, and why last week we announced a new national infection lead to champion and oversee this effort. This is an important issue and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising it.

Q3. [907160] Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): Free trade is vital to our future prosperity, and Brexit does not mean rejecting globalisation. Will the Prime Minister ensure that any new trade deals with the wider world after Brexit are based on the mutual recognition of standards, not on the kind of over- elaborate, prescriptive, top-down regulatory regime that underpins the European single market?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s support for free trade. He is absolutely right that as we leave the EU we will be looking for opportunities to develop flexible trading relationships around the world that suit the United Kingdom. Given the strength of our economy, I believe that we can go out there and be a global leader in free trade, and I welcome his support for that.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Last Wednesday, seven people tragically died and 50 were injured in a tram accident in Croydon. I am sure that the whole House will join the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the SNP in extending our heartfelt condolences to the bereaved families. Three investigations—by British Transport Police, the Office of Rail and Road, and the Rail Accident Investigation Branch—are under way. Will the Prime Minister assure the House and the families that any recommendations to improve safety on trams in Croydon and across the country that are made by those investigations will be rapidly implemented by the Government?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in once again sending our condolences to the families and friends of the seven people who died in this terrible incident, in expressing our sympathies for those injured and affected, and in thanking our emergency services. It is important that we allow these investigations to continue and that they can come up with recommendations in due course; we will, of course, look very seriously at them. We can never be complacent about safety and security regarding such issues, so we need to make sure that if there are lessons to be learned, they are indeed learned.

Employment and Support Allowance/Universal Credit

Q4. [907161] Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): If she will postpone proposed reductions to employment and support allowance and universal credit; and what recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on those reductions.
The Prime Minister: The Government are committed to protecting the most vulnerable in society, including disabled people and those with health conditions, and people currently receiving employment and support allowance will continue to receive the same level of financial support. We are ensuring that the support is concentrated on those most in need, and that it is available not just through benefits, but as part of a wider package to help those who could get into the workplace reach the point where they can get into the workplace.

Neil Gray: This week, the Prime Minister said: “Change is in the air. And when people demand change, it is the job of politicians to respond”, so how does she respond to the 70 disability organisations that want these cuts stopped, or indeed to Conservative Members who have supported my cross-party motion calling for these cuts to be halted, which will be debated tomorrow? Surely she must respond accordingly.

The Prime Minister: As I have said, we are focusing support on those most in need. For those in the support group for ESA, support has gone up, and we are giving extra support to help those in the work-related group who could at some stage get into the workplace to do so. It is important that we do not view this solely as an issue of benefits; it is about the whole package that is available, which includes the personal independence payments that provide for the living costs of disability. Let me gently remind the hon. Gentleman that if he is concerned about the levels of payment in Scotland, he might wish to talk to the Scottish Government about the new powers that they have, whether they intend to use them and how they would fund them.

Engagements

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Following the election of Mr Trump, and given the very welcome progress made in our society by women and those from ethnic minorities, what message of reassurance does the Prime Minister have for fat, middle-aged white men, who may feel that we have been left behind?

The Prime Minister: That is a very interesting point. Perhaps my hon. Friend would like to come up and see me some time.

Q5. [907162] Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): In its state of the nation report, the Government’s Social Mobility Commission today issued a damning verdict on progress: things are getting worse. The commission concluded that the key drivers of social mobility—quality in early education, narrowing the educational attainment gap, and access to work and housing—are all going backwards on the Prime Minister’s watch. When will she come forward with a real strategy for opportunity for all, instead of fixating on creating an even more elite workplace?

The Prime Minister: I note that the Social Mobility Commission has recorded today that more working-class youngsters are benefiting from higher education than at any point in our history. The Government have invested record amounts in childcare and the early years, and the attainment gap, as the report acknowledges, has actually narrowed. The hon. Lady refers to the education system and the reintroduction of grammar schools, so I refer her to the report commissioned by a Labour council in Knowsley to look at how it could improve educational achievement there. That report said: “Re-introducing grammar schools is potentially a transformative idea for working class areas”.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): Today the BBC World Service announced its biggest expansion since the 1940s, including 11 new services in different languages, bringing the total number of languages covered around the world to 40. Does the Prime Minister agree that this is an excellent example of soft power and a lifeline to many people around the world?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The service that the BBC provides through its World Service and the independent journalism that that brings to millions of people around the world is very important, including by bringing that to people in places where free speech is often limited. It is important to support the BBC World Service, which is why we are investing £289 million over the next four years so that it can provide accurate and independent news to some of the most remote parts of the world.

Q7. [907164] Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The University of St Andrews in my constituency gets 25% of its research funding from the EU. It has benefited from freedom of movement, which brings some of the finest researchers to St Andrews and elsewhere. What guarantees can the Prime Minister give about research funding and freedom of movement for academics, particularly after 2020?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will know that we have already given guarantees about the research funding available from the EU and those contracts that will be signed. He will know, too, that within the immigration rules for people outside the EU, we are already able to ensure that the brightest and the best can come to the United Kingdom. I remind the hon. Gentleman, however, as I reminded his right hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson), that it was not long ago since he was campaigning to come out of the European Union and come out of free movement.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): In a Committee yesterday, I learned that the Iraq Historic Allegations Team had placed serving members and veterans under surveillance in this country. I also learned that, despite everything we have said, we have paid for chasing lawyers to go out and collect evidence in theatre. I know of the Prime Minister’s commitment to this agenda. Does she agree that we need to work harder to close the gap between what we say and how things actually feel for our servicemen and women?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I recognise the concern that has been expressed by a number of my hon. Friends about the impact of the IHAC on servicemen and women. It is important that we ensure that it conducts its inquiries within a reasonable timescale, which it is now set to do, and that it weeds out what could be described as the more frivolous cases. I am sure that my hon. Friend will accept that credible allegations of criminal activity should be investigated properly, but I am conscious of the need to ensure that
our servicemen and women, who do such a good job for us around the world and keep us safe and secure, have the support that they need.

**Ministerial Meetings (First Minister)**

Q8. [907165] **Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): When she next plans to meet the First Minister of Scotland.

**The Prime Minister:** I recently met the First Minister and leaders of the devolved Administrations at the Joint Ministerial Committee. Its next meeting is planned for early in the new year. Of course, the United Kingdom Government engage regularly with the Scottish Government on a range of issues.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** There is a question that is, I am sure, vexing not just the First Minister but the whole of Scotland. On 22 June, Ruth Davidson stated that those supporting the leave campaign “won’t tell us what they will replace the single market with.” Now that the Prime Minister is part of a Government who are dragging Scotland out of the European Union against its sovereign will, can she answer Ruth Davidson?

**The Prime Minister:** And on 23 June, the people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, and that is what the Government will deliver. [Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Members should not seek to shout down the Prime Minister. The question was asked, and the answer has been provided.

**Engagements**

**Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): It is right that the Prime Minister has latitude to enter into negotiations with the EU. However, the Vote Leave campaign was very clear that the rights of EU citizens would not be affected if this country voted to leave. My parents are Italian. They have never naturalised and have been in this country for 50 years. Can the Prime Minister assure me that she will never instruct me to vote in the Lobby to take away the rights of my parents and those of millions of other EU citizens?

**The Prime Minister:** I recognise the personal passion with which my hon. Friend raises this issue. I want, intend and expect to be able to guarantee the rights of EU citizens living in the United Kingdom, but I also want the rights of UK citizens living in EU member states to be guaranteed. As I have said previously, I hope that this is an issue that we shall be able to discuss with my European colleagues at an early stage.

Q9. [907166] **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): Dementia is the single greatest health crisis faced by this country. New figures published by the Office for National Statistics reveal that dementia and Alzheimer’s disease are now the leading cause of death. In Bradford, however, there can be up to four months between referral and diagnosis. Will the Prime Minister pledge today to bring about parity in end-of-life care for people with dementia, and commit to introducing a specialist end-of-life service for those who are diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease?

**The Prime Minister:** I commend the hon. Lady for raising an issue that I know is a personal concern for her. It affects the constituents of Members in all parts of the House. We have set ourselves the ambitious target of 4 million dementia friends by 2020; we already have 1.6 million. We have doubled research spending on dementia and invested in the development of a dementia research institute. We are determined to transform end-of-life care, which is why we have created the national end-of-life care programme board, which will help to implement the commitment to high-quality, personalised end-of-life care for all. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this important issue and assure her that it is something on which the Government are focusing.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): At the same time as the Government are rightly restoring hundreds of millions of pounds of funding to the BBC World Service, there are no current plans to restore the very modest £20 million a year it costs to run BBC Monitoring. Former members of the Intelligence and Security Committee such as Lord Menzies Campbell and I are dismayed that the BBC is proposing to cut the monitoring service further, to close Caversham Park and to break the colocating with its American counterparts. Will the Prime Minister agree to meet us and have a discussion before this disaster is visited on an incomparable source of open-source information on which so many Government Departments and intelligence agencies depend?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend raises an important issue. Of course the staffing and provision for the monitoring service are matters for the BBC, but we are clear about the importance of the service. It provides high-quality reporting for the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence and other parts of Government, and of course for the BBC itself. As part of the charter renewal process, we are talking to the BBC about a new agreement in relation to the BBC monitoring role that we believe will result in an improved service for Government, not a reduced one.

Q10. [907167] **Lisa Nandy** (Wigan) (Lab): The Prime Minister does not seem to have very much control over world events, but she should at least be able to get a grip on the child abuse inquiry that she set up. In two years, it has lost not only three chairs, but now eight senior lawyers, the latest citing further concerns about competency and leadership. The Prime Minister will surely be as aware as me that further serious allegations that have been made to the inquiry panel have gone uninvestigated, so will she tell us whether she shares the full confidence in the inquiry that her Home Secretary expressed some moments ago, and if so, why?

**The Prime Minister:** I recognise the importance of this issue to the hon. Lady. It is one on which she has campaigned, and she champions the cause of the victims and survivors. Of course, like her, it is the victims and survivors whom we must always keep at the forefront of our minds. That is why it is important that this inquiry is able to continue, and I agree. This point was made this morning by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the new Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee. We owe it to the survivors and victims for the inquiry to continue.
I have to say that, having seen the work that Professor Alexis Jay did in the Rotherham inquiry, I have absolute confidence in her ability to undertake this inquiry.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): During the United States election, President-elect Trump stated that Britain should not be at the back of any trade queue, but should be at the front. Now that he has been elected President, what action will the Prime Minister's Government be taking to ensure that the already very good trading conditions between the USA and the United Kingdom further improve?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I mentioned earlier the special relationship between the UK and the USA. We now have an opportunity in our trading relationship with the USA, and that is something I will want to discuss with President-elect Trump at a very early stage.

Q11. [907168] Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Too often social media is the weapon of choice of those who seek to bully and intimidate others. It was the weapon used against my young constituent, Declan Duncan, when his bullies tried literally to run him out of his own hometown, making his life a misery. Will the Prime Minister agree to meet Declan and me to discuss how companies such as Facebook and Twitter can be held to account for their platforms being too easily used by those who try to harass and bully others?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. Social media is overall a good that is used for good intentions—it is even used by political parties for campaigning and in other ways—but it can also be abused and ill-used by people who wish to bully others, and there are Members of this House who have suffered significantly as a result of bullying and trolling on social media. The Home Office is well apprised of this issue. Over the years—I did this when I was Home Secretary—it has been talking to the companies about their responsibilities. The issue is best addressed through the terms and conditions of the companies themselves, and I am sure that the Home Secretary has listened very carefully to the hon. Gentleman’s point.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): In the teeth of opposition from the Conservative party, the last Labour Government changed the law to make sure that all prisoners were released halfway through their sentence, irrespective of whether they had misbehaved in prison or still posed a threat to the public—[HON. MEMBERS: “Rubbish!”]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Philip Davies: That must have contributed to the upsurge in violence in our prisons. Does the Prime Minister agree with the previous Labour Government that prisoners should be released halfway through their sentence, irrespective of how badly they have behaved or the threat they pose to the general public, or does she agree with me that this is an outrage that flies in the face of public opinion and must be reversed?

The Prime Minister: The important point, as my hon. Friend indicates, is that when decisions are taken about the release of prisoners, proper consideration is given to the impact of that release on the wider community. That is why this issue has been looked at, and I cannot assure him that it was an issue of concern when I was Home Secretary. But this is not just about the conditions under which prisoners are released; it is actually about how we ensure that we have measures in place to rehabilitate ex-offenders. That is why the work that has been done by previous Justice Secretaries, which is being continued by the current Justice Secretary, is important to ensure that we reduce reoffending by prisoners when they are released.

Q13. [907170] George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Can the Prime Minister confirm or deny that there have been official conversations at any level about giving Nigel Farage a peerage?

The Prime Minister: All I can say to the hon. Gentleman is that such matters are normally never discussed in public.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister join me in welcoming the announcement of phase 2 of High Speed 2 from Crewe to Manchester airport and into Manchester Piccadilly, bringing jobs and prosperity to Weaver Vale, to Cheshire and to the north-west region including north Wales, thereby closing the north-south divide?

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend has championed the cause of HS2 for a long time, and he is absolutely right. I welcome the Government’s announcement about this. It shows that we are willing to take the big decisions that will help to support our communities and our economy. Crucially, as he says, HS2 will support the economy in the part of the country that he represents.

Q14. [907171] Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The very special relationship between the UK and the Republic of Ireland has flourished over the years. Holyhead in my constituency plays a major part in that, thanks to freedom of travel, which both countries have enjoyed within the European Union, which we both joined in 1973. Now that the UK has voted to leave the European Union, can the Prime Minister assure us that there will be no extra barriers at Welsh ports that could threaten trade, tourism and that special relationship?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman refers to free movement arrangements being in place since 1973, but the common travel area was actually started 50 years earlier, in 1923, so it existed for some considerable time before we were in the European Union. I repeat what I have said in the House before when asked about this issue: we are working with the Government of the Republic of Ireland and with the Northern Ireland Executive, and we are very clear that we do not want a return to the borders of the past. We recognise the importance of movements of trade and people to those on both sides of that border.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to expectant hon. Members who are itching to raise points of order that points of order come after urgent questions. I am sure that they can restrain their appetites for a period.
Calais Children and Immigration Act

12.44 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on the Calais children and the guidance document published by her Department for section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016.

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Home Secretary updated the House on 24 October on how the Government were supporting the French authorities in the humanitarian operation to clear the camp in Calais. That statement outlined the Government’s absolute commitment to bring eligible children from France to the UK. That included those with close family links under the Dublin regulations and those unaccompanied refugee children who met the wider criteria of the Dubs amendment to the 2016 Act. These children are the very youngest, those assessed as being at a high risk of sexual exploitation, and those likely to be granted refugee status in the UK. On Monday, my Department published further details of the policy, including our intention to prioritise the youngest.

We remain absolutely committed to bringing all eligible children to the UK as soon as possible. More than 300 children have been transferred from France since 10 October. Transfers were resumed over the weekend, and another 19 girls assessed as being at high risk of sexual exploitation were brought to Scotland. It is important to note that all the children previously in the camp in Calais are now in the care of the French authorities. Staff from the UK supported the French operation to move the children from the container area in the camp to specialist centres across France, where they are receiving the care and protection they need.

Home Office staff, interpreters and social workers are currently visiting the centres to carry out the necessary assessments to determine whether it is in the best interests of the child to be transferred to the UK. The Government have continued to seek every opportunity to expedite this process, but as has previously been made clear we must work alongside the French and with their permission. I am grateful for the support of the local authorities that have stepped forward to accommodate the children and look forward to continuing to work closely with those authorities to ensure we do not place an unnecessary burden on them.

The Government are getting on with the job of bringing eligible children over to the UK, working closely with the French authorities to ensure that both Governments are working in the best interests of these children. I hope that the whole House will join me in supporting that.

Tom Brake: The chaotic demolition of the Calais camp, which abandoned some children on the street, leaves upwards of 1,000 children in basic and temporary care facilities in France. In the days running up to the demolition, the Home Secretary made statements that pointed to the UK offering a home for up to half of the children in the camp. It is unclear how that will be achieved given the criteria in the guidance document, so I hope that in answering my questions the Government will be able to explain how that will be done.

What progress has the Home Secretary and her Department made with local authorities on agreeing the number of vulnerable children the UK will take from Calais and other European camps? Will the guidance and the criteria apply to other European countries, such as Italy and Greece? When will the criteria for those countries be produced? Why has the Home Office limited one of the criteria to Sudanese and Syrian unaccompanied children? Why are Eritrean children excluded? Can the Minister explain why they have chosen to exclude 16 and 17-year-old children from the eligibility criteria in Calais given the universal recognition that they are still children and still vulnerable? Given the Government’s commitment to tackling modern slavery and exploitation at home and across the globe, will the Minister clarify why the vulnerability of these child victims is not included in the “at risk” criteria? Finally, what guarantees can the Minister give that the children who will eventually be allowed into the UK will not be deported on reaching the age of 18?

This House agreed to the Dubs amendment and our Government must now set out how they are going to honour its letter and spirit.

Mr Goodwill: It was absolutely right that, during the final days of the camp clearance, there was a pause. As the right hon. Gentleman said, there were some chaotic scenes, but they were not as chaotic as some of the scenarios that we had planned for, including violence, possible injury and even death, during that clearance. Now that the children have been transported to the reception centres—or welcome centres as the French call them—around the country, we can now assess them under the criteria of the Dubs amendment. More than 300 children have already been transferred to the UK, and we expect several hundred more to be transferred under both the Dubs amendment and the Dublin regulations.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the numbers. Under the Dublin regulations, there is no limit on numbers—if the children meet the criterion of having family here, they will be brought across. That applies not just to France, but to Italy, where we have Home Office people working, and to Greece, where things are slightly more difficult, but where we hope to make progress.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the Syrians and the Sudanese. It is absolutely important that the children we bring across are those who are more likely to qualify for asylum. He mentioned the Eritreans. I know that there are particular issues with Eritrea—I have been taking an interest in that country, particularly in the open-ended nature of the national service there—but we did update our country guidance in October to reflect the court judgment. The threshold that we have put in place is based on overall grant rates for the year ending June 2016, and the nationalities that have a grant rate of 75% or higher are the Sudanese and the Syrians. Yes, he is absolutely right that when children arrive in the UK they should claim asylum, and they will be processed in the usual way.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What is the average age of the children?

Mr Goodwill: The demographics of the children in the camp are that 90% were male and 60% of them were in the age group of 16 and above. We are determined to
Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): The qualifying eligibility criteria for children from Calais are a disgrace. The children have to meet one of the following criteria: they are aged under 12; they have been referred by the French authorities as being at high risk of sexual exploitation; they are aged under 15 and are Syrian or Sudanese; and they are aged under 18 and the sibling of a child in one of the former categories. They must also all meet the following criteria: it must be in the best interests of the child; they must have been in Calais on or before 24 October 2016; and they must have been in Europe before 20 March 2016. The criteria are a disgrace, and are certainly not in the spirit of the Dubs amendment.

On the basis of the criteria, it seems that any child at medium or moderate risk of sexual exploitation is on their own. A child is a child until the age of 18, and it is wrong to restrict children’s right to transfer based on their age. It is not clear what the basis or authority for determining the additional criteria are, or whether there is any appeals procedure.

The arbitrary dates mean that children who came to Europe after 20 March are on their own, whatever their age, and that children who came to Europe after 24 October are on their own. Children are at risk of all kinds of exploitation, including trafficking, forced labour and modern slavery, but this Government do not care.

If Members are not comfortable with what I am saying, that is not my problem. Without a proper asylum process, we risk pushing children into taking dangerous journeys to the UK in order to get a fair hearing for their asylum claim. None of this meets the Dubs amendment, which is that any child who would benefit from asylum in the UK should be granted it—up to 3,000 children. Will the Government now meet the full demands of section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016 as voted for in this House?

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Lady has gone completely over the top. I am proud that the United Kingdom is the second biggest donor in the region. I am proud that the United Kingdom has agreed to take 20,000 people from the region and an additional 3,000 people, including children from the wider area. I am proud of the work that we are doing and I am proud that we are meeting our obligations under the Dublin regulations and the Dubs amendment. If she reads the Dubs amendment, she will understand that the number we bring across should be able to be accommodated by our local authorities.

I have been working very closely with local authorities. I met representatives of the local authorities at their summit on 13 October and I spoke at their conference on 3 November. We are working very closely with them to ensure that the children we bring across can be accommodated, and, as I have said, 118 local authorities are doing that.

I remind the hon. Lady that the children we do not bring across are not in Syria, but in France, which is a civilised country with a developed social system. Those children are being well supported and well looked after in France. The children about whom I am most concerned are those who are still in Syria—they are the ones we are endeavouring to help.

The reason why we do not consider children who arrived in Europe after 20 March is, simply that we do not want to introduce a pull factor that will incentivise parents to pay people traffickers to help their children make that hazardous journey across the Sahara, across the Mediterranean and, in many cases, and in a watery grave. That is why that date has been chosen and why we do not want to do anything to introduce a pull factor that would increase the number of people drowning in the Mediterranean or the Aegean.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Let me tell the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) that I know that this Minister is absolutely committed to safeguarding and protecting unaccompanied refugee children.

I have constituents who have been working as volunteers in the Jungle, and they have contacted me. I have also contacted the Department about them—because they still have some concerns about the children who have been scattered across France. They are still in direct contact with those children by mobile phone. What would be the best way for my constituents to contact the Department to give real-time and up-to-date information about these vulnerable children who they believe have a right to come to the UK?

Mr Goodwill: First, let me pay tribute to the non-governmental organisations that have been working in France. I am talking about not only the French NGOs such as France terre d’asile, but British charities that have been working in the camp, giving the children much-needed help, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which is one of our partner organisations working in France and the wider region. Anyone who is in contact with a child in France should tell them to apply for asylum in France. That child’s claim will be considered and they will be looked after in France. One problem that we faced during the Calais camp situation was that the people traffickers and the organised criminals were advising people not to apply for asylum. That is the wrong advice to give. It is important that they do apply for asylum in France, which is a safe country for them to be in.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The debates that we had in this House on the Dubs amendment were among the most passionate that I have seen since my election 18 months ago. How section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016 is now implemented is important to this House and deserves the greatest scrutiny. Surely the Government will agree to a proper debate in this Chamber on the content of the guidance that they have issued, because restrictions appearing in the guidance were certainly never contemplated during the Dubs debates.

My party shares the uneasiness about the exclusion of any children aged 16 and 17. Of course 16 and 17-year-olds can be, and are often, vulnerable. I ask the Minister is this a hard and fast rule, or will discretion be applied?
Similarly, we are very troubled with the restrictions on nationality. For example, the exclusion of Eritreans is utterly inappropriate given that Home Office decision making in this area has been torn to pieces in the tribunals. Surely, the grant rate will soon be back through the 75% threshold mentioned. Again, will some discretion be applied in this area? We share UNICEF’s concerns that eligibility is restricted to those “at risk of sexual exploitation.”

I have not yet heard an explanation of why those at risk of trafficking, forced labour and modern slavery are not to be included as well. As the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) said, this guidance relates to children in France. What input did the French Government have in setting these criteria, and when will we see guidance for other countries, especially Greece and Italy?

Finally, in relation to children and the Immigration Act, may I ask when the Secretary of State intends to extend the scope of the scheme for transferring responsibility for relevant children in order to include Scotland, under section 73 of the Immigration Act?

Mr Goodwill: May I suggest that the hon. Gentleman closely reads section 67, the Dubs amendment, as it makes it quite clear that it applies to refugee children? The reason why we are choosing these particular nationalities is that they are more likely to qualify for refugee status. He also talks about vulnerability. That is why we are addressing the issue of younger children. Indeed, we go further to make it clear that we must work with local authorities and, I am pleased to say, the devolved Governments around the country, to ensure that the capacity is there. This is all in the Dubs amendment, which is why we are discharging that amendment within not only the letter of the law, but the spirit as well.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): In order to ensure that we are helping the most vulnerable children, can the Minister tell us whether those 300 who are coming over or have come over have undergone a proper age assessment and, if so, whether the results of that will be made available to Members of this House?

Mr Goodwill: The more than 300 children who have arrived since 10 October include 60 girls. Two hundred of those children would qualify under Dublin, of whom half have been reunited with family members here in the UK, and the other 100 would be Dubs children. Of the further children being transferred, a greater proportion will be Dubs children. When the children arrive at the assessment centre in Croydon or elsewhere, they will be assessed for age. There will have been an initial assessment based on appearance and demeanour, but if necessary a further age assessment can be undertaken using a Merton compliant process, a well-established process that social workers are used to using. Two social workers would have to refer a child for that process.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Minister will know that I have supported him and the Home Secretary in the important work they have done to bring the first few hundred children over from Calais and from France, but not on this. I remember the debates on the Dubs amendment and we did not discuss ruling out 13-year-old or 14-year-old Eritreans on an arbitrary basis. If this was simply priority guidance because we were going to prioritise the youngest children, people would understand, but why is he basing this on strict eligibility rules? I urge him to think again, turn this back into priority guidance, not eligibility guidance, and tell the House how many children he now thinks are going to come from France, because the number sounds considerably lower than the previous numbers that he and I discussed.

Mr Goodwill: We certainly expect many hundreds more children to be brought across from France under the criteria that we have set out. I must repeat that the Dubs amendment specifically refers to refugee children. Many of the children who may currently be in France would not qualify for refugee status, which is why for the older children we have set that criterion. For the other children, the risk of sexual exploitation indicates that they are likely to be the most vulnerable, as are the youngest children. Again, the children that we are bringing across as part of the 20,000 from Syria are the most needy children, in my view.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I am very glad that the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry), after his earlier consternation and excitement, is now displaying veritably a Buddha-like calm.

James Berry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Will my hon. Friend congratulate Kingston Council on being the first council to call for every council to take 50 Syrian refugees and on already meeting its quota of vulnerable minors? Does not that compassionate attitude on the part of Kingston and other Conservative councils show how ill-judged and wrong the bombastic comments of the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) were?

Mr Goodwill: I congratulate not only Conservative councils throughout the country but, to be fair, councils of all political affiliations that have stepped up to the mark. It is great that they understand their responsibility. There is potential in the legislation to mandate councils to take children. That has not been the case and I do not believe it will be. I am pleased that so many local authorities have entered into the spirit of this great humanitarian need and helped with children up and down the country.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): When this matter was last before the House, I asked the Home Secretary about reports that the number of Home Office officials who were dealing with bringing these children to the United Kingdom had been doubled from one to two. She was not able to tell me whether that was correct, so can the Minister say today how many Home Office officials are dealing with bringing these children to the United Kingdom?

Mr Goodwill: We have dozens of Home Office officials on station. On the buses that were taking the children from the camp in Calais to the reception centres there were two Home Office officials, supported by interpreters
and social workers. We have stepped up the numbers that we have operating in Italy and Greece. We currently have 70 officials who have been allocated to Greece and 54 are already on station there.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): At the Dover and Kent frontline, our communities are looking after 750 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children—a quarter of the total. That is five times more than the whole of Scotland and 12 times more than the whole of Wales, while Wakefield is looking after just 22. Is it not time for either mandatory dispersal or more help for Kent?

Mr Goodwill: The national transfer scheme is working well. We have had 160 transfers. I do understand the pressure that Kent has been facing and I have met the leader of my hon. Friend’s county council to discuss that. In response to concerns from local government, we have increased the rates that we give for the children being looked after, in some cases by as much as 33%. Some councils have been very helpful in opening up their books. We believe now that the funding that we have made available is sufficient to cover their additional costs.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s statement that he wants to increase support for Syrian children in Syria. May I press him on that? What specifically does he intend to urge on his ministerial colleagues in other Departments? Will he be urging aid to be transported into the berm—the no man’s land between Syria and Jordan? Will he be urging the reopening of the border at Jarablus? What more will he be doing to make sure that aid gets to Syrians, who are so desperate?

Mr Goodwill: I was in Jordan last week, where I visited the Azraq refugee camp and met some of the people who had been transported from the berm. The Jordanian Government have concerns about some of the security aspects in the berm, particularly following the recent attack on their police forces. We continue to work with the Jordanians and others in the region to ensure that we can put people into a place of safety and, at the same time, maintain security. We have allocated £2.3 billion to assistance in the area, and I am proud of what we as a Government are doing as the second-biggest humanitarian donor in that region.

Suella Fernandes (Farham) (Con): Running through the Home Office guidance on the interpretation of section 67 is the legal test of the best interests of the children. Does my hon. Friend agree that in addition to that legal test, there is a wide-ranging assessment of the children, including their age, health needs, emotional needs, whether they have been victims of trafficking or trauma and any other family links? That is a reflection of the compassion and pragmatism that this Government are showing to these vulnerable children.

Mr Goodwill: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The priority is to ensure that the best interests of the children are served. We need to demonstrate to the French authorities that, by bringing these children across to the UK, their best interests will be served. A number of criteria, including the ones that she mentioned, are taken into account.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister referred in his statement to the NGO work that was going on, particularly by volunteers, to help to resolve the issue. Have they reported to him any difficulty with the French authorities, as they try to ensure that children at risk are sheltered and helped as they try to make their way to the UK?

Mr Goodwill: I have not received any concerns about the facilities available in the 60 or so welcome centres that have been set up around France. Indeed, the conditions there are unbelievably better than the dreadful conditions that many people had to endure in the camps. I am pleased that in the interim, while these children’s cases are being looked at and while we assess them against the Dubs and the Dublin criteria, they are in a place of safety and are being well looked after.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Will my hon. Friend update the House on the lead that this Government are taking in tackling the vile trade of people trafficking?

Mr Goodwill: Yes, indeed. Much of that dreadful trade is fuelled by the fact that the people traffickers seem to have no regard for people’s safety. During the summer, I was in Nigeria talking to the authorities there, and they are very concerned about the way that people are putting their children’s lives at risk by putting them into the hands of people traffickers. If and when the children arrive in Europe, the nightmare continues, particularly when they are pressed into modern slavery, or even worse in the case of some of the girls.

Robert Fello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): In the run-up to the closure of the so-called Jungle camp at Calais, there were reports of a thousand or more people disappearing from the camp and melting into the countryside. What work is the Minister doing with his counterparts in France to ensure that when the French authorities identify people who melted away from the Calais jungle and who have vulnerable children, they too can be included in this programme?

Mr Goodwill: I certainly received reports of some people leaving the camps as the clearance started. I also received reports of people coming back into the camps as they saw how that clearance was taking place. Indeed, some children who had been elsewhere in France arrived at the camps, hoping that they would be part of the scheme and could be relocated and considered under the Dubs and Dublin regulations. Unfortunately, those late arrivals were not considered in the same way. The advice that we always give to people is to claim asylum in the first safe country that they reach, and if not so, then to claim asylum in France, where they can be adequately processed.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): May I commend the Minister for the evidence he gave to the International Development Committee this week? Opposition parties might benefit from reading it, because he was very open and honest about what is happening. Will he confirm that any action taken by the Home Office in France must be approved by the French? Is it right that, until relatively recently, the French did not want Britain to take any children under the Dubs amendment for fear of creating a pull factor?
Mr Goodwill: I have to say that the French have been excellent partners in working through this. Of course, it was very difficult while the children were in the camp, and the clearance of the camp has been the opportunity we were all waiting for to make sure that those children who could be looked after and considered for relocation to the UK could be considered. I am full of admiration for the way that the French have worked with us in partnership, and I hope and feel sure that the children who are not coming to the UK will have a long and successful life in France, should their asylum claims be granted.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What provision is being made for counselling services for children who have experienced trauma and perhaps seen and experienced things that our own children have not?

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: many of these children have experienced traumatic situations, not only perhaps in their host country, but certainly as part of their journey and their life in the camp. On 1 November, my hon. Friend the Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families and I issued a joint written ministerial statement on the safeguarding strategy for these children. The strategy includes a number of measures, including transfer procedures, safeguarding for family reunion, the information given to these children and revising the statutory guidance under the Dublin III arrangements. We will give regular updates to right hon. and hon. Members on how that is working out.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Does my hon. Friend think it extraordinary that, for months, the Labour party has not had a shadow Immigration Minister?

Mr Goodwill: I think that Labour has had a number of problems in that regard, but I will not revisit those issues.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): As a proud city of sanctuary, Sheffield is doing everything it can to house these very vulnerable children, but it is being held up by Home Office incompetence around the central assessment process. Will the Minister ensure that funding is released urgently to all local authorities and that concerns around the central assessment process are addressed?

Mr Goodwill: We certainly have addressed the funding issues. As I pointed out, there have been considerable increases. For example, children under the age of 16 will receive a 20% increase—that is £114 a day. The 16 and 17-year-olds will receive £91 a day. That is in response to the concerns raised by local authorities about the funding we have given. We are working with the Local Government Association, and we are content that the funding is appropriate to the expenditure authorities are being asked to make.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I was pleased to hear the Minister’s comments about the welcome centres in France. It cannot be in the interests of France, the UK or future refugees that the Calais Jungle and the dreadful conditions there get re-established. Does he believe that that can be prevented?

Mr Goodwill: Certainly, the French are absolutely determined that new camps will not spring up. As we saw, the conditions in the Jungle, and previously in Sangatte, are not ones that anybody should be expected to live in. The French do, I believe, have adequate resource to enable people who claim asylum to be looked after properly—particularly the children.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My local authority, Hammersmith and Fulham, which has taken a lead on this, has not received the number of children it either offered to take or was told by the Home Office it would receive, because the Government have dragged their feet. Can the Minister give us some idea of how quickly assessments will take place of the children who are now dispersed across France, so that they can come here, because there are places for them to go to?

Mr Goodwill: It is great to know that there are places available. We must not forget that, despite the fact we have had around 318 children from France, in the year to June 2016, we had 3,472 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arriving in the UK by other means. A lot of that has meant that local authorities, particularly in the areas where these children arrive—in the south-east, in particular—have had to rise to that challenge. I am pleased that we have made 160 transfers under the national transfer scheme. I know that local authorities that have capacity will use it as they see fit.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister will be aware that, last week, the Public Accounts Committee had a very interesting discussion about the support the Government have been offering as part of the relocation programme and about its effectiveness, and the shadow Minister might benefit from looking at that. Yesterday, a constituent emailed me offering to provide a home—as has the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper)—to relocate a child. What work is the Home Office doing to make sure that such offers are taken up?

Mr Goodwill: Specifically, we have launched the community sponsorship scheme. In fact, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and the Archbishop of Canterbury launched it at Lambeth Palace—indeed, two Syrian families currently reside there. The community sponsorship scheme is more about local community groups working together with their local authorities to make sure people can be looked after than about people going into somebody’s spare bedroom. If those people who wish to help could become engaged with, perhaps, a faith group or another group in their area, I am sure that they would be able to put forward a bid under the community sponsorship scheme.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Citizens UK has warned that the new guidelines make it impossible for the Government to fulfil their promise to take half the unaccompanied children from the former camp. Is it correct that that promise will be met in full? If not, what proportion of those children do the Government now expect to take into this country?

Mr Goodwill: As I pointed out, we are assessing children against the criteria we have laid out, and we expect to bring several hundred more children here, as is our responsibility under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016.
Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Contrary to the bluster from the Opposition Front Bench, my hon. Friend the Minister is working tirelessly on this issue, as indeed did his predecessor. Knowing that we have a severe lack of carers, and particularly foster carers, in our area of Yorkshire, will my hon. Friend explain what the Government are doing to ensure that there is a fair distribution of caring responsibilities for unaccompanied children right across the UK?

Mr Goodwill: Some of the bluster we have heard from the Opposition Front Bench is not reflected in the very practical and constructive way that Labour local authorities have been working up and down the country. One aspect of the safeguarding strategy we launched on 1 November was, indeed, looking at the demand for foster care and its availability. Many local authorities have raised concerns that they do not have sufficient capacity for fostering, and they have had to place children out of area, which has incurred additional costs, particularly if agencies are being used. We do need to improve the capacity for fostering, and I would say to anybody out in the country who fancies a career in fostering that it is a very rewarding career and one we would be very pleased to see more people stepping forward to take up.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Can the Minister explain how he determines which children are at risk of sexual exploitation? What criteria are used? Who does the assessment? How confident is he about its reliability? I should have thought that any of the children we are discussing today would be at risk of sexual exploitation.

Mr Goodwill: The main criterion we would look at is gender, as we know that girls are more likely to be victims of sexual exploitation, but if any other individuals were in that category, they would also be considered.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): How many criminal gangs that have been exploiting these young people in Calais have been stopped due to our co-operation with France? What have we learned from those arrests in terms of the future safety of our borders?

Mr Goodwill: There have been a number of interceptions in France of these criminal gangs, and I am pleased to say that the number of interceptions has increased. Indeed, we have also had arrests in the United Kingdom, some of which have come to court. This is something we are very determined to address. These criminal gangs profit from people’s misery, and they must be prevented from doing so.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Amnesty International has found that children as young as 16 have been indefinitely conscripted into the army in Eritrea. I would gently suggest to the Minister that that is not a pull factor in terms of the attractiveness of the United Kingdom, so will he urgently review the arbitrary decision to exclude Eritreans over the age of 12 from these criteria?

Mr Goodwill: I have already mentioned the criteria we use, but I am well aware of the conscription situation. A number of EU countries, as well as our Home Office officials, continue to look at that situation, which is not a good one, in Eritrea.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I add my thanks to the Minister for his statement and update. I also echo the comments of my hon. Friend for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham), who is no longer in her place, and recommend that people read the Minister’s evidence to the International Development Committee yesterday. In working closely with the French to accelerate the process of identifying and bringing eligible children to the UK, will he confirm that the appropriate security checks will continue to be undertaken?

Mr Goodwill: The assessment that takes place when children are processed includes a security assessment. Indeed, in terms of the children and families who we are bringing across from Syria, that is a central part of what we do to ensure that we are kept safe, while addressing the real humanitarian need in the region.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the Minister re-explain the rationale about not accepting unaccompanied 16 and 17-year-olds under Dubs? Will he reassure us that that is not a reaction to his Back Benchers making outrageous demands for teeth examinations?

Mr Goodwill: The criteria that we use look particularly at vulnerability. In terms of sexual exploitation, that is gender-neutral. People are referred to us by the French, and their process is gender-neutral as well.
Points of Order

1.21 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On two occasions during Prime Minister’s questions, the Prime Minister suggested that the Scottish National party campaigned during the independence referendum to leave the European Union single market. That is untrue. We campaigned to remain in the EU, including the single market. That is not a matter of speculation or debate; it is a matter of fact. What powers do you have, Mr Speaker, to ensure that no one in this House, including the Prime Minister, can mislead the House, however inadvertently, when the facts are clear?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman, both for his point of order and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of it. I have heard what he has said and my response is as follows: it is the responsibility of each and every Member of the House faithfully to communicate what he or she regards as facts and to take responsibility for their own statements. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand that I do not think that it is right for me to be drawn into the matter any further. I understand entirely what he has said. I think that I also understand the Prime Minister’s position in relation to Scotland’s status within the United Kingdom and what the alternative to that status might entail. Therefore, notwithstanding the hon. Gentleman’s insistence that the matter is a straightforward one of facts, as with many things the situation lends itself to a number of different interpretations. If any Minister, including the Prime Minister, thinks that she has erred and needs to correct the record, it is incumbent on the Member to do so. Meanwhile, the hon. Gentleman can go about his business with an additional glint in his eye and spring in his step, in the safe knowledge that he has articulated his concerns and that they are on the record, both for the people of Scotland and for the world to see.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Today’s calendar of business shows no Government business for Monday 21 November. Rumour has it that it will be the Higher Education and Research Bill and the Clerks have been told that the amendment deadline is tonight. Members are gifted, but they are not psychic. Can you do anything, Mr Speaker, to clarify what is clearly an unsatisfactory situation?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman. Members are gifted, but, as he rightly observes, they are not psychic. However, I hope that he will not take great umbrage if I remind the House and communicate to the world the fact that he does at least have the advantage of being a noted philosopher. That may aid him in seeking to decipher matters, or it may not avail him. We shall see.

I had not heard bruited what apparently has winged its way to the hon. Gentleman about the likely business for next Monday. Admittedly, I had not inquired about that business. It may be so. In general terms, it is clearly desirable for the House to have the maximum possible notice of upcoming business. It is, in all likelihood, going to fall to the Leader of the House at business questions on Thursday to specify Monday’s business.

What I will say to the hon. Gentleman in respect of the point about the deadline for amendments is this: I, from the Chair, always seek, within such powers as I have, to facilitate the House. If the House ends up being disadvantaged by lack of notice, it is open to the Chair to consider, exceptionally, manuscript amendments. I make the point and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, who is a sagacious and perceptive fellow, will have got it.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Could you advise me on how it would be in order to put on the record the widespread anger felt in Torbay at the theft over the weekend of poppy boxes belonging to the Torquay branch of the Royal British Legion? While thousands attended remembrance services, some light-fingered thieves stole boxes that had been positioned in a number of shops in the centre of Torquay. It is the actions of the thousands of people who supported the appeal, the hundreds of people who helped to with the collection and the people who diligently run the Torbay poppy appeal that should be remembered, not the actions of a handful of thieves.

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order, as the barely concealed grin of the hon. Gentleman in raising the matter eloquently testifies. Nevertheless, what I will say to the hon. Gentleman, who is certainly a quick learner in the House, because he entered only last year, is that, as he knows, he has now found his own salvation. I have a feeling that his clarification in the Chamber may well communicate itself, or be communicated, to media outlets across Torbay and possible elsewhere.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At Prime Minister’s Question Time, the Prime Minister alluded to a written ministerial statement to be published later today on the fate of hundreds of UK citizens—in other words, on whether or not the Chagos islanders will finally be granted their right to return. That written statement has yet to make an appearance, but the Government’s decision has been reported all over the morning papers, and apparently that decision is to maintain the 40-year injustice. Is it in order for us to read about Government policy in the papers before it has been reported to this House? What opportunities are available to us to question Ministers on such disappointing decisions?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that it is up to the Government to decide whether the matter warrants an oral statement or a written statement, and that is not for the Chair to judge. What I will say to the hon. Gentleman, however, is that it is highly undesirable for there to be a significant time lag between public disclosure and parliamentary opportunity. He will know that other business has so far occupied us today. But that is true of today. The written statement that he legitimately anticipates has not yet been made. Doubtless it will be, and that may well lead Members to want to raise the matter in coming days, particularly if there has been no substantial parliamentary discussion of it beyond the brief exchange at Prime Minister’s questions. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be ready to explore what utensils are available to him.

Legion? While thousands attended remembrance services,
Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Are you able to give me any advice regarding incidents in my constituency? I have been contacted by a number of my constituents regarding letters that they have received from the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) about the Boundary Commission’s proposals. Some of my constituents have been left confused, given the subject matter, believing that their MP has already changed under boundary changes. Given that the hon. Gentleman gave me no notice of his activities in my constituency, may I seek your guidance, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order, and for notifying me in advance of her intention to raise it. Moreover, I gather that she did notify the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), who is in his place. He can hear what I have to say, and we can judge whether it requires any further comment today.

What I will say to the hon. Lady is that this is not a point of order relating to conduct in the Chamber. That said, as Members who have been here for a long time know, the Speaker will always encourage Members to observe the usual courtesies in informing others if they intend to visit, for political purposes, other colleagues’ constituencies, and they should do so in a timely way. I think the point about visiting is also applicable to communication with another Member’s constituents. The truth of the matter is that, especially in the run-up to potential boundary changes, there have often been, if I may put it this way—I do not mean this disobligingly—but spats of this kind. It is much better if such spats are avoided, and the whole House and all its Members benefit if these courtesies are observed.

If the hon. Gentleman particularly wants to say anything—I am not sure that the nation needs to hear it—as I have heard from the hon. Lady, I am happy to hear him as well.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The nation may not want to hear this, but my constituents will do. I have not written to the hon. Lady’s constituents by name or used parliamentary paper, resources or a portcullis emblem. I also did not deliver any of the letters personally, as I was away on parliamentary business out of the country at the time. I have therefore not breached any protocol. As far as the views that have been expressed are concerned, they are the views of my constituents and I am representing them as their Member of Parliament. Their responses to the letter concur with the opinion of both sides, which is that we should keep Morecambe and Lancaster separate.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his response. I note what he says about not using parliamentary notepaper and so on. We are certainly most grateful for that, because that would have been very wrong. I thank him for being characteristically up-front.

What I would say to the hon. Gentleman, for the benefit of all Members, is that we have to take responsibility for conduct in our name by our staff or volunteers who are, or might reasonably be thought to be, acting on our behalf. Beyond that, I have no wish to intrude into this matter, and I hope that people of good will who represent neighbouring constituencies and who are doing their honest best can try to observe these courtesies. I have a sense that that is what the public would expect of us, or—let me put it this way—that that is what the public would like to be able to expect of us.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Say sorry!

Mr Speaker: Mr Turner, your chuntering from a sedentary position, “Say sorry!” does at least represent a welcome change from your usual sedentary utterance, which several times a week, as you know, tends to be: “Shocking! It is a disgrace.” That does not render it any more orderly, however. We will leave the matter there for now, and I thank colleagues for what they have said.

BILLS PRESENTED

COMMONWEALTH DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 50)
Secretary Priti Patel, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr David Gauke, Rory Stewart and James Wharton, presented a Bill to amend the amount of the limit in section 15 of the Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 1999 on the Government’s financial assistance.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 93) with explanatory notes (Bill 93-EN).

CLEAN AIR BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)
Geraint Davies presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to set, measure, enforce and report on air quality targets; to require that vehicle emissions targets and testing reflect on-road driving conditions; to make it an offence to remove permanently devices that reduce vehicle emissions; to provide powers for local authorities to establish low diesel emissions zones and pedestrian-only areas; to restrict the use of diesel vehicles in urban areas; to make provision about the promotion of electric and hydrogen powered vehicles and for the development of sustainable public, private and commercial transport by road, rail, air and sea; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 December, and to be printed (Bill 94).
Feeding Products for Babies and Children (Advertising and Promotion)

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

1.34 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to control advertising and promotion of feeding products for babies and children; to establish arrangements to set standards for the efficacy of products and to measure claims against those standards; to make provision about penalties for advertisers and promoters who do not meet the standards; and for connected purposes.

We all expect the food we consume to be safe. We would like to hope that the standard of that food is monitored and that the advertising that tries to encourage us to buy it is accurate; should that not be the case, we would hope that the companies involved would be punished for misleading us. We expect our health professionals to be knowledgeable, and we expect them to be able to give impartial advice on foods from a position of expertise. We expect parents to have access to information so that they can make informed choices about how they feed the most vulnerable and precious people in our society: babies and young children.

Unfortunately, that is not the case. The present means of regulating products intended for babies and children—the infant formula and follow-on formula regulations—has loopholes and is not enforced in any meaningful way. That is the reason why I have brought this ten-minute rule Bill to the House, and it is why I seek the support of hon. and right hon. Members today.

The Bill I wish to bring in would tighten controls on the advertising and promotion of infant and young child formula. Under the present regulations, the advertising of formula intended for babies under six months is not permitted, so formula manufacturers have instead focused their efforts on promoting follow-on milks. Such products are heavily promoted on TV and in the media with soft-focus visuals of cute babies. Looking at the products on a supermarket shelf, it is clear that they are branded in a similar way so that parents get the impression that a child will progress from one to the next. They are numbered from one through to three or four. The branding is very distinctive and attractive—golden, with shields, crowns and cute animals. This is a growing market, and competition is fierce.

Dr Nigel Rollins from the Department of Maternal, Newborn, Child & Adolescent Health at the World Health Organisation recently predicted that the market value of the formula industry would reach US $70.6 billion by 2019. The majority of growth in the sector comes from follow-on and toddler milks, but the truth is that those products are not necessary. They have emerged because of the tightening of regulations around formula intended for babies aged zero to six months. They are marketed on TV, in print and online as important for child development, but many agencies globally are concerned about their high sugar content, and young children will receive all the nutrients they require from a healthy, balanced diet. I am concerned that parents are not hearing that message and that there is an impact on family budgets as a result.

Infant formula milks are not cheap. The size of the containers is getting smaller while the cost is increasing. As a rough guide, the price of a tin of infant formula can range from £8.50 to £14. Ready-prepared milks are even more expensive, and using one of the brand leaders in the first week of life could cost a family more than £100. Certain heavily advertised niche brands can cost nearly £23 for 900 grams of powdered formula. For a baby in the first six months of life, one of those tins of formula might last around a week.

As hon. Members can imagine, the cost can have a significant impact on household budgets. If families do not have access to impartial information about the content and merits of infant and young child formula, they make the decision on which product to choose by the way in which formula is presented on the shelves and by the marketing produced by formula companies. They might well consider the most expensive formula to be the best. I do not believe that formula companies are providing good enough and transparent enough information to allow parents to make an informed decision. That is being left to small charities such as First Steps Nutrition Trust, which has excellent guides to infant formula on its website. We do not have any independent analysis to check whether the information provided by the companies about their products is accurate.

The Mintel baby food and drink report from April 2016 notes that one of the main factors determining parental choice of milk is “brand”. It is not well enough known that all formula milks have to be of a very similar composition to comply with the requirements set by the EU, and claims are made primarily for unnecessary ingredients. Most of the rest of the difference is simply in the label and the branding, which parents are paying for: companies spent about £23 for every baby born in the UK on marketing follow-on formula in 2015. Given the disproportionate prevalence of bottle feeding in less affluent areas, the poorest families in our society are losing out the most. The Government should act to protect their interests.

This is an area in which one might expect health professionals to be able to help. Unfortunately, their ability to do so is constantly undermined by formula companies and by the lack of support, funding and leadership from Government in protecting them via legislation. There is a significant loophole in the regulations, which means that all infant formulas, for use from birth, can be advertised “in a scientific publication, or... for the purposes of trade prior to the retail stage, in a publication of which the intended readership is other than the general public”.

That includes adverts in professional medical and health journals that health professionals will read. Dr Helen Crawley of First Steps Nutrition Trust, who is doing a great deal of work in this area, recently published a report called “Scientific and Factual? A review of breastfeeding substitute advertising to health professionals”, which analysed some of the claims made in advertising to healthcare professionals. Many of the headline health claims made cannot be substantiated. The sources they cite are not in line with health policy, graphs set out to mislead and the adverts may fail to meet the Government’s requirement for such claims to be supported by peer-reviewed work. Even more frustratingly, the adverts cannot be challenged, as they could be in any other...
The Bill proposes arrangements for controlling claims. Claims in adverts are challenged successfully and regularly by organisations such as Baby Milk Action. At present, claims can be made by formula companies for ingredients that are not necessary. For example, there is a global trend at the moment to add probiotics to formula, and for many years companies in this country have made claims about prebiotics in formula, which scientific authorities say have no benefit. There may also be issues with the degrading of formula composition over time, but we just do not have any information about that. Formulas can sit on the shelf for years, and we do not know what the impact of that is. There is no independent verification of formula composition or of claims. Furthermore, the Government take no formal national role in testing and monitoring all infant formulas to ensure that the products are safe and meet compositional regulations. I think parents would be quite shocked to find out that this is the case. These products are chosen with care to give to our youngest citizens in this country, and I propose that the Government give serious consideration to making improvements in this area.

Lastly, I wish to turn to penalties. There have been no prosecutions under the current regulations since 2003, despite numerous flagrant breaches. Under the present regulations, contravention or failure to comply is an offence liable, on summary conviction, to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale, which is a fine of up to £5,000. Given the size and scale of the companies and of the industry, that level of fine barely registers. We should contrast this with Romania, which has recently signalled its intent to bring in a new law banning the promotion of infant formula products for children up to the age of two. Breaching the rules will constitute a criminal offence, with fines of up to 100,000 Romanian new leu, the equivalent of about £19,000. This would be a step in the right direction and would put down a marker to formula companies that failure to comply is not going to lead to a mere slap on the wrists.

The World Health Assembly resolution adopted in May 2016 clarified that all infant milks marketed as a breastmilk substitute in the first three years of life should be covered by the WHO code, the international code of marketing of breastmilk substitutes, including follow-on formula, toddler milks and other milks. The House has an opportunity today to make progress on this important public health recommendation.

I am grateful to colleagues from both sides of the House who have put their names to this Bill for their support. I would be glad to have the opportunity to consider other aspects of this issue should the House give me leave to bring in the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Alison Thewliss, Dr Sarah Wollaston, Mrs Flick Drummond, Dr Philippa Whitford, Jim Shannon, Caroline Lucas, Patrick Grady, Julie Elliott, Mark Durkan and Kirsty Blackman present the Bill.

Alison Thewliss accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February 2017, and to be printed (Bill 95).
Opposition Day

[12th ALLOTTED DAY]

Autumn Statement Distributional Analysis, Universal Credit and ESA

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

1.44 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern the £3.4 billion reductions to the work allowance element of universal credit and the £1.4 billion reductions to employment and support allowance; calls on the Government to reverse those reductions; and further calls on the Government to reintroduce detailed distributional analysis for the Autumn Statement and all further Financial Statements, as was done between 2010 and 2015.

On a solemn note, I wish to send my condolences to the family and friends of Debbie Jolly. Some Members may have known Debbie, who was a disability campaigner. Over the years, she provided briefings for many Members of the House of Commons and, through Disabled People Against Cuts, was involved in many of the various lobbies of Parliament. She passed away last week, and I would like to send our condolences to her family and all her friends. We all hoped she would survive long enough at least to see this debate. I pay tribute to her for the work she did.

I want to explain the genesis of the motion that I and my right hon. and hon. Friends have tabled for today’s debate. As we all know, the autumn statement is a week today. Traditionally, we would have held an Opposition day debate and used it to have a wide-ranging debate, second-guessing and commenting on what we predicted would be contained in the autumn statement.

This year, we want to try something different. We want to break radically with that tradition, because next week could be the last chance to head off what is shaping up to be quite a harmful disaster for many low earners and many vulnerable people in our society. For our debates today, we have taken two significant issues that are contained in the Budget plans announced earlier this year by the Chancellor’s predecessor, and which the new Chancellor has the ability and opportunity to intervene upon and, we hope, reverse. The first is the plan to cut the work allowance element of universal credit and employment and support allowance, and for the later debate we have chosen the issue of funding social care.

We believe that the Chancellor, by withdrawing the proposed cuts to ESA and universal credit, would dramatically beneficially impact upon the lives of many, many of our fellow citizens, who are, yes, low earners, but many of whom, through their disability, are also often the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. We want to see today and, yes, over the next week, whether we can assemble across the House a coalition of pressure that can decisively influence the Chancellor to think again.

I welcome the Back-Bench debate that has been secured for tomorrow, which I believe will contribute to forming that coalition; I certainly believe and hope that we can succeed in doing so. So the appeal to hon. Members today and in the coming week is to do all we can to prevail upon the Chancellor to halt the policy of cuts to universal credit and ESA contained in the Budget introduced by the former Chancellor, which are planned to come into effect on 1 April.

Before I come to the grounds for making this appeal to the Chancellor, it is important to understand the origins of the proposals, and this goes to the heart of the autumn statement process. I believe their origins lie in the mistake by the last Chancellor of imposing a fiscal framework on his colleagues that was simply impractical, given the economic circumstances that we were facing, and certainly what we are about to face. If the fiscal framework is wrongly set and, importantly, if it is so inflexible that it cannot reflect the realities and challenges of the economy, decisions on both tax and spending equally fail to reflect the economic realities and meet the new economic priorities.

I believe that in this instance, the fiscal framework imposed by the former Chancellor was so inflexible, and unworkable in the end, that it totally failed to meet the economic targets he set for it. It is also vital to understand that the former Chancellor’s fiscal framework imposed on his colleagues’ Departments unrealistic constraints that are undermining their ability to achieve their own policy goals.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): The reality is that the fiscal framework did see a significant reduction in the annual deficit. That is a good thing for this country. I have not seen anything from Labour Members to suggest that they would have been able to do anything like that.

John McDonnell: The hon. Gentleman clearly has not been listening. We introduced a fiscal credibility target, which would have built in the flexibility that we need—and actually, which his colleagues would have benefited from as they sought to deliver the goals set out in the manifesto upon which they were elected. That is the critical problem—that this fiscal target has become unworkable. Next week, most probably, we will see that not only will it be reset, but large elements of it will be scrapped; and some of those political disputes within the Government will be seen to have been completely unnecessary if only the Chancellor, at that stage, had listened not just to us, but to some of his own colleagues.

On the Government’s own economic metrics, the fiscal framework has failed. I remind the hon. Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) that the former Chancellor’s target was to eliminate the deficit by 2015. The deficit remained at over £45 billion in the first six months of this financial year. I remind the House that his target was to reduce the debt. The debt now stands at £1.7 trillion and has increased over the past six years, according to the latest estimate, by £740 billion. I believe that the biggest failure was to ignore the needs of the real economy and use the fiscal framework to constrain investment. The failure to invest on the scale needed to modernise our economy resulted in stagnating productivity.

In the face of all the evidence that the fiscal framework was not working and not achieving its target, the decision to set a target for the framework not just to eliminate the deficit, but to produce a multibillion-pound surplus...
by 2019-20 demonstrated to many of us how far the former Chancellor's politics was overriding sound economics. The result of his setting targets even more removed from reality was that he imposed on his own colleagues the task of scrambling round to find a scale of cuts that, in many instances, undermined what chance they had to implement the policies on which they were elected and their long-standing ambitions, some of which could have secured cross-party support.

That was no more evident than at the Department for Work and Pensions. For the Treasury to demand cuts to universal credit that would take, on average, £2,100 out of the incomes of people who were doing all that was asked of them—working all they could to come off benefits, bringing up their families, contributing to society—flew in the face of all that the universal credit system was meant to be about. The same can be said of the cuts of nearly £30 a week to employment and support allowance. That is an extremely significant cut to the incomes of people who were doing all that was

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): On the ESA cut, does my right hon. Friend recall that at the time it was being taken through the House, we were assured that the Government would introduce an ambitious plan to reduce—indeed, to halve—the disability employment gap by 2020? Does he share my dismay that that goal has been abandoned completely?

John McDonnell: I recall my right hon. Friend advising the Government of the unreality of their proposals at the time. What worried us all was that, on the one hand, benefits were being reduced, but the support was not being put in place by which those people could gain work and supplement their incomes.

I understood the motivation of the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) when he resigned. The overriding demands of the Treasury were undermining the policy goals he was seeking to implement. He rightly objected to a further burden being placed on the social security budget, especially at a time when new, long-planned systems were at the early stages of introduction. I understood then his sense of frustration, and I understand now why he and many of his hon. Friends have called on the new Chancellor to look again at the burden that is being placed on the welfare budget and the threat, above all else, that it poses to the successful roll-out of universal credit and the policy of supporting disabled people into work.

The planned cuts are more than a threat to the implementation of policies long advocated and cherished by many Government Members. More importantly, they are a threat to the livelihoods, living standards and quality of life of millions of low earners and some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in our communities. The Government have sought to judge themselves on their own set of economic metrics: eliminating the deficit, reducing the debt and adhering to a cap on welfare spending. On all their own metrics, they have failed. However, there is an alternative and very basic set of metrics on which a Government should be judged—whether they ensure that their population is adequately fed, decently housed and kept warm in winter, and has sufficient income through employment or a support safety net to have a decent quality of life.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is laying out a powerful case for the need to make some very different decisions next week in the interest of all our futures. There is clearly a combined moral and economic rationale for an urgent focus on disability employment. The 30% disability employment gap makes that even more important. Does my right hon. Friend agree that people with disabilities and their families deserve so much more from the Government, who should be on their side, rather than pursuing a strategy characterised by cuts to ESA, the tragic failure of work capability assessments and no strategy for fairness?

John McDonnell: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. There is a week in which we can overturn at least an element of that brutality. This week, we need to seize upon the chance as best we can, across parties, to deliver change.

From our privileged position in this House, I firmly believe that before we consider cuts to basic support for low earners and disabled people, we have a moral duty, as my hon. Friend said, to fully appreciate the plight of many of our fellow citizens and the impact that any changes that are forced upon them could have. There are some basic facts that we need to face up to: basic facts that depict the harsh reality of the lives of so many members of our community. Nearly 4 million of our children are living in poverty. The scandal is that two thirds of them live in families where someone is working. Thanks to low wages, zero-hours contracts and forced or bogus self-employment, which has been exposed today, the promise that work will lift people out of poverty is a broken one for many.

If a basic responsibility of the Government is to ensure that their population is adequately fed and housed, they are failing. A million emergency food parcels were given out by food banks last year to families who did not have sufficient income to feed themselves. The latest reports confirm that the numbers are rising. This year, 200,000 children in our country will be dependent on a food bank to get a decent meal at Christmas. One survey reported that more than 20% of parents had regularly not eaten so that their children could eat. Others report the frequent choice between eating and heating. This is 2016.

On the duty of the Government to ensure that people are adequately housed, they are failing again. Rough sleeping has doubled in recent years. The equivalent of 100 households a day are evicted from rented homes—a near-record 40,000 in the year to date. Some 1.2 million households are stuck on council housing waiting lists. In my constituency tonight, there will be families sleeping in beds in sheds that have been rented to them.

As for the Government’s responsibility for disabled people, as the UN report concisely summed it up, the Government have—and I quote—systematically or gravely violated the rights of disabled people. Independent research suggested that Government efforts to push people off claiming disability benefits have been associated with more than 500 people committing suicide in three years.

Three years ago, I led a debate following the presentation of the War on Welfare petition, which highlighted the need for an overall impact assessment of the Government’s policies on disabled people. I cited the immense human
suffering caused by the brutal implementation of the work capability assessment and the latest round of cuts to benefits and care services. I cited examples of people who had tragically taken their own lives in despair following the WCA and the penalisation through sanctions. We now know that those suicides were not isolated examples, but that there have been hundreds.

Robert Fello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Of course, there is a double whammy, because people who are suffering and being punished in that way are not likely to get access to good mental health services or NHS services, because those are being cut and wound down across the country as well.

John McDonnell: I have listened carefully to the Prime Minister’s responses to a number of questions about cuts to mental health services at Prime Minister’s Question Time. I hope that her commitment to social justice will result in the reversing of some of those cuts, particularly to mental health walk-in services, which were raised at the Prime Minister’s questions session before last.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The shadow Chancellor mentioned what happened three years ago. He will probably remember, as I do, that the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), who was the Labour party’s spokesman at the time, pledged that Labour would be “tougher than the Tories” on benefits.

Bringing things more up to date, many people in the ESA work-related activity group have told me that the current support package—a visit to the jobcentre once every six months—is completely inadequate. Does the shadow Chancellor agree that that shows a system that urgently needs reform?

John McDonnell: I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman. There needs to be more support, and that was promised but has not been delivered. At the same time, benefits have been taken away, so as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Fello) said, there has been a double whammy in the impact on disabled people. That demoralises people who are under pressure, losing benefits and not getting support, which pushes them into an even worse position.

I have raised this issue before, but we now have better figures than we had two or three years ago. We now know that between 2011 and 2014, more than 2,000 people who were assessed in a work capability assessment as being capable of work died before they could even take up that work. Surely we have to learn the lessons from that evidence, and surely one lesson is that if we impose further cuts on people who are already struggling, not only will we increase the deprivation and suffering that they endure, but many of them will see no light at the end of the tunnel and will simply despair.

The WOW debate was intended simply to ensure that any impact of decisions on benefits was properly assessed. We called for a cumulative impact assessment to be published, and we asked for a detailed impact assessment of every policy to be published for the House before a final decision was made. In a supposed post-truth environment, I still believe that evidence-based policy making is worth aiming for. That is why it is critical that the Government also restore the distributional analysis of their proposals, and ensure that it is intelligible and usable.

Before scrapping that analysis entirely, the Chancellor’s predecessor took to publishing figures that disguised the real impact of his policies. That accusation is not mine but that of one of his old colleagues, the former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the former Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey. If the Treasury is to restore public trust, it must not just let the House know when it will publish the distributional analysis, but ensure that the figures are published clearly and without any attempts to massage or spin them. Only in that way will we be able to test the fairness and equity of policy proposals.

In my view and that of many Members, when the cuts were first introduced they reflected a grotesque unfairness, because at the same time the Government were cutting taxes for some of the wealthiest in our country and for large corporations. [Interruption.] Capital gains tax, inheritance tax—how many more examples do we need? That was a strange priority to many Members on both sides of the House. As the Resolution Foundation has pointed out, reversing just some of those tax cuts could render the cuts to benefits unnecessary. The last Chancellor also had a penchant for absorbing budget gaps at various times.

There is a real opportunity next week for the Chancellor to live up to the Prime Minister’s spoken commitment to tackle social injustice. We believe that the Chancellor will reset the fiscal framework in next week’s autumn statement. He has already adjusted it. That will allow him the flexibility he needs to reverse the cuts. I appeal to hon. Members throughout the House to help us lift the threat of further cuts from families and disabled people. We have a week to achieve that, and we can start today by supporting the motion.

2.4 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “House” to the end of the Question and add:

“notes the role of universal credit in ensuring that work pays; welcomes the £60 million package of additional employment support announced in the Summer Budget 2016 available to new claimants with limited capability for work from April 2017 and set out in the recent Work and Health Green Paper; further welcomes the proposals for employment support for disabled people and those with health conditions set out in that green paper; and notes the comments by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to the Treasury Committee on 19 October 2016 on his intention to publish distributional analysis at the forthcoming Autumn Statement.”

Since 2010, we have been working to get the country’s finances in order while continuing to provide proper financial and practical support to those who need it. We will have to wait until next week to hear the Chancellor’s plans, but we can note today the significant progress on which the autumn statement will build. In 2010, we faced an economy that was barely growing, investment that was low, unemployment that was high, and a deficit at a level not seen since the second world war. In 2009-10, the then Labour Government were borrowing an annually recurring amount of nearly £6,000 for every household in the country—an unsustainable situation.
Since then, Conservative-led Governments have taken the tough decisions needed to reduce the deficit, and it is working. Over the past six years, we have cut the deficit by almost two thirds from its 2009-10 post-war peak of 10.1% of GDP to 4% last year.

**Robert Flicko:** It is funny, because I remember being in the House and being told that the deficit was going to be cut—wiped out, gone—by 2015, and Labour’s plan to halve it by 2015 being dismissed as nonsense. Does the Minister have the same recollection?

**Damian Hinds:** The hon. Gentleman, who is a man of great memory, will also remember the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman shouting “Too far, too fast” over and over. We embarked on a determined programme to get our nation’s finances back in order, which the Opposition opposed at every turn. They voted against essentially all the substantial measures to get us there.

**Robert Flicko:** I also remember, in the run-up to 2008, Conservative Members saying from the Opposition Benches that the Labour Government needed to spend more on hospitals, spend more on schools—spend more, spend more, spend more. Funny how they have forgotten that.

**Damian Hinds:** They have not forgotten that, and it is because we are getting our nation’s finances back in order that we can afford to increase our funding for the national health service by £10 billion, in line with what the NHS itself has deemed necessary in the five year forward view, a plan that it would never have been possible to realise had the Labour party been in government.

The Opposition claim that the poorest in our society have borne the brunt of the reductions in the deficit, but that is not the case. It is undeniable that when we face a deficit of almost £6,000 for every family in the country, we have to do some difficult things, but people throughout society have contributed to getting our finances back in order. We have never seen tackling the deficit as just an option. It is a matter of social justice, because when Governments lose control of the public finances, with all that flows from that, it is invariably those who have the least who stand to lose the most.

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): Is it not the case that a distributional analysis cannot capture the impact that things such as capital gains tax cuts have on the wider economy by encouraging entrepreneurs to create jobs and wealth so that we can pay our way in the world, which is what we have to do if we are to afford schools, hospitals and all the rest of it?

**Damian Hinds:** My hon. Friend is of course right. There is always a dynamic effect of changes in taxation. I will come on to the question of the distributional analysis, because when we look at it we see that it is rather different from what the shadow Chancellor suggested.

**John McDonnell:** May I remind the Minister of what the Institute for Fiscal Studies said about the Government’s changes? It stated that the long-run effect of tax and benefit changes in last year’s autumn statement, which were translated into the Budget, would be percentage losses around 25 times larger for those in the bottom decile than for those in the top decile.

**Damian Hinds:** The programme of deficit reduction has always been done in a fair as well as a determined way. At the end of this decade, the best-off fifth of households—the best-off quintile—will be paying a greater proportion of total taxes than in 2010-11: in fact, they will be paying more in tax than the rest of the households put together. That means that those with the broadest shoulders are, quite rightly, paying their fair share towards fiscal consolidation. Meanwhile, the plans the Government have set out lead to a projected distribution of public spending between the income groups that is essentially the same as in 2010. As the distributional analysis published alongside the last Budget showed, the poorest will continue to receive a share of spending on benefits in 2019-20 similar to that in 2010-11. I reassure the House that the Chancellor has committed to publishing a distributional analysis alongside the forthcoming autumn statement.

Government reforms to incentivise work and enable those who are just about managing to keep more of their pay packet include the national living wage, increases to the personal allowance, the doubling of free childcare, action on council tax and freezes to fuel duty. Although we have had to make difficult decisions on welfare spending, we have never lost sight of the fact that the most sustainable route out of poverty and just managing is to get into and progress in work. The introduction of the national living wage means that lower-paid workers are now seeing record increases to their earnings.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Will the Minister explain to our constituents how the introduction of the “pay to stay” policy will help incentivise people to get into work?

**Damian Hinds:** I was in the middle of talking about how wages have been rising. If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I thought that she was challenging me on that point, so I will continue to make it. According to recent data on earnings from the Office for National Statistics, the lowest 5% of workers saw their wages grow by more than 6% in 2016, the highest growth for that group since that statistical series began nearly 20 years ago. Based on the Office for Budget Responsibility’s forecast at the Budget, almost 3 million low-wage workers are expected to benefit directly by 2020, with many more benefitting from the ripple effect on income distribution.

At the same time, universal credit is transforming the welfare system to ensure that it always pays to work more and to earn more. That is in stark contrast with the pre-2010 system, in which in-work poverty increased by 20% between 1998 and 2010, despite welfare spending on people in work increasing by £28 billion. Evidence is already showing that people move into work faster under universal credit; for every 100 people who found work under the old jobseeker’s allowance system, 113 universal credit claimants have moved into a job. We estimate that universal credit will generate around £7 billion in economic benefit every year and boost employment by up to 300,000 once fully rolled out.

Most important of all, universal credit will drive progression, delivering sustainable outcomes for low-income families. Unlike tax credits, with the 16-hour cliff edge, it supports part-time and flexible working—as well as full-time working—adjusting on a month-by-month basis.
According to household income. The work allowances are just one element of a much wider system of support and incentives. The personalised work coach support, the smooth taper rate and the reimbursement of 85% of childcare costs as soon as someone starts working, even for a small number of hours, are all key to making work pay for universal credit recipients.

In this morning’s employment figures, we saw that the employment of disabled people is up by 590,000 in the past three years. The disability employment rate has gone up by 4.9% in that time, and the gap has been narrowed by two percentage points. We were talking about this earlier, and it is welcome news, but there is much, much more to be done, as only half of people with disabilities are in work, compared with 80% of the non-disabled population.

**Damian Hinds:** I am glad that the Minister has raised the question of the disability employment gap. Former Ministers—two of them, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), are in their places this afternoon—promised that a quid pro quo for the cuts in employment and support allowance would be halving the disability employment gap by 2020. That was in his party’s manifesto, and the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, committed to halving the gap by 2020. Why has that promise now shamefully been abandoned?

**Stephen Timms:** I am not reading any more into the promise that was made than what was set out very clearly. In the election campaign David Cameron said that the commitment was halving the occupational disability employment gap by 2020. There was a press release in the name of former Minister for Disabled People, the hon. Member for North Swindon, saying that it would be by 2020. Why has that promise now been so shamefully abandoned?

**Damian Hinds:** We are working hard on this. When my colleague the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, and Work and Pensions sums up at the end of the debate, she will no doubt elaborate on that more. To be able to do everything we can as a Government, we need employers to do more as well, as the right hon. Gentleman will recognise. A whole-society approach is required to address this great challenge. Progress is being made but more is needed. He should have no doubt about the Government’s commitment to doing everything possible to achieve that.

One reason why so much more needs to be done is that we still have that yawning gap despite all the progress that has been made—despite the regulatory reform, the medical advances, the advances in assistive and adaptive technology, and, critically, the fact that we know that so many people with disabilities want to move into work and that so much talent is not currently being fully utilised. We know that being in work can have wider benefits for the individual, beyond the purely financial. There is clear evidence that work is linked to better physical and mental health, and to improved wellbeing. That is a key theme in our recently published Green Paper “Improving Lives”, and a driver behind the changes to the employment and support allowance and universal credit that were announced in last summer’s Budget.

ESA was originally introduced—I am happy to acknowledge the bipartisan parts of this debate—in 2008 by the then Labour Government. The expectation at that time was that the Atos-run assessment process would place the clear majority of claimants into the work-related activity group, leaving a relatively smaller number in the support group. Over time it became clear that that was not the case, with around three times as many people in the support group as in the work-related activity group. At the same time, fewer than 1% of people were leaving that benefit for work each month.

That is why we are introducing changes to encourage and support claimants to take steps back to work and to fulfil their full potential. From next April we will no longer include the work-related activity component for new ESA claims, or the equivalent element for people on universal credit with a health condition or disability. I stress that that is for new claims after April next year; there will be no cash losers among those already in receipt of ESA or its universal credit equivalent, and there will be further safeguards meaning that they will not lose the extra payments even if reassessed after April and placed in the work-related activity group.

**Mr David Burrowes** (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I very much welcome the Green Paper, which many of us have been looking forward to for some time. It sets the direction of travel, providing a much more joined-up approach for this group of very vulnerable people. On the notional cash loss for new WRAG claimants, could there be support from the financial support grant in the Green Paper?

**Mr Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): The flexible support fund.

**Mr Burrowes:** Yes, the flexible support fund, which could provide some flexibility and relief for those particular needy groups.

**Damian Hinds:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and to the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, to whom I pay tribute for bringing forward the universal credit system and so much else that goes with it. The flexible support fund is part of the package of support there is, through the Jobcentre Plus network and other means, to help people into work. It is the case—I will come on to this in a moment—that more money will go into those support packages to help people into work, or, as some people have very significant barriers and some distance to go, to get closer towards work. About 47% of people in the work-related activity group also receive the personal independence payment, which is, of course, exempt from the benefit freeze, and there will be
no change to the support group supplement. In the Green Paper consultation, we are consulting on whether we should decouple the support group rates from the type of support people are receiving, so that those in the support group can seek help that goes towards their getting work without worrying about their benefit entitlement being at risk.

The amount we are spending on disability benefits, at £50 billion, is not going down: it is going up. In real terms, it will be higher at the end of this decade than it was at the beginning. We believe that the change in the work-related activity group, working in tandem with the new employment support package announced in the Green Paper, will help to provide the right incentives and support to assist new claimants who have limited capability for work. We believe that this package—representing £60 million of funding in 2017-18, rising to £100 million a year in 2020-21 and developed with external stakeholders, including groups and charities expert in addressing the barriers that can come with disability—can have a much bigger and lasting effect on people’s prospects and their livelihoods than the work-related activity component itself. In addition to the funding package, we are introducing £15 million for the Jobcentre Plus flexible support fund in 2017-18 and 2018-19 to help claimants with limited capability for work. From next April, we are also removing the 52-week permitted work limit that exists in ESA, to allow claimants to continue to undertake up to 16 hours’ part-time paid work and, currently, earn up to £115.50 per week.

I trust that hon. Members will recognise the value in our approach. Today’s employment figures show unemployment at 4.8%—a decade low. Average wages are rising at 2.4%, which in real terms is 1.7%. Since 2010, we have seen a 2.8 million rise in the number of people in a job, 865,000 fewer workless households and 62,000 fewer households where no one has ever worked. Income inequality has fallen and average incomes are the highest on record. There are 300,000 fewer people and 100,000 fewer children in relative low income. This morning’s figures show that the rate of young people who have left full-time education and are not in work is at a new low, and the biggest drop in unemployment was among the long-term unemployed.

We introduced the national living wage—a £900 a year pay rise already for a full-time person on the previous minimum wage, with more to come. We have taken millions out of income tax. We have extended free childcare to disadvantaged two-year-olds and we are raising childcare spend by £1 billion a year. We are being ambitious on skills through school reforms and a dramatic increase in apprenticeships, so that more people can share in the opportunities of the new world economy. We are transforming social security through universal credit. We are stabilising the nation’s finances, and ensuring that low-income families and those with health conditions and disabilities have the support they need to enter and progress in work as we build an economy and a society that works for everyone.

2.23 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): The UK Government must commit to protecting disadvantaged people from the impact of future budget cuts in their autumn statement. Post-Brexit, it is essential, that with the risks to economy and with inflation rising and set to rise further, the Government act now.

Analysis by the IFS is the latest sign that the UK leaving the EU is having a negative impact on the UK economy even before article 50 is triggered. The IFS said that “virtually all” forecasters revised down their predications for growth and revised up their expectations for inflation in the years ahead. The collapse in the value of the pound, combined with potential rises in inflation, will hit the poorest and the most disadvantaged in society hardest. It will mean more of their income will have to be spent on day-to-day costs and living standards will push people into poverty.

James Cartlidge: If the hon. Gentleman is so concerned about the disadvantaged, will he explain why it has been reported that the Scottish Government will defer, until April 2020, taking powers from the UK Government to administer the welfare system?

Ian Blackford: I expected this issue to be raised, given press speculation. Let me tell the hon. Gentleman the facts of the matter: with the powers coming to us, we will control 15% of welfare spending in Scotland. We have to put in place the mechanisms for us to deliver fairness with the revenues we have at our disposal. We certainly would not punish the poorest in our society in the way that this Government have, and we certainly would not be punishing the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign women, who are not getting their just rights when they have had only a year’s notice. What I would be saying to this Government is, “Give us the powers over welfare so that we can protect the people in Scotland.” When we have put in place the mechanisms to allow us to look after people, we will certainly be doing a better job than the Government are doing today.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the point about powers is that, unlike this Tory Government, we are able to help and support people properly? We should not have to fill the black hole they have created in our budget. When we get those powers and have that agency, they will be set up properly. We will protect the people in Scotland properly.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend makes a very valuable point, because this is about powers and responsibilities. For us to protect people in Scotland in the way that we want to, we need powers. We were promised—since this has been raised—devolution to the max. We were promised home rule for Scotland. How on earth can we have control over what we have in the UK when we control 30% of our revenues and 15% of social security? I am afraid that the UK Government’s failure to protect the disabled and pensioners demonstrates that if we want to do what is necessary in Scotland, we will ultimately have to have the independent powers to do so. I am sure we will get to that point.

Let me return to what I want to address. I am only responding to the Conservatives’ uninformed distractions, with which we are all too familiar.

The IFS stated:

“Normally, working-age benefit recipients would also be at least partly protected as benefits usually rise in line with prices, but, as we have discussed before, their benefits have been largely frozen in cash terms, meaning that their income from this source
is fully exposed to future inflation. Those in work will, unless they are able to negotiate a bigger pay rise, find that their earnings will stretch less far than they otherwise would have done.”

Why should the most disadvantaged pay the price for Brexit and its consequences? That is what the Conservative Back Benchers should be addressing today rather than making an undisguised attack on the Scottish Government. What we need to address this afternoon is why working people will suffer from rising inflation. The weakest in our society deserve to be protected and their benefits ought to be inflation-proofed. Why are the UK Government not doing that? Why are they not seeking to protect the vulnerable in our society?

Hannah Bardell: Does my hon. Friend agree that while the tax gap in the UK sits at £36 billion, this Government should be focusing on closing that gap, and not marginalising and targeting some of the most vulnerable people in our society?

Ian Blackford: I fundamentally agree. There is a £36 billion tax gap, so let us fix that hole. I listened to the Minister talk earlier about the challenges the Government face in fixing the deficit. What they fail to recognise is the interaction between fiscal and monetary policy. It is the richest who have benefited most from quantitative easing. We should have had a fiscal stimulus package. That would have driven investment and productivity into the economy, and got more people back into work. That is what we should be doing.

Jeremy Quin: This is not the first time I have heard the hon. Gentleman refer to the great fiscal reflation he is planning. I welcome the fact that in the same speech he is also talking about the problems with inflation, but is that not a contradiction in terms?

Ian Blackford: It most certainly is not. The reason for the rise in inflation—to something between 2% and 3% next year, according to commentators—is, quite simply, that the pound has crashed, and the reason the pound has crashed is that investors do not have confidence in the UK economy, and who caused that? It is a direct consequence of Brexit, through the referendum, which was the misjudgment of the previous Prime Minister.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman not see an inconsistency in his argument, given that only a few years ago, his party was campaigning to leave the United Kingdom and, by virtue of doing so, the EU?

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman has made a gross misjudgment. When we were campaigning for independence for Scotland, it was about securing Scotland’s future as a European nation. Those in the Better Together campaign continually told the people of Scotland that our European future would be secured only by staying with the UK. Well how has that worked out? I am glad that the Scottish Parliament has given a mandate to the Government of Scotland to make sure we protect Scotland’s position as a European nation and remain within the single market, and, through that, to ensure we protect the prosperity and jobs of the people of our country.

Let me come back, if I may, to the subject we are supposed to be discussing.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): While half of me is loth to continue this debate, I want us to be clear. We have here an economic crisis brought about by political instability caused by the rupturing of unions between countries. So for the hon. Gentleman to argue that Scottish independence would not have had similar disastrous effects for the Scottish economy is, frankly, disingenuous.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I remind Members to be cautious with the language they use. Also, I do not want this to degenerate into a debate about independence, and I know that the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) wants to get back to his brief and not to be tempted by those who want to go out fishing today. To those Members intervening, I say this: when your speaking time is reduced to four minutes, do not blame me.

Ian Blackford: I will take your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker. I only say to the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) that she has demonstrated once again that Better Together is still alive and well—and how did that work out for the Labour party in Scotland?

I will return to the issue we are dealing with. We have inflation created by Brexit and a falling the pound, and the result of this failure will be a fall in living standards for many of our poorest—falling living standards brought to you by this Government. On top of the benefit cuts next year, the Prime Minister is sleepwalking into a perfect storm for low-income families, rather than living up to her promise of delivering for just-managing families. The UK Government must use the autumn statement to end their austerity obsession and instead bring forward an inclusive programme that will truly support low-income families and their children.

The UK Government’s U-turn on tax credits last year was simply a delaying tactic that kicked cuts to universal credit further down the line. The Government should take the opportunity to reverse the cuts to universal credit work allowance in their autumn statement. The original intention of universal credit was to increase work incentives and make sure that, as the Government put it, work paid. On top of damming economic forecasts, however, which will push up the cost of living, the work allowance cut will simply push more working people into poverty. It has slashed the income of working universal credit claimants. The IFS has calculated that in the long term more than 3 million working families will lose an average of more than £1,000 a year as a result of the work allowance cut.

Hannah Bardell: Shameful.

Ian Blackford: As my hon. Friend says, it is shameful. The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that the resulting cut in income will mean that many low-income parents cannot protect the income levels they had before April 2016.

House of Commons Library analysis from February 2016 calculates that lone parents without housing costs will experience the largest reduction in their work allowance, from £8,800 in 2015-16 to £4,764 in 2016-17—a loss of
over £4,000. Is that what the Government want to defend? A person or couple without housing costs who claim universal credit where one or both are disabled will see their allowance reduced from £7,764 in 2015-16 to £4,764—a loss of £3,000. The U-turn on tax credits in the short term saved families and working people from having their benefits cut, but in the long term the work allowance cut will have a similar impact.

The House of Commons Library analysis also states that the work allowance reductions announced in the summer Budget “will ultimately have a similar impact to the changes to tax credits which are not now going ahead, though the impact of changes to UC work allowances will not be fully felt until the roll out of Universal Credit is complete.”

By cutting the work allowance, the Government will impose an eye-watering level of marginal taxation on people in low-paid jobs and make it harder than ever for those in low-income households to break out of the poverty trap.

That point is well understood by many, including the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), the previous Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who said:

“At present, the 2016 Budget’s plan to reduce Universal Credit work allowances will not be the most effective way of controlling welfare expenditure and, moreover, it goes against the key principles. The planned reduction will affect more than three million people, reducing their income by an average of over £1,000 per year. This will reduce people’s incentive to move into work. Moreover, in November 2015 the previous Chancellor decided to reverse the reduction in working tax credits, increasing the pressure on Universal Credit as it created an artificial disincentive to move to Universal Credit from Tax Credits.”

I do not say this too often, but I fully agree with him. I would even say that, for the Government, the game is up when even the architect of much of the landscape on this issue can see the fatal flaws in what they are doing. When will they start to listen and begin to act?

We are having this debate today, and welcome though it is, it is important that we achieve a cross-party consensus on the substantive motion we are debating tomorrow, on the cuts to employment and support allowance. The House will have an opportunity to send a very clear signal to the Chancellor ahead of the autumn statement next week. It is a scandal that proposed cuts to ESA WRAG are still going ahead. The Chancellor must halt these planned cuts until the UK Government can deliver the long-awaited support promised for disabled people in and out of work. Almost 500,000 disabled people in the UK rely on ESA WRAG. This £30 cut will make the cost of living more expensive for many people—even more so in the context of the devalued pound and a possible inflation increase.

The UK Government said that these changes were introduced to “remove the financial incentives that could otherwise discourage claimants from taking steps back to work”.

But Mencap’s review of this policy found “no relevant evidence setting out a convincing case that the ESA WRAG payment acts as a financial disincentive to claimants work, or that reducing the payment would incentivise people to seek work”.

It is a positive step that the new Secretary of State has announced the Green Paper on support for disabled people in and out of work, and we look forward to assessing the detail of the Department’s proposals in due course. However, until the detail in the Green Paper comes to fruition, storming ahead with these cuts is simply putting the cart before the horse. The autumn statement is a key opportunity for the new Cabinet to prove it is true to its rhetoric about delivering for just-managing families. That can be achieved only by abandoning austerity by reversing these cuts and delivering an inclusive Budget fit for the post-referendum economic turmoil.

A failure to act will drive more people into poverty and the use of food banks. Recent data show that the Tories’ austerity agenda continues to push people into poverty across the UK. A survey for the End Child Poverty coalition suggested that 3.5 million children were living in poverty in the UK, with 220,000 of them in Scotland. A separate study by the Trussell Trust found that in the first half of this year there was an increase in food bank usage that included 500,000 three-day emergency food supplies distributed across the UK, of which 188,500 were for children.

A recent Resolution Foundation report has highlighted the need for the urgent delivery of support for families who are just managing. It also noted: "Average incomes in the low to middle income group were no higher in 2014-15 than in 2004-05, reflecting not just the turmoil of the post-crisis period but also a sharp pre-crisis slowdown in income growth."

It also points out that the projections for unemployment have been revised up since the March Budget following the referendum in June, and real pay growth is now projected to be lower than previously thought.

In conclusion, with this autumn statement, the Chancellor has the ability to re-prioritise the spending agenda to reflect the very real danger of economic turmoil resulting from the June referendum and ongoing negotiations with the EU. The Chancellor must use the autumn statement to propose measures that reverse benefit cuts and mitigate the impact of economic uncertainty on disadvantaged people.
explain why that is the case to my colleagues. Let me start by welcoming both Ministers to their new roles on the Front Bench, and I congratulate them on continuing to commit to the changes and reforms necessary to improve the quality of life for so many people who would otherwise be left behind.

In passing, let me note one or two figures. The number of children in workless households has fallen to record levels—down to just under 11% from the 20% that we inherited. A child in a workless household is nearly three quarters more likely to be in poverty than a child in an in-work household. That is an important point, because that dynamic is critical—a point to which I shall return. The fall in income inequality has been mentioned, and it is falling because more people at the lower end are going back into work.

There is another important issue about disability. We have committed to, want to commit to and must stay with the position of wanting to see more people with disabilities in work. We want the gap to be at least halved, which I think is feasible. I shall explain in a few moments why I think that it is feasible.

**Stephen Timms**: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Duncan Smith**: In a minute, but let me finish this point first.

A lot of the work of the Green Paper was done when I was in the Department. It was a White Paper at that stage, and I hope it gets speeded up and becomes a White Paper again fairly soon. After five reviews of the inherited employment and support allowance, I would be the first to acknowledge that although we have stabilised it and it is better than it was, it is a very difficult area, as we all know. If every Member was prepared to be reasonable, we would all recognise that these things need to change.

Let me clarify that the main single thing that I wanted to see change and I still want to see changed is this artificial idea that people are either too sick to work or unable to work. There should be a greater nuancing in people’s lives, and universal credit now opens the door to a much more flexible process that allows even those diagnosed and reasonably said to be “not capable of work” to be able to work—and if they wish to work, they should be allowed to do so as far as they possibly can, with the taper used to take benefit money away gradually. I think that might improve the quality of life for many people. I know that this is a submission in the Green Paper, and I hope the Minister will bear it in mind.

Let me return to the point that when universal credit was set up by my noble Friend Lord Freud, who worked very hard on it, and me, the idea was that it was not just about money, but about human interface. The people in jobcentres now stay with individuals as they go into work to help advise them and be with them. This will be a more human interface, so that people can be helped through to gain extra hours, which opens the door for people with limited capabilities to work to be helped in a way that would not have been possible if we had stayed with the original system. All this is very good and very positive.

There are two critical elements. First, when people step into work, the barrier must be reduced by improving the amount of money that can be held from benefit before it is tapered away. The second element is the taper itself, which is the simple process by which people have their income reduced. I say to the Minister that those two elements, notwithstanding all the other stuff such as improved childcare and everything else, are at the heart of what delivers.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies and others recently looked at what the dynamic effect of universal credit might be as it rolls out. The IFS was very clear: it said that the effect was a 13% improvement in all elements—going back to work, staying in work, taking more hours and earning more money. I know from my experience in the Department that every time one benefit has been substituted for another, it has almost always been worse on arrival than the previous benefit before people engage with it and improve it. This is the first time that a benefit being rolled out is a net improvement on a previous benefit.

I therefore make this recommendation. That figure of a 13% improvement was made on the basis of the original work allowances. In the spirit of general collective view and belief, I say that if we really want to see the right thing happen to people out there who try to get into work and stay in work, the allowances are critical. I recommend and hope that my colleagues in government will think very carefully again about the decision to reduce those allowances. I recognise the problem with the deficit, and we of course want to reduce it. I am not asking for more money; I am asking for wiser spending. I wonder whether we could revisit the idea of a tax threshold allowance and look to see whether getting the money to the lower five deciles would be better served by universal credit. Some 70% of those people will be on universal credit, whereas only 25p of a tax threshold allowance will actually go to the bottom five deciles.

I urge the Minister to speak to his right hon. Friends and say, “Look, we have a very good opportunity to do something that is really bold and right for those whose lives we really want to improve—those that the Prime Minister rightly said was her target group.” It is a very Conservative thing to do to help people who are doing the right thing to improve their lives. Even if the Government cannot do it all, they should look at two elements: lone parents and those with limited capability for work. This would answer the problems surrounding the WRAG, too. I urge Ministers to do just that. It is the right thing to do, and it will be the thing to do that changes lives and improves the quality of those lives.

2.47 pm

**Jenny Chapman** (Darlington) (Lab): I begin by saying some words that I never thought would leave my mouth: I really hope that Ministers listen to what the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) has just said—but where were you as Secretary of State? The right hon. Gentleman has explained very clearly how many people feel about the proposed changes. I hope that it is not too late for the Government to change their mind.

This Government seem to be developing a problem with transparency. We found out from the front page of The Times this week that there is no plan for Brexit,
even though we were told that there was. My constituents found out through a leak from another local authority that their A&E department was under threat. Now we find that the Government do not intend to publish a full distributional analysis of the impact of the decisions they are about to make in the autumn statement. The decision not to publish a full analysis of that impact makes Opposition Members incredibly suspicious. The people who are going to feel the worst brunt of those decisions might well feel extremely angry.

Robert Flello: The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) said that, historically, whenever there was a change to benefits, people suffered until the situation was changed and improved. Does that not also explain why so many of our constituents are extremely worried about what is going to happen?

Jenny Chapman: That is right. People want clarity. What everyone wants is for work to pay and for people to be better off in work than out of work, but that is not what we are going to get.

The Government used to be very keen on having a full and detailed distributional analysis, and I have with me the introduction to the one they published in 2012. They said then:

“The Government has taken unprecedented steps to increase transparency and enable effective scrutiny of policy making by publishing detailed distributional analysis of the impact of its reforms on households.”

It was a very good thing that the Government, and the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), did then. The right hon. Gentleman went on to say:

“The analysis shows average impacts due to policy changes over time across the income and expenditure distributions by decile”.

I hope that, at the end of the debate, Ministers will commit themselves to publishing the information by decile, so that we can scrutinise it properly and challenge the Government on what they are about to reveal. That is not just my view. The Tory Chair of the Treasury Committee agrees, because he knows that if he is doing his job effectively the information must be published and available to everyone, including the public. This matters: the distributional analysis should reveal the impact of tax, welfare and public spending changes on 10 household income brackets, but the Government want to halve the amount of detail and cover just five brackets.

I was pleased when the Conservatives chose this new Prime Minister, given the choices that they had, and I was pleased when she said that she wanted this to be “a country that works for everyone”. Don’t we all? But how can we know whether the Prime Minister is true to her word if she does not proceed to publish the information that we need to test the assertion by which she herself asked to be judged? Unless she does so, we cannot test that claim.

This leads us to ask ourselves what the Government are attempting to hide. What the Minister said sounded incredibly positive, and there were many measures that he said we ought to be welcoming. If that is true—if he is right and Opposition Front Benchers are wrong—he should publish the information, so that we can test him on his claims. Go on, let us see it!

I suspect that the picture is not quite as rosy as the Minister suggested. Perhaps it is the £1,500 a year to be taken from disabled people that he is trying to conceal, but it could be any number of the measures that he has in mind. The Resolution Foundation has estimated that the poorest 50% of households will be £375 worse off on average by 2020-21, while the other half will be £235 better off. We need this information to be published before every Budget and every autumn statement, so that we can compare the impact of the different measures. I want to be able to see what is going to happen next week and compare it with what happened three years ago.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a marvellous speech. Does she agree that we can safely conclude that someone is going to lose out somewhere when the Government speak about their proposals in such glowing terms?

Jenny Chapman: My hon. Friend has far more experience of scrutinising Conservative Governments than I have, and I suspect that he may be right.

According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the effect of all the tax and benefit changes in last year’s autumn statement would mean losses about 25 times larger for those in the bottom decile than for those in the top decile. If the IFS is wrong, let the Government publish the information so that the Minister can back up the claim that he has made today. The IFS also says that average earnings have been revised down in every year of the forecast, as has real household disposable income.

We want to know exactly what the country is in for. On 23 June, we made a decision to leave the European Union, and what that has done—or part of what it has done—is unleash a huge amount of uncertainty on the country, on business and on decision makers. One thing that the Government could do to ease some of that uncertainty is publish all the information that we need to determine where we are and track the direction in which the Government are taking us.

According to the IFS, nearly half a million children will be plunged into absolute poverty by 2020 “as a result of planned tax and benefit reforms” in the March Budget. The IFS says that an additional 500,000 people—including 400,000 children—will be in relative poverty because of tax and benefit overhauls. That paints a very different picture from the one presented by the Minister. Unless he is prepared to publish a proper distributional analysis, we shall be forced to conclude that he is, for some reason, trying—his attempt will fail—to conceal the impact of some of the measures that he has in mind. I hope that he will resist that urge and commit himself to publishing a proper analysis with 10 deciles, so that we can see what is happening, make comparisons over time, and challenge and scrutinise the Government effectively.

2.56 pm

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I am pleased to be able to take part in the debate. The shadow Chancellor talked about econometrics. I want, like the Prime Minister, to focus on human metrics. At the outset of her premiership, she rightly said that this would be a Government who wanted to
“stand up for the weak” and reach out to the “just managing”. Today’s debate, like the debate that we shall have tomorrow, is about seeking to fulfil those aims.

I intend to concentrate on cuts in the universal credit work allowance today and delay most of my comments about the ESA WRAG payments until tomorrow, although I will say now that I approve of the Green Paper’s direction of travel. Its vision of integrated and personalised employment and health support is overdue, but welcome. However, we need to look out for the disabled people—some 500,000, according to a House of Commons Library estimate—who worked in April as new WRAG claimants. They will still be affected. The flexible support fund—about which I look forward to hearing from my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work—is crucial. Along with other discretionary relief, it needs to meet the wider costs of job seeking for disabled people by April. We cannot deny that those wider costs exist, and we must ensure that we meet them. My support for the Government’s admirable reform agenda for disability depends on that.

Let me now say something about low-income families, who are the main subject of the debate and, in particular, about the first few lines of the Government amendment, which

“notes the role of universal credit in ensuring that work pays”.

That is what we want to happen. It is the very basis of our welfare reforms. We must commend the Government, and previous Governments, for the fact that some 764,000 children will not wake up in workless households today because of the opportunities for work that have been provided. That is extraordinarily important. Work is obviously a primary route out of poverty, and the income tax cuts, the national living wage and the 30 hours of free childcare are all extremely welcome.

What will drive all this through, however, is universal credit that does what it was designed to do, and makes work pay. In Enfield, which rolled the scheme out early, it has been a success. Work coaches have reached out to previously unreached individuals, helping them to find work. More people are working, obtaining work more quickly, staying in work longer, and earning more. The first nine months have been very successful. Universal credit claimants are now 13% more likely than jobseeker’s allowance claimants to be employed, work 12 days more, and are more than twice as likely to try to work for more hours.

That is all extremely welcome. However, there is a risk that the cuts in the universal credit work allowances will unpick the good work of the universal credit: the work coaches, the incentives, the living wage and the free childcare. It will be like a traveller in an airport. We want the traveller to help people—especially those on low incomes—to travel into work. It will now be switched in another direction; actually, it will be going in the opposite direction, which will mean that 2.7 million working families will on average be £1,500 worse off without the benefit of work allowances. It matters greatly to these families. It also does not make sense that these families who are claiming universal credit will be worse off than families protected under legacy tax credits payments living in the same town, the same neighbourhood or even the same street. That is not fair.

There is cross-party concern about this, and a shared concern among campaign groups, which are not always on the same wavelength. Gingerbread, focusing its concerns on single parents as well as couples with children, makes the point that working single parents in the poorest fifth of households are set to lose nearly 7% of their income. A home-owning single parent working full time will be over £3,000 a year worse off without the work allowances, and if a second earner enters work he or she will lose 65p in every pound earned. CARE also made this point in relation to recognising our support for marriage in the tax system, which it says could be undermined. In particular, single-earner married couples on median incomes with two children will lose significantly without the work allowances.

Mr Duncan Smith: My hon. Friend is rightly dealing with the levels and the amounts, but may I take him back to one point that came out of the dynamic study, which was that if we stayed with the purposes of the original universal credit with that allowance, it would amount to a minimum of an extra 300,000 people in work over and above existing forecasts? That is a positive reason for staying with those allowances.

Mr Burrowes: I agree, and it helps to revolutionise things for everyone—those on low incomes and those on median incomes. A one-earner married couple on a median income with two children—those with children are particularly impacted, given the costs—will lose some £2,211.04 per year without the allowances.

This Opposition debate is plainly timely as it comes ahead of the autumn statement. Before all the universal credit is rolled out and has its full impact, we want to make sure that that impact fulfils the first line of the amendment: to ensure that work pays. Welfare reform rises and falls on this basis, and that is why I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) for all the work he has done. That is the basis of our welfare reform. We want this to rise to meet the aspirations of everyone who can work—families who have been put in poverty, and vulnerable disabled people who are the subject of this debate.

I urge Ministers to take back to the Chancellor the message coming from both sides of the House and from campaign groups, who are united in their concerns for these low-income families, and to ensure that universal credit, which is doing great work across our country, is given the boost it deserves and that work allowances are regenerating it to ensure that work pays.

3.2 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): One of the beneficial consequences of the recent change in Government personnel is that we are no longer subjected on a daily basis to the phrase “long-term economic plan.” We know of course from recent press reports that that is because the Government do not really have an economic plan at present, and many of the pre-existing problems in our economy are now exacerbated considerably by the decision to leave the EU. We also know, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) said, that it is going to get a lot worse before it gets better. The Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that pretty much every forecaster says things are
going to get extremely challenging. Six months ago we could have got £1.50 for £1; today, we would be lucky to get £1.25. As those changes feed through, we are going to see a rise in prices and inflation.

Yet at the same time we have had practically no real-terms growth in wages over the last 10 years, and that is likely to continue. Although there has been a blip in 2016 as a result of the increase in the national minimum wage, it is likely to be just that; we are not likely to see sustained growth in wages, so revenues are not going to increase as a result of increasing wages. This will present the Government with an even more challenging problem; they will be facing rising costs, and revenues not keeping pace with them, and they are going to have to take some difficult decisions.

James Cartlidge: The point about the currency has been made several times now. I campaigned for remain, but in terms of the cost of living, which is obviously key to this debate about poverty and living standards, the hon. Gentleman must surely recognise that our country’s economy is unbalanced and there is significant benefit from a lower pound. We need to export more if we are to have sustainable growth.

Tommy Sheppard: The Government are faced with a big challenge, and I think how they manage the necessary deficit in the years ahead will be the measure of this Government. The Prime Minister has talked about just-managing families; we will have to see whether or not we have a Government who, as they have to make the necessary cuts and adjustments to their plans, are prepared to protect the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. It is said that the mark of a civilised society is how it treats the worst-off and the most vulnerable; we will see in next week’s autumn statement whether the Government really believe that.

The Government have a bit of form on this question. Just last week there was a report from a United Nations committee which put the Government in the dock for the way in which their policies affect disabled people in our society. It is not the first such report; there have been many others, yet the reaction from the Government was to dismiss this out of hand in a fairly cavalier manner and say that the criticisms were unfounded. Well, these reports cannot all be wrong, and we need a better approach from the Government to these reports if disabled people in our community are going to feel with any confidence that their concerns are taken seriously.

I do not have a lot of time, but I want to spend a couple of minutes talking about the cuts to employment and support allowance. Perhaps over 500,000 people will be affected by them, including over 60,000 in Scotland and over 1,300 in my constituency. It has been said that the cut of £30 a week in this benefit, bringing it into line with jobseeker’s allowance, is being introduced to make sure that there are no incentives to be on the higher rate. Not a single one of us in this Chamber could live on £109 a week, but let us take the Government argument at face value. It is not an incentive, and the argument that it is fails to recognise the very real costs that people in this category have as a result of their illness or disability.

Over 1,300 of my constituents will be affected by this, as I have said, and I want to read into the record the testimony of two of them. The first is Dean Reilly, a single father of three children. Four years ago he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and had to leave his job at British Gas. Dean is currently in the work-related activity group of ESA and gets the £30 a week. He tells me in his correspondence that this money means he has more security, independence and confidence. It helps to mitigate some of the extra costs he incurs because of his health condition, and it helps to compensate for the fact that his condition prevents him from being able to function normally. One of the symptoms of his condition is that he often suffers from fatigue which can develop without warning. If this happens when he is out of the house, he has either to rely on friends or to pick up a taxi, which can be very expensive.

Dean also uses oxygen therapy to help to alleviate the symptoms of his condition and he attends the MS therapy centre in Leith twice a week and makes the suggested donation of £13 on each visit. That is what he spends his £30 a week on, and he believes that were he not to get it, his quality of life would be significantly affected. In fact, it could be even worse. Dean works a few hours a week, as he is allowed to, at the local Nike shop. He feels that if he was not getting this extra money and support, he would not be able to continue that employment, so would face a double whammy in terms of loss of income.

The second person I want to mention is Lauren Stonebanks. She wrote a long letter to me, but I will only read out a couple of the points it makes. She says the money “helps with increased bills because I find it so hard to leave the house. Most people spend a chunk of time at work or school or university but I’m often stuck in my own house using my own gas and electricity. It also gets used on a takeaway or very, very convenient food if I am too exhausted from fighting my illness to cook. Other times it might cover a taxi if I need to get home as quickly as possible because I’ve become too unwell to be outside the house.”

She also says: “In my personal experience, losing this money won’t incentivise me to return to work. It will demoralise me and make me feel like I’m completely worthless. £30 a week is nothing to MPs but everything to someone as ill as me...I already struggle with finances because of my condition. Financial insecurity and welfare reform wreak havoc on my mental wellbeing.”

The Minister will probably say that existing claimants like Lauren will not be affected by this change, but most of the people receiving this benefit are not doing so on a permanent basis. The whole purpose of it is to get them back into employment so that they can stand on their own two feet. If this change goes through, many people will take employment, and if it does not work out for them because of their condition, they will have to go back on ESA, at which point they will lose money.

For anyone who has a mental health condition or who suffers from stress and anxiety, making it difficult for them to go to work, what sort of additional pressure will be put upon them when they have to ask themselves, “If I take this job and it doesn’t work out, I could lose a third of my income and be much worse off?” That is a horrible position in which to put people, and I appeal to Members on both sides of the House to come together and support the motions today and tomorrow, and to ask the Government to reconsider, to postpone the changes, to stop digging and to have a think and change their mind.
James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I applaud the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) for his great passion. He speaks very eloquently. I could not resist intervening on him about the currency because I think that the key economic challenge for the country involves rebalancing. Every aspect of what we are debating today is affected by the sustainability of our growth.

I want to focus on two key points. The first is why I support the move to a universal credit system in principle, based on my experience of running a small business. The second is that, when we talk about distributional analysis, we need an analysis of the intergenerational impacts of any changes. We have to start talking about all benefits in the system, not just those that are paid out to those of working age.

Last year, we had a number of debates about tax credits at the time when the changes were meant to be coming through. I spoke about this several times, and I said then—I say it again now—that tax credits were one of the greatest mistakes in the history of the welfare state, bringing in a £30 billion means-tested in-work benefit for healthy working people to make them completely dependent and to nationalise the income of the country for political purposes. I say that not out of ideology but out of experience.

My experience of running a small business taught me about the problems of the people who are trapped on the rough edges of the welfare state. I had a member of staff who told me that she did not want a pay rise because she would lose too much in tax credits. More commonly, people working 16 or 24 hours a week told me that they did not want to work any more hours. I heard that many times, and other business owners have told me exactly the same thing. People should be encouraged to make the most of the talents they were born with, and we should not have a system that stymies that aim to make the most of their talents.

What I particularly welcome about universal credit is the fact that it smooths out the rough edges by being more generous in terms of childcare and support. I am sure we all agree that we want people who are unemployed to move off benefits and into work, but we never talk about people who are on in-work benefits needing to work harder to get off those benefits. To me, however, it should be the goal of our economic system to reduce dependency and help people to maximise their income from real employment. The other part of the system that I welcome is the extra support that it will give, not just to get people into work but to get people who work part time to work more hours. That is very much to be commended.

It is quite extraordinary that, for the first time ever, pensioners are now better off than the working-age population, once housing costs have been taken into account. This is something that we need to talk about, because 68% of benefits are paid out to pensioners. The point about housing costs is incredibly important.

James Cartlidge: That is a very fair point. Our voters say, “Well, I’ve paid in so I should get it,” but that is not the case for the winter fuel allowance—as the hon. Gentleman knows, millionaires get that along with everybody else—the free TV licence or the Christmas bonus. Although the state pension is based on paying in, it is a pay-as-you-go system. The fact is that the current young working generation are paying in but they might not receive the triple lock. Also, we know for certain that many of them will still be paying their housing costs when they retire. We know that 94% of home-owning pensioners own their property outright. They have no housing costs. The young working generation are probably paying for the defined benefit pensions of those who are fortunate to receive them, and for the state pension of those who have the triple lock. They are also paying for those who possibly do not even have housing costs, yet they themselves will have housing costs perhaps well into their retirement. We are reaching a critical point here.

Ian Blackford: I am conscious that we should not be diverted from the topic, but the key point here is that the national insurance fund is currently running at a surplus that, according to the Government’s own figures, is due to increase. It is not the case that pensioners are taking their income from others. They have paid their national insurance contributions, which fund the amount that is paid out to pensioners.

James Cartlidge: It is a pay-as-you-go system, but the key to this is the triple lock. The hon. Gentleman is welcome to read the report on intergenerational payments produced by the Work and Pensions Committee. It has my name on it, although I have to say that I approved it having been on the Committee for only 15 minutes. I did not contribute to it, but I welcome all of it. It makes the point that we have a pay-as-you-go system and that the younger people currently paying in might not benefit from the present generosity, particularly in relation to the triple lock, which is unaffordable and unsustainable.

This is primarily a political question. During the leadership hustings, I asked the final two contestants the same question. I said, “Given the situation of many young people, is it morally defensible to continue to protect pensioner benefits?” The answer that both contestants gave me—quite rightly, given that we are a democracy and that we have elections—was that our manifesto had pledged to protect those benefits. However, as the shadow Chancellor has said—I am certainly not trying to pray him in aid—we also pledged to wipe out the deficit. That pledge is now coming home to roost. We are protecting so many budgets and forcing so many disproportionate cuts on others because of this huge cost which we will not touch, and I think we have to talk about it. This has to be done in a cross-party way. We all know the political reality of this situation. I am not naive, and I know the political price that can be paid if these things are not done correctly, but from canvassing in my constituency, I know that the older voters understand this point. They are as concerned about it as anybody else. We have to start talking about how the whole benefits system—not just the one for working-age people—can be reformed.

I very much welcome the speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), and I welcome what has
happened with universal credit. It will smooth out some of the perverse incentives created by the tax credit system, and it will encourage people to make the most of their talents and reduce their benefit dependency. Just as we had radical reform on in-work benefits, we must now start to think about what will happen to those who are retired and who will live longer and longer, so that we can all live in a happy, one nation situation in which all the generations get a fair deal.

3.18 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am pleased to take part in this debate, and to follow the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). He made the very fair point that benefits that go to pensioners in the higher tax brackets could be an area that is targeted for reductions. If we made those reductions, we would not be putting people with long-term chronic health conditions and disabilities into the position that the Government are choosing to put them in by making these ESA cuts.

I want to take part in this debate because in my constituency 6,138 people are either on universal credit—or on jobseeker’s allowance and will be moved on to universal credit—or on ESA. That is a lot of people and the cuts will have a significant impact on some of them. When we look at the wider economic impact, we must also take account of the fact that more than £1 million will be taken out of the local economy—another £1 million that will not be spent in the local high street and that does not help the local economy. The measure does not make sense for individuals—it is unkind and cruel—and does not make sense for the local economy either.

I want in particular to focus on what the Chancellor publishes regarding the distributional implications of his measures. I note that the Government’s amendment refers to the Chancellor’s remarks to the Treasury Committee last month. He simply said:

“I will look carefully at the best format for doing so, including the issues you have raised around the baseline.”

That is pretty gnomic. As well as being able to stop the ESA cuts, I hope that we may also persuade the Chancellor to revert to the practice that we saw between 2010 and 2015 of providing proper distributional analysis, showing how each decile will be affected in the first year and for the rest of the Parliament by changes in the tax and benefits system. That is the detail we want. That is the detail we used to have.

It is incredible that the Government have not published the detail. I do not believe that they do not know what the distributional impacts are. It is possible that they do not care, but they are foolish if they think that they can hide the impacts. Every year, three days after the Budget, the IFS does the analysis anyway, so the impacts are revealed to the nation in the newspapers. It would be much better for the Chancellor to do what was done between 2010 and 2015 and be up front about the impacts and put them in the back of the Red Book.

The Treasury Committee has been on this case for a long time and initially asked the previous Chancellor to make the changes. However, we have returned to pressing the new Chancellor. The Committee’s Chairman, the right hon. Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie), first pointed out that the quintile analysis “cannot be used to determine the effect of government policies on household incomes.”

Secondly, he said that it is “not possible to determine the impact of the policies of the present Government on the distribution of tax and spending.”

Thirdly, he stated that the “assumptions underpinning the analysis” keep changing, meaning that we cannot compare one Budget with another. Fourthly, he said that the attempt to apportion “public spending on items such as health, police, justice, defence” by quintile is extremely flaky. We do not really know how much of these other public services are consumed by people in the different quintiles. If the Government want to do the quintile analysis, that is fine and they can publish it, but they should also do the decile analysis.

I want to remind the House about the impact of the last Budget. The truth is that it provided losses in annual net income for all families except two-earner couples without children. The bottom half of the income distribution gained £20. The top half, however, gained £170. Looking in detail at the deciles, the second poorest decile lose £1,500 between 2015 and 2019, but those next to the top gain £170. Looking at working-age families with children, the second poorest decile is set to lose £2,800, but those next to the top will gain £500. The number of children in absolute poverty between 2009-10 and 2013-14 rose by half a million. The proportion of children in absolute poverty rose up to 32% in 2013 and then fell down to 28% in 2016. The IFS has revealed to the nation in the newspapers. It would be much better for the Chancellor to do what was done between 2010 and 2015 and be up front about the impacts and put them in the back of the Red Book.

The Treasury Committee has been on this case for a long time and initially asked the previous Chancellor to make the changes. However, we have returned to pressing the new Chancellor. The Committee’s Chairman, the right hon. Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie), first pointed out that the quintile analysis “cannot be used to determine the effect of government policies on household incomes.”
a genuine difference to some of those who are most desperate to be given an opportunity to work. Wages are also increasing at 2.3% against inflation of 0.9%. I gently remind the SNP speakers, in particular the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), that inflation fell this week. I do not know whether that news escaped them.

Ian Blackford rose—

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Gentleman has had plenty of opportunities to contribute to this debate and other Members still want to speak.

We are also significantly extending childcare with a doubling of free childcare coming in.

Specifically on universal credit, the key difference is that it provides additional much-needed support. We know how important it is. Only 1% of ESA claimants came off the benefit every month despite the vast majority wanting the opportunity to work. There will be additional childcare, which will be beneficial for lone parents in particular, the provision and identification of training opportunities and specific job search help. Most importantly for me, in-work support will be offered for the first time. Many people coming off that benefit will go into low-paid jobs. They will often then stay at that low level and not benefit from a growing economy. In-work support will be provided. Someone may be told, “Look, you have been going for three months. You have turned up and been a diligent worker. Perhaps it is now time to push for greater responsibility and greater earning opportunities.” That is something that is very much welcomed by people I talk to.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk highlighted the 16-hour cliff edge. He pointed out that his staff did not want to work extra hours. That is not quite the case. They were desperate to work additional hours, but they were just unable to work them, and that was blocking opportunity for them.

On ESA, I wish to take a moment to pay tribute to the staff in the jobcentres, the Work programme providers, including Shaw Trust, plus many other organisations and charities that support those activities. They do a huge amount of work that often goes unseen. They are often not thanked, but I know that they have made a real difference to many people and we are seeing that in the jobs figures.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said, there has to be an emphasis on what people can do, rather than on what they cannot do. That is highlighted right the way through the very welcome Green Paper. I am proud to have made a small contribution to bringing that forward. It is very welcome that organisations such as Scope, Leonard Cheshire, the Royal National Institute Of Blind People, the National Autistic Society and hundreds of others are using their expertise and first-hand experience to help shape policy. I will continue to raise the importance of making them a priority in policy development and in delivering in the future.

We have already seen with the additional £60 million rising to £100 million that we will have more of a personalised and tailored approach. There will be quicker assessments, which is particularly important because 50% of people on ESA also have a mental health condition, and it is vital that we get support to them as quickly as possible. There will be a place on the new Work and Health programme, work choice for those who choose to volunteer, and additional places on the Specialist Employability Support programmes.

If anyone visits a jobcentre, they will understand how desperate people are to have those extra places. It is a bit like getting tickets for a very popular concert—first thing, once a month, it is about getting on the phone to try to grab those one or two available places. Job clubs will provide support, which will be delivered by peers, particularly those who have disabilities, who will give their first-hand experience and support. For many people, trying to return to the work environment is a very, very scary prospect.

There will be the new community partners and increased access to work for young people. There are also future opportunities, particularly through the Disability Confident campaign, which is very proactive in identifying to employers the huge wealth of talent that is out there if people will make a small change. I am particularly excited by the encouraging early results from the Small Employer Offer, which, in effect, doorsteps local employers saying that there is a wealth of talent out there. It asks what their skills gaps are and whether they can find the people to match them. Some really impressive results have been achieved.

We have seen increased funding for Access to Work. At the moment, it assists about 38,000 people. There will be funding in place for an additional 25,000 people. People who do not understand the scheme may say that it only helps 38,000. They ignore, or simply do not understand, how often we need to help people on only one occasion to then be able to get them into work. It could be by purchasing equipment, or by providing additional training. That person could then end up having a long-term sustainable career.

The other area is to make sure that the Fit for Work service supports people earlier than the four weeks, because, often, it is simple early advice, particularly to small employers, that will help keep people in work. It is far easier to keep people in work than to try to get them back in. Finally, we need to make sure that the charities are central to the delivery, because they have so much proactive experience. Their policy teams are constructive. When I was a Minister, it was a real pleasure to work with those organisations. Through the Green Paper, they can help to make a real difference.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am sorry, but I have to reduce the time limit to five minutes. I call Alison McGovern.

3.32 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson). I admire his ambition and commitment to people with disabilities. Unfortunately, I do not admire the changes that the Government have made, especially the Work programme, which prevented the kind of work with charities that he was just describing. It is a shame that words do not always match reality. That is the nub of what I want to say in my brief five-minute speech.
Today, the Oxford English dictionary added “post-truth” to its long list of words. It is a phrase with which we have become all too familiar over the recent year or so. I place the blame for that squarely on our own shoulders. The public disconnect from the words that we say when they do not match the reality of what they experience.

Another phrase that we learned about in the Brexit debate was the “end of experts”. That is true no more of any profession than of our economists. Far too often, we have seen our economy described in a way that simply does not match up with what the average ordinary person wants in our country.

The point I want to make to Ministers today is that we have a choice about what we offer the British people. We must consider whether we are prepared to face the reality of our decisions. In the end, I feel very strongly that they should publish the distributional analysis—this is what I want to focus on rather than the specifics of ESA. In the end, what matters is the money in people’s pockets. We do not want a repeat of what we saw in the last Parliament, which is the better-off half of our country doing well and those with the least doing the worst. If that happens again, it will not be the Budget book but people’s own bank balances that tell them, so we might as well be honest and up front about it.

A couple of Members have mentioned the prospect of inflation and the fact that the autumn statement needs to respond to the possible risks ahead. Because of Brexit, however, we simply do not know what is going to happen to our economy. Uncertainty has increased radically and British people face a more unstable situation than ever before, so the least they can expect from us is clarity and the knowledge that we have looked squarely at the consequences of our decisions.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am sorry that I missed the first part of the debate, but I have been in Committee. As an example of the uncertainty, the hon. Lady will be aware of the collapse in the value of sterling since the Brexit vote, but she may not be aware that as a direct and perverse result of that, the UK’s contribution to the European Union is now £2.5 billion a year more than it was in June. Does she not think it ironic that that alone would cover half the costs of the cuts that are being debated here this afternoon?

Alison McGovern: For the good of my constituents, I have never advocated our leaving the European Union and I still do not. Why damage the relationship that we have with our European partners such that they put such high numbers on the table? The hon. Gentleman makes a good point.

We can choose to face squarely the consequences of our actions or we can try to hide them from ourselves. I ask Ministers to consider the steps that they took in the previous Parliament to undermine people’s confidence in us as a body politic that wants to deal with poverty and inequality in our country. Among the consequences of the decisions taken in the previous Parliament—including, despite his welcome contribution earlier, those taken by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith)—was a steep rise in child poverty that looks to continue and will see 3.6 million children in relative poverty by 2020. It is no wonder that steps were taken to undermine the clarity of the Child Poverty Act 2010 that meant that we could never hide from the impact of our decisions on the children who depend on us all for a decent life and a decent future.

The Minister mentioned childcare several times. Unfortunately, that is a promise in words only. Families across the country are still not able to access the childcare they need to get to work, and the consequences of the Minister’s decisions mean that we are staring in the face the possibility of single parents being hit hardest, given the changes to universal credit. Ministers should make the right choice, be honest and up front, and allow scrutiny. Let us get this right together. We need to be clear and transparent. At the last Budget, the distributional analysis was not good enough and the IFS produced its own analysis anyway. It did not take long for the obfuscation to be revealed. Others will find out and analysis will make the position clear. Most importantly, our constituents will know. They will see the consequences in their bank balance and in the money in their pockets, and they will not forgive us.

3.38 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): It is almost a year to the day that I stood here making my maiden speech and joining Members from all parts of the House to ask for reconsideration of the planned tax credit cuts. We understood and supported the need to reduce the welfare bill, but the planned cuts would have left a gaping hole in low-earning families’ incomes.

Looking back, that was an easy argument to win. No one with a compassionate bone in their body would have thought it good policy to cut the incomes of low-paid working families before replacement systems were put in place, in the form of the national minimum wage and tax threshold increases. However, the reprieve and relief that came in last year’s autumn statement were short-lived, and the legacy work allowance reductions are still embedded in universal credit. Only its slow roll-out has stopped the ticking time bomb exploding.

Our mission now, as it was last year, is to ensure that everyone understands the risks of leaving universal credit as it stands. Although Brexit continues to dominate the headlines, we need to keep our Prime Minister’s vision of creating a Government that works for the “just managing” focused and equipped to deliver. We must demonstrate that we are not only a competent Conservative Government, but a compassionate Conservative Government. It is the detail that matters. It means going beyond the headline statistics and looking at the human detail—the cost, the names on the spreadsheets. It means getting to grips with the impact analysis of policy change.

Life is still very hard for families on low incomes. The high cost of accommodation, low wage growth, rising inflation—apart from today—and the cost of living mean that the transformation of our benefits/work system is not yet over. Brexit means that it may not be business as usual for quite some time; if anything, the economic volatility on the way means that things are about to get a whole lot harder—an estimated £1,000 a year in earnings harder, and that is before we even get on to talking about the cuts in universal credit.

Families transitioning from tax credits to universal credit will receive financial protection; that is a sensible decision, and that is the good that Government can do. A national minimum wage, recent income tax cuts and
Mr Burrows: How much of a priority is it that we make changes ahead of this autumn statement, rather than waiting until April?

Heidi Allen: I think it would send a message and set the fiscal tone that this Government care and are listening to those who, as I mentioned, are running our engine. It would set the tone by saying that this country is, and will continue to be, open for business and can afford to run itself.

Turning to employment and support allowance, I am, of course, delighted that we have a Green Paper coming, and early signs from disability charities are that it is being very well received. However, it is still only a Green Paper and is still subject to consultation, so I remain uncomfortable, just as I was back in February, that the £30 per week planned cut is still in place.

With a new Prime Minister and a new Government, we have a priceless opportunity to build a system that supports and realises the aspirations of people with disabilities. That clearly and rightly is the Government’s mission, so let us not waste it by retrospectively fitting policies to savings targets agreed in a different era.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): This has been a detailed and thorough debate, in which we have heard from 10 speakers. I will begin by responding to the Minister’s comments. I state for clarity that this Government are borrowing more now than any previous Labour Government have borrowed in the past. We certainly welcome the reduction in the disability employment gap, but unfortunately it shows that the Government have simply stood still, because the situation got worse over the past year. The Minister did not answer the question that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) asked about the commitment to halve the disability employment gap by 2020.

I am glad that the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) has suddenly seen the light, but why did he not do something about the issues faced by the social security system when he was Secretary of State?

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) made important points about the distribution analysis and the impact on child poverty. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrows) made an interesting speech, but I refer him to the IFS data that show that cuts to universal credit work allowances mean that the incentives for single parents to enter into work have been significantly weakened. Similarly, the Child Poverty Action Group has described the cuts as being in direct contradiction to the policy’s stated agenda of making work pay.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) for highlighting her constituents’ issues, particularly with the distribution analysis and the impact on the poorest, as opposed to the richest. The former Minister with responsibility for disabled people, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), said that nobody has explained how our proposal would be funded. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington said at the beginning, the Resolution Foundation has shown that

30 hours of free childcare—assuming it can be delivered—are the good that Government can do. However, understanding that those three very positive policies still will not offset the cuts in universal credit for the poorest third of families to the tune of £500 a year is the good impact analysis that Government can do.

Brexit has polarised society, with divisions running through communities and even across family dining tables. The Prime Minister has vowed to lead for all, repair those rifts and reunite our country. On both sides of the House, we will struggle to explain that vision to the 3 million families who will be worse off on universal credit than their legacy tax credit neighbours. We can deliver unity only if we treat all just-managing families the same.

Keeping the work allowances in universal credit at the reduced levels set in the summer Budget last year means a single parent without housing costs will be up to £2,800 a year worse off than their tax credit next-door neighbour. A couple with children and no housing costs will be up to £1,200 a year worse off than their tax credit next-door neighbour.

Universal credit has it in it to be the greatest enabler of social change this country has seen in decades. Funded as it was intended, it will support people every step of the way as they make their transition to independence from the state.

Let us get out of our well-heeled shoes and put ourselves in someone else’s for a day. If I were a single mum with little family support, working 10 hours on the national minimum wage and taking home about £240 a week, would I work another 12 hours just to take home a further £36? I am sorry, but I probably would not, and I am coming from a starting point of mental comfort and emotional calm.

Effective policy must understand the lives of the people who will be affected by it. To keep this country firing on all cylinders post-Brexit, we need the workers who run the engine to be able to afford to operate it. I have said it before, and I will say it again: we need every teaching assistant, every carer, every cleaner and every shop worker to secure our future, and if people are not supported into work, and up in work the engine—the country’s engine—stops turning over. Is it really worth taking a risk with that?

There are options to better fund universal credit. We could review the arbitrary 2.5% factor embedded in the pension triple lock, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) mentioned, or we could review the planned further income tax allowance changes and question whether that expenditure is being efficiently directed to the right audience.

Quite simply, we need to give universal credit its mojo back, and that means restoring the work allowances that drive it. Only if we do that will the wording of the Government’s amendment—that “work pays” under universal credit—be true. Currently, as work allowances are set, it is not.

I could go on for longer on the subject of universal credit, but I would run out of time, so I will turn to the aspect of the motion that deals with employment and support allowance. I will be brief for I suspect that most Members know where I stand on this.
reversing the cuts to capital gains tax, corporation tax and inheritance tax would be more than sufficient.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) made a characteristically comprehensive speech. Her passionate and regular campaigning on child poverty does her and our party credit. The same is true of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), who is brave to speak out on the issues so eloquently and so often.

There are 6.8 million adults in this country who are in working households but who live in poverty. Two out of three of the nearly 4 million children living in poverty are from working households. All the evidence points to the simple truth that, under this Government, work is not a route out of poverty. I contrast that with the achievements of the previous Labour Government, who reduced poverty across the board.

Our disabled people have been battered by this Government, too. Some 5 million disabled people currently live in poverty in the UK—nearly one in three—and the gains made by Labour are now in reverse. Although disabled people are twice as likely as non-disabled people to live in poverty, specifically as a result of their disability or condition, the Government cut £28 billion from 3.7 million disabled people as part of the Welfare Reform Act 2012, thereby increasing the likelihood of poverty. As we have heard, the IFS has shown that people on low incomes have been most adversely affected by the Government’s changes to tax and social security support since 2010, and that that will continue. In other words, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

Landman Economics and the National Institute of Economic and Social Research estimate that poor families with a disabled adult or child have been made five times worse off than non-disabled families, through tax and social security changes. Of course that does not even factor in other spending cuts. There is ample evidence.

Several measures in the Welfare Reform Act 2016 further punish the sick and disabled, but the cuts to employment and support allowance and the related cuts to the limited capability for work element of universal credit are among the most troubling. Nearly half a million people will be affected when the measure comes in next April, losing around £30 a week or £1,500 a year—a third of their weekly income from ESA. Those are people who have been found by the Government’s flawed work capability assessment process to be not fit for work, but who might be in the future. The Minister’s argument that these cuts will incentivise sick and disabled people into work is baseless and deeply offensive. In fact, the Government published this summer their own research showing absolutely the opposite. The policy does not incentivise people; it makes the situation worse. We must stop using this “shirker” and “scrounger” rhetoric, which is harmful and wrong.

I remind Ministers that the Government’s data show that the death rate for people on incapacity benefit and ESA in 2013 was 4.3 times that of the general population; that figure increased from 3.6 in 2003. People in the support group are 6.3 times more likely to die than the general population, and people in the WRAG—the people from whom the Government will be cutting more money—are more than twice as likely to die as the general population. IB and ESA are recognised as good population health indicators, and the Government’s data prove that point.

Consultation on the Government’s work, health and disability Green Paper will barely have finished before the cuts are imposed. I am sceptical that the measure will address the issues that sick and disabled people face, and I fear that it will be just another means to get people off flow. Last year, the Government failed to produce evidence of the cumulative effect of their further cuts on disabled people living in poverty, saying that it was too difficult. Labour disagreed, as did the Equality and Human Rights Commission, disability charities and disabled people’s organisations. Reporting last week, the UN committee that investigated breaches by this Government of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities also disagreed. The UN’s report concluded that “grave and systematic violations” of disabled people’s rights had been perpetrated by this Government.

In the same week as the UN published its damning report, the Trussell Trust released data on the increase in food bank use because of social security issues, and the Supreme Court ruled against the Government on the discriminatory bedroom tax as it related to disabled people and their carers. The film “I, Daniel Blake” epitomises what is wrong with the social security system, in an accurate and moving representation of what is happening in this country. Surely the Government must see red. They must do the right thing and reverse the cuts to ESA WRAG.

On universal credit, we supported the principles of the Government’s flagship programme when it was first introduced: to unify a complex system into a single payment and to ensure that work pays. However, since its inception, universal credit has gone from damage limitation to outright disaster. In particular—apart from the Government’s gross incompetence in its costly implementation—the £3.8 billion of cuts to work allowances significantly undermine the principle that work will always pay under the scheme.

Research by the Resolution Foundation showed that the cuts will leave 2.5 million working families on average £2,100 a year worse off. The Resolution Foundation estimated that the poorest 50% of households will be £375 worse off on average by 2021, while the other half will be £235 better off. Those already on UC will be hit first. House of Commons Library analysis shows that the cuts will mean that a single mother of two who works full time on the minimum wage will lose £2,400 a year. Further analysis by Liverpool Economics has shown that disabled people in work will lose £2,000 a year. The north—particularly the north-west, where UC started—has been hit first: from powerhouse to workhouse. Once again, the Government have failed to publish an impact assessment on the effects of the cuts. The Government’s cuts to UC work allowances, replacing tax credits and topping up income for people in work on low pay, are undermining the principle of making work pay. I repeat the call to reverse these cuts.

In conclusion, the Government’s arguments to justify the cuts to UC work allowances are without any evidence. In contrast, there is a clear and growing evidence base on the effects that these cuts are having on the working poor and on sick and disabled people. At the same time, there is increasing evidence that as a nation we are becoming more and more unequal. After six years, the Government have done next to nothing to curb boardroom pay, giving tax breaks to the highest earners. Last year,
the average worker’s pay of £27,645 increased by less than 2%; by comparison, the average top executive pay of £5 million increased by nearly 50%. The impacts of these inequalities are already being felt. The very fabric of our society—who we are and what we stand for as a tolerant and just society—is under attack as a result of these inequalities. The Prime Minister’s warm words about tackling injustice are not enough. We need action, not just words.

3.55 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): May I associate myself with the sentiments expressed by the shadow Chancellor about the late Debbie Jolly? She was a noted researcher and sociologist, as well as a tireless campaigner. I am sure that our comments will be just two of the many tributes that will be paid to her.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to this debate. It has been a lean-but-fit Opposition day debate, and I will try to make my reply lean and fit as well.

Let me answer the question asked by the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) about the disability employment gap. I am sure he is aware of the evidence the Work and Pensions Committee has taken on the complexity involved in measuring and tracking progress on the gap. I am taking a much more low-brow approach. All Members will shortly receive an invite to an event in this place on 5 December, when they will receive information not just about the Green Paper and how they can get involved in the consultation at local level, but about the focus on unmet and existing needs in their local area. We will crack this—getting services to focus on what we need to do not just to halve the gap, but to close it completely—by, for example, looking at exactly how many people with learning difficulties there are in their constituency for whom roles need to be carved out.

Stephen Timms: Will the Minister give way?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry, but I am very short of time.

The welfare state is a safety net, but—done well—it should anticipate, empower, be seamless with other services, be unbureaucratic, have commons sense and compassion at its heart, and be focused on helping someone in their ambitions as well as on their basic needs. In the last quarter, there have been many tweaks to the system, some so dry and small that they have not registered with the House. Others have registered, such as the decision to stop reassessments for those with degenerative conditions, the increase in the number of groups able to access hardship funds, and our concerns—they have been expressed by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions today—about sanctions on people with mental health conditions.

We will continue to work methodically through the improvement plan: reducing the number of people having to go to appeal to get the right decision; ensuring that our programmes work better and improving them; ensuring we have the reach we need; and building capacity and expertise in our organisations. That will build on the substantial reforms already carried out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson). I pay tribute to them for the work they have done.

The proof that we have listened and understood will be seen in our actions. A person’s experience of the system and their support is the only thing that will assure confidence, but I hope this debate will afford me the opportunity to reassure colleagues on both sides of the House about the specifics that have been raised. To deliver well, we must understand the impact of a policy on people who are often in complex situations and under considerable strain and challenge. There is the challenge of budgeting for those who have suddenly had to stop work or have lost employment due to their condition, ill health or accident, or the challenge of facing increased costs, or both.

Hon. Members have pointed to three concerns. First, there is a person’s liquidity—their ability to afford the additional costs of looking for work and being poorly or disabled. Someone with a neurological condition will spend almost £200 a week on costs related to their disability, and hon. Members on both sides of the House have raised concerns about that. Secondly—this is often exacerbated by the first—there is a person’s dignity and mental wellbeing. Thirdly, there is the obvious point that someone is more likely to get into work and make a success of it, as well as to recover from ill health, if they are able to devote themselves to that. If they have other worries or concerns, their energy and focus on their objectives will be diluted. Many who find themselves in receipt of universal credit or ESA will already have complex situations to deal with, and the delivery of our services should not add to that.

Let me briefly touch on each of those three concerns. To inform our view of the income needed by the range of people we are considering, we have relied heavily on the work of third parties, most notably Macmillan and Scope. Personal independence payments will be able to help some people with some of those costs, but not with them all. More is therefore needed, and more will be provided.

First, there is the flexible support fund, a discretionary fund that is used by work coaches to provide local support for the costs related to getting into work, such as travel to and from training and travel costs when in work. As part of the enhanced offer, we have committed an additional £15 million to that fund over the next two years. The partners we work with are aware of the fund and signpost people to work coaches, so that they can access it.

Secondly, we have schemes such as the travel discount scheme for those on ESA, universal credit and jobseeker’s allowance. Thirdly, we are continuing our work that focuses on sectors such as energy costs and insurance. In relation to April’s changes, we are doing new work with key providers, such as mobile and broadband providers, to see whether they can offer further help. Where there is existing help, we must ensure that our clients know about it. We are building on the excellent work that Scope has done through the Extra Costs Commission to drive down costs and utilise the consumer power of this group of people.

In the context of this debate, I am working to provide a greater number of ways to reduce a person’s personal outgoings by next spring by using funds to alleviate the costs directly related to work, negotiating better deals...
on expenditure not directly related to employment and extending the hardship fund with immediate effect. That will use new money from the Treasury over the next four years.

Happily, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon helpfully outlined the measures in the Green Paper, which will be key to supporting those who are in the WRAG. That support may not seem relevant to some hon. Members, who understandably have focused purely on liquidity, but we have a duty to do more than provide what can only be limited financial support. We must also provide a way through to the workplace for the many who want to be there. No Government support can ever compensate for a pay cheque and the financial resilience, health and wellbeing that come with it. That is why, in the last Parliament, we increased the benefits that contribute to the additional costs of disability and care and the elements of ESA that are paid to people with the most severe work-limiting conditions and disabilities.

The changes that we deliver in April will provide more support to those people—something that I hope all will welcome. Alongside that, we will ensure that the focus on personal liquidity, dignity and the ability to focus on one’s health and work ambitions is maintained. We will invest in helping a person out of their situation, rather than helping them endure it. We will support people’s ambitions as well as their basic needs. We will enable them to build their future, as well as helping them in the here and now.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 265, Noes 284.

Division No. 82] [4.2 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Arlott, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Berger, Luciana
Bells, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinshop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brook, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen

Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawsbv, Mr David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon

David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
Dockerty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Eldford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elliott, Tom
Ellman, rh Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Ferrier, Margaret
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, rh Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Holburn, Kate
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Diane
Jones, Edward
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerr, Calum
Kinsahan, Danny
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Slobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGarry, Natalie
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Liz
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahom, Jim
Meale, Sir Alan
Mears, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Patonson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Analysis, Universal Credit and ESA

Autumn Statement Distributional

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeff Smith and Thangam Debbonaire

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Alkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burt, rh Alistair
Caims, rh Alun
Cardidge, James
Cash, Sir William

Thewlis, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thompson, Owen
Thombery, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Phil
Wilson, Sammy
Winnick, Mr David
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Euslice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evnett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Francis, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
Frer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Hastehurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloway, Mr Adam
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Knight, rh Sir Greg

Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Lewin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, rh Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philip, Chris
Pickle, rh Sir Eric
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Rh Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew

Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Saville, Roberts, Liz
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, rh Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sheriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Simpson, David
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smith, Karon
Spellar, rh Mr John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark

Analysis, Universal Credit and ESA

NOES

Caulfield, Maria
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Colley, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mr James
Davies, Mims
Davis, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Chris
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie

Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Lewin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, rh Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Millling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philip, Chris
Pickle, rh Sir Eric
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Autumn Statement

Distributional Analysis, Universal Credit and ESA

4.18 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House notes the role of universal credit in ensuring that work pays; welcomes the £60 million package of additional employment support announced in the Summer Budget 2016 available to new claimants with limited capability for work from April 2017 and set out in the recent Work and Health Green Paper; further welcomes the proposals for employment support for disabled people and those with health conditions set out in that green paper; and notes the comments by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to the Treasury Committee on 19 October 2016 on his intention to publish distributional analysis at the forthcoming Autumn Statement.

Social Care

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

Resolved,

The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).

That the proposed words be there added.

That this House notes the role of universal credit in ensuring that work pays; welcomes the £60 million package of additional employment support announced in the Summer Budget 2016 available to new claimants with limited capability for work from April 2017 and set out in the recent Work and Health Green Paper; further welcomes the proposals for employment support for disabled people and those with health conditions set out in that green paper; and notes the comments by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to the Treasury Committee on 19 October 2016 on his intention to publish distributional analysis at the forthcoming Autumn Statement.

Social care is “in crisis” owing to a lack of funding. So says the Conservative leader of the Local Government Association’s community wellbeing board, Councillor Izzi Seccombe, who says that “it is no exaggeration to say that our care and support system is in crisis”. I could go on. Googling the words “social care funding crisis” returns 2 million results.

Richard Humphries, of the King’s Fund, talks of “a deeper existential crisis of care”. The Care Quality Commission says that the sustainability of social care is seen as “approaching tipping point”. Ray James, of the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, says that “the Government must face up to the reality that social care is in crisis now and provide immediate funding to stabilise the sector.”

On the priority of providing extra funding for social care, NHS England chief executive, Simon Stevens, says that “there is a strong argument that were extra funding to be available…we should be arguing that it should be going to social care.”

I could go on. Googling the words “social care funding crisis” returns 2 million results.
join me in commending Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council for setting up a not-for-profit organisation to ensure that the money goes into services instead of shareholders’ pockets?

Barbara Keeley: I certainly will join my hon. Friend in commending the council. It is one of the things we talked about to the care staff today. Why should people be paid vast profits from public money, when care staff are so badly paid?

The reasons for the social care funding crisis are clear: insufficient funding in the face of growing demand and a fragile market in the provision of social care. We know that people are living longer and that demand on social care services continues to increase. People aged 85 and over are the group most likely to need care, and their numbers are projected to rise sharply in the coming years. Moreover, the gap between need and funding has grown wider since 2010.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): The sustainability and transformation plan for Staffordshire, some of which has been leaked to me, NHS England and NHS Improvement having categorically refused to make it available to Members of Parliament, shows a deficit for Staffordshire over the coming years of more than £250 million. Is that not appalling?

Barbara Keeley: It is dreadful. The deficit in Greater Manchester is £1.75 billion, so the problem is the same up and down the country.

We have had six years of Government cuts to local authority budgets, and that has seen local authority spending on the care and support needs of older and disabled people fall by 11% in real terms. In fact, the number of people getting publicly funded support has plummeted: 400,000 fewer now than in 2009-10. Such facts are shocking, but behind the statistics are real issues: the impact that cuts to social care are having on the NHS, on people who need care and on unpaid family carers.

First, I will deal with the issues that the crisis in social care causes for the NHS. As the Nuffield Trust states:

“Hospitals have struggled to meet the needs of the older age group in a timely way, in both emergency departments and inpatient admissions”.

The most visible manifestation of the pressures caused by cuts to social care budgets is the rapid growth of delayed transfers of care from hospital. The September figure of over 196,000 delay days is another record—the highest figure for six years—and it comes not in winter but at the end of summer. That means for the NHS, on people who need care and on unpaid family carers.

People should not be stuck for weeks or months in hospital, waiting for a care home placement or a nursing home placement. I shall go on to say why.

The hon. Lady mentioned the most common causes of delayed transfers of care. However, I know that in hospitals in Kent near my constituency, around 30% of the delayed transfers of care are attributable to delays in social care and the majority are for other reasons. Does she not agree that it is important for the NHS to take its own steps within its own organisations to improve people’s discharge from hospital?

Barbara Keeley: That is what we are debating. Of course the NHS should put its own house in order, too, but delays should not happen on account of social care. People should not be stuck for weeks or months in hospital, waiting for a care home placement or a nursing home placement. I shall go on to say why.

Returning to the issue of the backloading of funding, in view of what was happening to social care, the Local Government Association and the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services appealed before the last autumn statement for £700 million of the promised better care funding to be moved forward to this year and next year. That appeal was ignored. Reacting to that, Ray James of ADASS said:

“Ministers must know that their proposals do not deliver sufficient funding to meet the growing number of older and disabled people requiring increasingly complex care and support...The Council Tax precept will raise least money in areas of greatest need which risks heightening inequality. Councils in deprived areas will have greatest social care needs, yet they will raise less than a third of what more affluent areas do through this approach.”

He went on by clarifying that ADASS does not believe that the funding for the next couple of years will anywhere near meet the costs of the national living wage and the increasing demand for social care.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In my Hull constituency, not only have we seen massive cuts to the local government budget since 2010, but the precept that we can raise—2%—is much smaller than the gap in the budget for social care. By comparison, wealthier areas of Yorkshire such as East Riding are able to raise far more, so this is a double whammy for deprived areas.
Barbara Keeley: It is indeed. The gap in my Salford local authority area is £1.1 million. We can raise only £1.6 million from the social care precept, while just paying the national living wage in the care sector is costing us £2.7 million.

Let me return to the matter of where the promised funding sits. In our motion, we call on the Government once again
“to bring forward promised funding”
for 2019-20
“to address the current funding crisis”
in social care. I am sure that the Health Secretary hears plenty about the impacts on the NHS of the missing funding for social care, but let us also think about the impacts on the people who actually need that care.

The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) mentioned the thousands of patients stuck in hospital. We should be aware that keeping them there longer than necessary can have a number of detrimental effects. Long stays can affect patient morale and patient mobility, and of course increase patients’ risk of catching hospital-acquired infections.

Effects on mobility can be particularly keenly felt by older patients. As Professor John Young said in the 2014 national audit of intermediary care:
“A wait of more than two days negates the additional benefit of intermediate care, and seven days is associated with a 10% decline in muscle strength.”

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, observed when the Committee published its own report on discharging older people from hospitals:
“Delayed discharge is damaging the health of patients and that of the public purse.”

Cuts to the funding of social care also affect a larger group of older and vulnerable people, and those cuts are now having a major impact on family carers. Age UK estimates that more than a million older people in England are living with unmet social care needs. I was struck by what the Unison staff told me about the many people they see during their care visits who are lonely and isolated.

Social care services have clearly failed to keep pace with increasing demand. Carers UK tells us that the drop in social care support, in the context of the increasing needs of our ageing population, is having a profound impact on the unpaid family carers who are stepping in to provide more care than ever before. It also tells us that the increase in the number of people providing care, and the increased number of hours of care that they provide, are being delivered at a huge personal cost to those family carers if they are not well supported—as, in all too many cases, they are not.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a case for more funds for social care. May I ask how the Labour party would raise that money? Would it give more to local authorities, or would it increase council tax precepts further?

Barbara Keeley: Our motion asks for promised funding that is backloaded to 2019-20 to be moved forward. The LGA and ADASS wanted it to be moved last year, and that is what we keep asking for.

Maria Caulfield: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way again; she is being extremely generous. Will she tell me, however, whether she is committing her party to delivering that money to local authorities directly, or to allowing them to increase their precepts?

Barbara Keeley: We do not even know what the Chancellor is going to do next week. The hon. Lady has invited me to make a declaration today, and it was a nice try, but we did not hear a word from Ministers about their plans during Health questions yesterday. I will, however, make what I think is an important point to the hon. Lady and to any other Member who raises the same issue. Labour would not have put our councils in this position to start with. If the hon. Lady looks back at our spending plans, or looks at the analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies relating to the different parties, she will find that our plans meant that we did not have to make the cuts that her party has made. This Government’s cuts will take £5 billion out of social care. I will send her the link to the IFS analysis if she wants to read it.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. The scale of the crisis in some areas is very serious, and it will become even worse following the increase in the minimum wage. Although that increase is welcome, if the local authorities do not have the budgets to cover it, the crisis will be exacerbated.

Is my hon. Friend aware that many providers in both the private and the charitable sectors are returning council contracts? They are saying, “We can no longer make this pay; in fact, we will go bankrupt if we carry on servicing the council.” That is adding to the current problems.

Barbara Keeley: My hon. Friend has made a key point. I have already mentioned the fragility of the care market. We shall not be able to explore that fully during my speech, but it is a serious factor. If we do not get the funding right, more and more care providers will simply walk away. At the Unison meeting, members of a Leicestershire rehabilitation team spoke of the problems that they experience when care providers walk away from a contract. When the staff are not there any more, they have to plug the gaps.

Mr Clive Bets (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Communities and Local Government Committee is conducting an inquiry into the funding of social care. We have learned that not only are care providers handing contracts back, but councils are terminating contracts because of the inadequacy of the care that is provided. Ultimately, that means that individuals do not receive the care that they should be receiving. Their appointments are cancelled, or there are flying visits from under-trained care workers who are paid less than the minimum wage.

Barbara Keeley: My hon. Friend is right, and I shall come to that point shortly.

Carers UK reports that insufficient support from health and social care services is leaving the carers who are doing all that extra work “isolated, burnt-out and unable to look after their own health.”

The Richmond Group of Charities published the story of Susan. She cares for her husband Bruce, who has been diagnosed with both Parkinson’s and dementia. The struggle that Susan underwent to find quality care...
is one about which I have been hearing from carers for some time. She was provided with respite care from a care home which was of such low quality that her husband was unrecognisable when she returned for him:

“He hadn’t been shaved, he couldn’t walk, and his eyes were crusted...with blepharitis.”

When Susan managed to get home care for her husband, it was also poor quality. She said:

“They didn’t know what they were doing. It seemed like they’d never cared before. They turned up at five o’clock in the afternoon to put my husband to bed. Or they turned up at ten, once I’d already helped him to bed. Absolutely awful.”

It is also telling how carers like Susan feel when dealing with the challenges of negotiating complex and fragmented care systems. She “felt small” and she said:

“You go in there, and you’ve got no idea about anything, about care. It’s like going in on the first day at school.”

Susan is not a rare case of a carer battling to get respite care or home care of an acceptable quality. Carers UK tell us that three out of 10 carers in its survey have experienced a change in the amount of care and support services that they receive. Six out of 10 of those carers experiencing a change said the amount of care and support received had been reduced.

**Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): The hon. Lady argues for bringing forward funding, and I agree. Does she agree, however, that that is not enough in itself and that all of us on both sides of the House must confront the chronic underfunding of the health and care system, and we need to find ways to raise significantly more resources to ensure we have a modern and efficient health and care system?

**Barbara Keeley:** I agree, and our motion talks about the need for a “longer-term settlement to ensure that the social care system is sustainable going forward”.

We absolutely do need that.

On quality of care, I was talking about Susan finding a care home and it giving inadequate care. There are too many such care homes. In its 2016 “State of Care” report, the Care Quality Commission said that when it makes a return visit to a service originally rated as “inadequate”, one quarter of those services were not able to improve their ratings. Susan found poor-quality home care, and last week the ombudsman reported that the number of complaints about homecare is rising and that the number of complaints upheld by the ombudsman is also rising.

**Dr Sarah Wollaston** (Totnes) (Con): I agree with the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on the need for cross-party working to achieve sustainable funding for both health and social care. As the hon. Lady will know, I have set out my concerns about the underfunding of social care in a letter to the Chancellor. Does she agree that it is not just about funding, however, but also about how we support and train our social care staff? Would she like to see further progress made on the recommendations of Camilla Cavendish about how we train and support our care staff to help to retain them as well as recruit them?

**Barbara Keeley:** I agree, and that is why I started my speech by saying we should value the job our care staff do and we should train them properly; it should be a proper job with a proper career path. The carers I met today were reduced to worrying about what they were being paid, however, simply because they were paid less than the minimum wage.

This is what six years of funding cuts to social care actually mean for people who need care and their carers: unmet needs for care; patients stuck in hospital, increasingly because they have to wait for a care home or a nursing home place; poor care in care homes, with one quarter of “inadequate” services unable to improve; poor home care, with more complaints being upheld by the ombudsman; more unpaid family carers having to step in to care; more unpaid family carers having to provide increased levels of care; and, without the right support, those family carers becoming isolated, burnt-out and unable to look after their own health. That is a disturbing deterioration in the state of social care. I want the Secretary of State to tell us whether he recognises the scale and seriousness of the issues I have outlined.

**Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): As chair of the all-party group on Parkinson’s—and motor neurone disease—I have had repeated complaints about the 15-minute calls that local authorities are being forced to introduce because of cuts in their social care allowance. They mean that people are neglected: carers literally run in, and, if the person cannot communicate or has poor mobility, the quality of their care is appalling.

**Barbara Keeley:** It is indeed. There are many examples of that, and we have debated them here many times. The funding crisis is at the base of all this.

I repeat what I said at the start of my speech: social care is in crisis due to a lack of funding. It is notable how many leading doctors, health experts and organisations involved with the NHS are now expressing their concerns and fears about social care and the lack of funding for it. Here are some of those people: Simon Stevens, chief executive of NHS England; Miss Clare Marx, president of the Royal College of Surgeons of England; Professor Dame Sue Bailey, chairwoman of the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges; Dr Suzy Lishman, president of the Royal College of Pathologists; Professor Carrie MacEwen, president of the Royal College of Ophthalmologists; Professor Neena Modi, president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health; Professor David Oliver, president of the British Geriatrics Society; Dr David Richmond, president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists; Professor Sir Simon Wessely, president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists; Dr Anna Batchelor, dean of the Faculty of Intensive Care Medicine; Dr Liam Brennan, president of the Royal College of Anaesthetists; and Professor Jane Dacre, president of the Royal College of Physicians. All those people have expressed their fears and concerns about social care and the lack of funding for it.

I should like to add to that list some of the organisations working in the NHS and social care that are now expressing their serious concerns about the funding of social care. They include: the King’s Fund, the Nuffield Trust, the Health Foundation, the Local Government Association, the Association of Directors of Adult Social Care, Social Care and the lack of funding for it.
Social Services, the County Councils Network, the BMA, Care England, Unison, Age UK, the Alzheimer’s Society, the British Red Cross, Carers UK, Independent Age, United for All Ages, the Learning Disability Coalition, the Motor Neurone Disease Association, and the Care and Support Alliance. Those people and those organisations share a belief that the Government must act now on social care funding, and I urge hon. Members on both sides of the House to support our motion and vote to save social care tonight.

4.41 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “House” to the end of the Question and add:

“welcomes the Government’s Spending Review settlement for health and social care, which ensures that the amount of money available to local authorities for adult social care services will rise significantly across the Parliament, and ensures that up to £3.5 billion more will be available by 2020; commends the work and dedication of those in the social care sector; and further welcomes the introduction of the national living wage, which is helping 15-minute visit. I hope that, like us, he is proud of the introduction by the Government of the social care precept which allows local authorities greater autonomy in making decisions about how they best meet their local communities’ needs for social care.”.

I too want to start by paying tribute all those working in the social care system; there are few jobs that are more important to our society. They work with some of the oldest and most vulnerable people in our society, many of whom have dementia. That is a growing population, with the number of over 90-year-olds having increased by more than a quarter. Life expectancy is up by a whole year since Labour left office. While I would agree that HMR C should carry out a full investigation in relation to an individual care worker, does he agree that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs should publish the results of the investigations it launched two years ago into the six big providers? Where employers are found to be non-compliant in that respect, let HMRC know. HMRC has a policy of naming and shaming employers who do not do the right thing and rightly so.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): There are none so noble as those who care, and they include the Castle Vale carer I met who buys Easter eggs out of her own pocket to give out in her own time to those she cares for. Does the Secretary of State understand the despair being felt by carers who are told that they have only 15 minutes per visit, the despair being felt by those being cared for because they no longer have the contact they once had, or the despair being felt by the family and friends of those who built this country and who now deserve better in the twilight of their years?

Mr Hunt: We are absolutely determined to clamp down on employers who do not pay the national living wage. If the hon. Gentleman or any other hon. Member has any evidence at all of that happening, they should let HMRC know. HMRC has a policy of naming and shaming employers who do not do the right thing and rightly so.

Toby Perkins rose—

Mr Hunt: I will give way to the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) first.

Wes Streeting: It is welcome that the minimum wage will increase and that money will hopefully reach the workers we are discussing. Will the Secretary of State acknowledge, however, that the consequence of the increase is that the precept that local authorities charge residents for social care will be eaten up by the wage increase—even in local authorities such as the London Borough of Redbridge, of which I am still an elected member? What will he do to alleviate the very real financial burden on my local authority and others to ensure that everyone gets the quality of care they need?

Mr Hunt: I acknowledge the financial impact of the national living wage and will talk about the funding of local authorities.

Toby Perkins rose—

Norman Lamb rose—

Mr Hunt: I will give way once more now and will then try to give way to everyone during the course of my remarks.

Toby Perkins: The Secretary of State is being generous in giving way. He started his peroration by talking about the importance of care for the elderly and he is absolutely right about that. Does he agree that we are also talking about caring for people with learning and physical disabilities? The care debate is often entirely about the elderly, but it is much wider than that.

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to make that point. I want to talk about Winterbourne View a little later, because this is not just about older people.

Norman Lamb rose—

Mr Hunt: I will give way shortly, but I want to finish my point about the critical role played by care staff. In total, 1.5 million people work in the social care sector, and I want to mention one group in particular: the 90,000 who come from the EU. They do a brilliant job and we value their contribution to the sector.
If the House will forgive me, I want to share one story from early in my time as Health Secretary about an absolutely brilliant manager, who is Polish, of a dementia care home in Swiss Cottage. The people at the home had advanced dementia and many were unable to talk or move, so the atmosphere in the home was challenging to say the least. I asked the lady how she motivated her staff every day, and she said, “If I can get a resident to smile, they won’t remember it the next day, but I do, and I go home with a smile on my face.” The care that was being provided was, to be frank, completely remarkable. This is a moment for all of us to reaffirm what the Prime Minister said today at Prime Minister’s questions: we want these people to remain and we are confident and optimistic that we will be able to get them to remain.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab) rose—

Mr Hunt: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman, but I want to give way first to my former ministerial colleague.

Norman Lamb: I totally share the sentiment that EU workers are welcome in our country and that we must guarantee their future as soon as possible.

Does the Secretary of State ever feel that he is confronted by a pretty fundamental choice? He can either preside over a system that deteriorates with an increasing number of failures of care, which I know he cares passionately about, or he can be the politician in government who confronts that, who works with other parties and who comes up with a sustainable long-term solution. It is one or the other. I urge him to take the latter course.

Mr Hunt: I absolutely want to be someone in this role who confronts poor care and does everything possible to fight for the highest standards. That is exactly why I am doing this job. Poor care comes in different forms and, yes, funding is an issue. As the health and social care system goes through perhaps its most financially challenging period since the founding of the NHS, I particularly want to ensure that we protect the high standards that the right hon. Gentleman cares about.

Andy Burnham: I heard the Secretary of State’s earlier words about EU carers. I am sure that they were genuine, but words are not good enough for them. The longer the Government leave them in limbo, the greater the risk is that they will leave. Our national health service and our care system could not cope with losing all those staff, so what more is he doing? Is he petitioning the Prime Minister for a decision now that will give them leave to stay and properly respects their contribution to our society?

Mr Hunt: With respect to the right hon. Gentleman, with whom I have enjoyed many debates in this House, neither he nor I wanted the Brexit vote to happen, but now that it has, we have to cope with a very changed world. The Prime Minister said that she is confident of getting an early agreement. I hope that what we are saying in this House this afternoon will resonate with people and make them understand just how valued they are.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hunt: I want to conclude the section about the role of social care staff.

Whatever disagreements we have in this afternoon’s debate, I want the message to go out loud and clear to all social care staff that Members from all parts of the House recognise the work that they do, and that they value it and support them to do that work better. That is part of the definition of a civilised society.

Helen Whately: On the point about the need for a long-term sustainable health and social care system, is it not the case that the Secretary of State is driving through work in devolution deals and sustainability and transformation plans, which aim to achieve exactly that—bringing together health and social care to create a much more sustainable system?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Although this afternoon’s debate is about the social care system, the sustainability and transformation plans are a critical part of the long-term solution for financial efficiency and for improving the quality of care.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) on introducing this debate, which is the first Opposition day debate that she has led. I also pay tribute to the fact that she has had a long-standing interest in these issues. She has asked me questions about the social care system on many occasions. She was particularly right to focus on the impact on the NHS, which is real, and on the impact on family carers, which is also real. She talked about Susan and about the impact on people who are finding that they are giving more hours of care than they were planning or are sometimes even able to give. That is something of which we must all be aware. She asked me to answer a direct question: do I recognise the scale and seriousness of the issues faced by the social care system? The answer is, yes, I do. I want to try to address, as comprehensively as I can, of some of the substantive issues faced in the social care system.

Let me start by saying that, although today’s debate and the majority of the hon. Lady’s comments were around funding, the issue is not only about funding. The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) mentioned that social care is not just about older people. In 2011, we had the shock of what was uncovered at Winterbourne View by a BBC “Panorama” programme. We have had a number of examples of horrific abuse at care homes. The Ash Court Care Home case in Kentish Town was one that came to light in 2012. The abuse there was filmed by a relative on a hidden camera. Those issues were primarily not about funding, but about cruelty—a strong word—that we have tolerated in our system. We have had some very significant policy responses since then, which are making a real difference. The first is that this Government, under the coalition, introduced the toughest system of care home inspection in the world.

We often talk in this House about the work of the chief inspector of hospitals, but I wish to pay tribute today to the work done by the chief inspector of adult social care, Andrea Sutcliffe, and her team. She has completed the inspection of nearly 90% of care homes and domiciliary care services. It is encouraging that,
Mr Betts: The Secretary of State said that the issues in social care were not only about funding, but it seems that funding is the only issue that he does not want to talk about. The Communities and Local Government Committee is taking evidence on social care. We have had evidence from local councils, including Conservative councils, council directors, unions, care providers in the private sector, care receivers, carers, academics and research institutions, all of whom say that there is a funding crisis in social care. Does the Secretary of State think he might just be wrong in being the only person to deny that such a funding crisis exists?

Mr Hunt: With great respect to the hon. Gentleman, I was coming on to talk about funding. I just wanted to make the point that the issue is not just about funding.

I respectfully disagree with some of the suggestions made by the shadow Health Minister in her comments earlier that this is essentially about party political choices, for the simple reason that at the last election, Labour promised less for social care and would have spent less than we are spending. I gently remind Opposition Members that Ed Balls as shadow Chancellor was absolutely explicit in 2015. He said that he would not reverse funding cuts to local government—indeed, he would have made further cuts. Under this Government, those cuts have started to be reversed. Spending on adult social care increased—[Interruption.] These are the facts. Spending on adult social care increased by around £600 million in the first year of the Parliament and is set to increase further because of the spending review, which will mean that up to an additional £3.5 billion can be spent during this Parliament.

Liz Kendall: My council has had to cut other vital local services to fulfil its statutory obligations. The social care precept will not even pay for the increase in the minimum wage—the council is going to have to move money from elsewhere. The Secretary of State is absolutely living in cloud cuckoo land. My council has had to cut other vital local services to fulfil its statutory obligations. The social care precept will not even pay for the increase in the minimum wage—the council is going to have to move money from elsewhere. The Secretary of State is absolutely living in cloud cuckoo land. My council has had to cut other vital local services to fulfil its statutory obligations.

Mr Hunt: I have great respect for the hon. Lady. I am sorry that the hon. Member for North Norfolk did not understand the scale of the funding crisis. I am more than happy to work with people of all parties to come to a sensible consensus. The one thing that unites all the major parties is a commitment to the NHS and social care system. With respect to the other issues, it is not just about rooting out poor care. It is also about something that the hon. Member for Worser and Eccles South mentioned earlier—giving a career structure to people who work in the care system and giving them recognition. That is why in April last year we introduced the care certificate, which is based on achieving 15 standards. It is a voluntary system, but the CQC inspects against it, so there is a strong incentive for care providers to get their staff enrolled for the care certificate. I pay tribute to the work done by Camilla Cavendish, who did a lot of thinking and had a long-standing interest in this issue in her time as a journalist and at No. 10, and on whose proposals we are basing our work in this area.

Huw Merriman: The Secretary of State is right to highlight the need to improve standards and the need for a rigorous inspection regime, but—taking on board what his former ministerial colleague, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), said—does he accept that even if every single care home in the country reached the appropriate standard, there would still be a care crisis? There is not sufficient funding in the system to make it work. Will he agree to work with all parties to do what we should have done many years ago—before the general election in 2010, as he will recall—and get a grip on the issue and, as a country and as a House, try to sort it out?

Mr Hunt: I am more than happy to work with people of all parties to come to a sensible consensus. The one thing that unites all the major parties is a commitment to the NHS and social care system. With respect to the other issues, it is not just about rooting out poor care. It is also about something that the hon. Member for Worser and Eccles South mentioned earlier—giving a career structure to people who work in the care system and giving them recognition. That is why in April last year we introduced the care certificate, which is based on achieving 15 standards. It is a voluntary system, but the CQC inspects against it, so there is a strong incentive for care providers to get their staff enrolled for the care certificate. I pay tribute to the work done by Camilla Cavendish, who did a lot of thinking and had a long-standing interest in this issue in her time as a journalist and at No. 10, and on whose proposals we are basing our work in this area.
and seriousness of the issues? Yes, I do, and I am coming on to explain what I think the solutions are. The point I am making is, yes, the budget—the amount spent on social care—was cut in the last Parliament, as a result of the very difficult economic situation we faced after the financial crisis in 2008, but it is starting to go up again in this Parliament. We need to look at what we can do to try to turn that into a sustainable improvement in the care received by all our constituents.

A crucial point was missing from the shadow Health Minister’s opening speech. There was a suggestion that the issues in social care are essentially caused entirely by decisions made by central Government. We need to salute the efforts made by councils of all colours to deal with the pressures in social care, because those are very tough. Middlesbrough Council, for example, increased its social care budget by 11%—it is the most improved council in England. My own council, Surrey, which is an affluent area, but has a large number of elderly people to look after, has battled enormous odds to expand provision.

However, the fact is that there is enormous variation in the way local authorities have responded to these challenges. If we look at the impact on the NHS, and at the delayed transfers of care that are attributable to social care, we can see that the best councils, such as Peterborough, Rutland, Newcastle and Torbay, have virtually no delays in hospital discharges attributable to social care. That can be compared with Birmingham, Manchester, Reading and Southampton, where there are between 14 and 21 days of delayed transfers attributable to social care per 10,000 of population every working day. That is a difference of 20 times between the best and the worst councils, and we cannot say that there is a 20-times difference in funding between the best and the worst councils.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Members have alluded to the fact that local authority budgets are under the hammer at the moment. More importantly—I have raised this with the Secretary of State before—one of the big problems is having the social workers to get people a care package when they leave hospital to go home, and that creates bed blocking, so we are in a vicious circle. The last Labour Government looked at an offer from the then Conservative Opposition to get together and have a properly funded national care service. Why have we not looked at that?

**Mr Hunt:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that the presence of social workers in hospitals is vital in discharging people, but I think he will be quite shocked to know that 50% of all the delayed transfers of care in the entire NHS happen in just 20 local authority areas. There are many places that are doing these things well, even in the current challenging financial circumstances, but there are others that, frankly, could do a lot better.

Overall, what we see is a picture where the best councils have expanded funding and provision. For example, last year, Windsor and Maidenhead increased its spend by 6.4%, and the number of people accessing long-term care is up by 8%. That was a Conservative council, but the Labour council in Doncaster also chose to increase its social care budget by 10%—nearly £8 million—and it is looking after nearly 7% more people.

This is not just about funding; it is also about the speed of health and social care integration and about local leadership. Where such leadership exists, important changes are happening even now. For example, in Cheshire East, dedicated workers are supporting people with early-stage dementia, saving more than £4,000 a year per client in social care costs while improving the service for patients. Milton Keynes is another good example: its innovative pilots have cut delayed days attributable to social care by nearly three quarters.

Others, regrettably, have chosen to cut funding and provision. There are many reasons for that, but the one thing that is difficult to explain to the public is why, at times of such challenge, local authority reserves have increased by nearly £10 billion since 2010. The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South made a fair point when she said that there has never been greater financial or operational pressure on all councils. Like the NHS, there is huge pressure, but unlike the NHS, it has not been possible to protect their budget since 2010.

What is the way forward in this very difficult situation? I think that it is a combination of the right financial decisions locally and recognition by local authorities and the NHS that they are part of the same team. That is why, as has been said, the sustainability and transformation plan process is so important.

It is easy to knock a process whereby local areas come together to have yet more meetings, which we are pretty good at doing in the NHS and social care system, and it is also easy to characterise those meetings as secret, but the fact is that people do not want to publish their plans until they are ready, and they will all be published by the end of this year. Many Members on both sides of the House criticised the Health and Social Care Act 2012 because they felt that it did not do enough to promote integrated care, but now we have a process to do that. That is massively important for the social care system, as this is the first time that local authorities are properly involved in NHS planning. Indeed, four of the STPs—namely those for Greater Manchester, Norfolk and Waveney, Nottinghamshire, and Birmingham and Solihull—are headed by local authority leads. On Monday, the head of operations at NHS England told me that there was not one STP meeting that he had been to where a local council was not represented. At the moment, it is a planning process and it needs to be delivered, but planning needs to happen collaboratively. It is a significant change for the NHS and social care system, but it is finally happening.

**Robert Flello:** So why is it that Stoke-on-Trent City Council tells me that no council officers or councillors have been involved in the Staffordshire STP? Given that it covers the whole of Staffordshire, the more deprived areas of Stoke-on-Trent and north Staffordshire will, in effect, subsidise south Staffordshire, because it has greater debts. Why cannot MPs have input into the plan? It is absolutely disgraceful.

**Mr Hunt:** Everyone will have input into the plan, but the hon. Gentleman might want to ask his council why it is complaining about pressures on the social care system when it has refused to use the social care precept
and raise extra money, which could be desperately used for social care. That would make a real difference to his constituents.

Where councils and local NHS organisations are working together, we are seeing some real financial savings that are having a big impact. For example, Northumberland has saved £5 million through integrated services with Northumbria NHS Trust, and there has been a 12% reduction in demand for residential care as a result. In Oxfordshire, where the local authorities, clinical commissioning groups and trusts are all working together, discharge delays are down 40% in six months, and those due to social care have more than halved.

**Karin Smyth:** We are having an interesting tour of various councils around the country. I referred earlier to the fact that people have been let down after the 2015 Conservative manifesto, which promised them that they would be secure in their own homes. The proposal to that effect in the Care Act 2014 was postponed because so many councils put pressure on the Government to delay. The Public Accounts Committee has been told that the proposal will be introduced in April 2020. What work is happening in the Department to ensure that that proposal will come forward so that people will be secure in their own homes?

**Mr Hunt:** We are doing work, and I would simply say that we have also delivered on that promise because we have introduced the deferred payment scheme, which means that no one will need to sell their home because of social care costs.

I will wind up now, because I know that many hon. Members want to speak. When we have local authorities and the NHS working together, what is our objective from that process? We want a seamless transition for patients between the health and social care system. We want shared electronic health records so that patients are not asked the same questions time after time. We want a single assessment system that people are not assessed twice by different organisations trying to get different results. We want to see the pooling of budgets, we want to get rid of delayed transfers of care, and we want multidisciplinary teams. Most importantly, we want there to be a single plan for every vulnerable person, to which everyone who is involved in their care adheres. Those are the objectives.

In the face of enormous pressure, the best solution for local authorities and local NHS organisations that are finding things challenging right now is not to slow down those vital changes, but to accelerate the pace of change, so that we eliminate waste and improve patient care at the same time. Councils that do so will have the full support of the Government. I urge the House to support the Government’s amendment.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Before I call the next speaker, I will have to impose a seven-minute limit. I have to warn Members that the more interventions that are taken, the more that limit will have to come down.

5.11 pm

**Andy Burnham** (Leigh) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley)—my good friend—on an excellent speech. She has no equal in this House as a champion for older people and their carers. Her speech, unlike the speech by the Secretary of State, was firmly rooted in the real world.

This is the century of the ageing society. Caring for people as they live longer lives is the greatest public policy challenge of our times, but for years Parliament has shown itself to be unequal to that challenge. I want to speak today to tell the story of the efforts to reform social care over the last decade, because I want the facts to be on the record, so that people can understand what happened and vow to do better. The story explains the mess we are in today. To be honest, it is quite a shocking story of partisan point-scoring and, worse, political cowardice, which have seriously failed millions of older and disabled people.

The story started nine years ago at the spending review in 2007. I was Chief Secretary to the Treasury at the time, and at the insistence of the Treasury I gave the Department of Health the condition on its spending review settlement that it would conduct a root and branch review of the funding of social care. There was a recognition, even in the Treasury, that if we allowed the situation to continue, it could, in the end, damage the national health service. Quite clearly, the funding was not sustainable, and if social care was left to collapse, it would drag down the NHS with it.

The urgency of such action had been recognised almost a decade earlier, in 1999, when a report by a royal commission on the matter recommended free personal care, paid for by general taxation. It did so for the reason that if we pay for free preventive care in people’s homes, those people do not end up in hospital and costing us all more. Nothing was done, and by 2007 the need for reform was urgent. So between 2007 and 2009, a huge amount of detailed modelling work was done and options were looked at.

When I arrived in the post of Health Secretary in 2009, the work had come to a head. The analysis supported a clear conclusion that radical reform, rather than patching up, was needed. Department of Health officials supported the Treasury analysis that there would be risks to the NHS if social care was allowed to decline. A Green Paper was published in July 2009, and the idea of a national care service. Quite clearly, the funding was not sustainable, and if social care was left to collapse, it would drag down the NHS with it.

The thinking was that only by bringing the systems together, with a system of clear national entitlement, would we be able properly to move towards integration. The maintenance of two entirely differently funded systems—one free at the point of use and the other means-tested and charged for—would mean that they would never be able to speak the same language and there would always be barriers to integration.

I was ready to grasp the nettle, because it was clear to me that the NHS was facing a decade of lower funding from 2010 and 2020, and that one of the ways it could cope with that was with the efficiencies we could unlock through properly and fully integrating health and social care and by moving from a hospital-based medical model to a person-centred social model of care starting in the home.

This is where things went wrong. Picking up that I was ready to up the momentum for reform, the then shadow Health Secretary, Andrew Lansley, approached the Government and the House of Commons to ask me for cross-party talks. I thought about it, but I agreed. I thought, as my hon. Friend the Member for...
Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) has suggested, that we should take the issue out of party politics, which would be better for everybody. We had a couple of meetings, in which we went round the issues. I favoured the more ambitious, comprehensive reform of paying for social care on the NHS principle—that everybody contributes, but everybody is covered for their care needs and has peace of mind in later life. Andrew Lansley wanted a more voluntary system, in which the insurance market would come up with solutions. That was where we left it.

Then a bombshell was dropped in February 2010: the poster saying, “Now Gordon wants £20,000 when you die.” I very vividly remember the day when it landed. I was told that Andy Coulson had put pressure on Andrew Lansley to do it, and that he did not really want to, but felt he could not say no. I do not know whether that is true, but I know that the Conservatives, who asked me for cross-party talks, betrayed the confidence that I gave, and they have never seen fit to apologise for that. The point is not about the personal political damage that that did, but about the chilling effect the poster had on the social care debate. It instantly killed any talk of radical reform, and it actually had a deadening effect for the rest of the following Parliament—the last Parliament—during which no real progress was made.

That brings me to what happened after the election, when, as shadow Health Secretary, I challenged the Government from the Opposition Front Bench about the poster that they had put out during the election saying that they would cut the deficit, not the NHS. I made the point that if they did so, they would in effect cut social care: if they prioritised NHS spending within the reduced envelope, that would have devastating consequences for social care and would in the end come back to affect the NHS.

From the Dispatch Box at every Prime Minister’s Question Time, the then Prime Minister used to quote me as claiming that it would be irresponsible to give the NHS real-terms increases, but he never commented on the second part of what I had said, which was that it was irresponsible to do so if we were cutting social care. I did say that, and it was irresponsible to social care in the way they did to pay for their commitment to the NHS. Social care was cut by 9% during the last Parliament, with 400,000 vulnerable people losing support in their homes. Those people ended up in A&E or trapped in hospital beds, piling pressure on the hospital system.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman—this is where we left it. He is absolutely right: that set everything back and meant that there was no possibility of a cross-party approach. There will have to be such an approach if we are to fix social care and, indeed, to give the NHS what it needs, because they will both need more funding during this Parliament. That is the real shame. I did not make my point about Andrew Lansley for political reasons; I just want people to understand what happened, so that the current generations of politicians might do something different.

The answers we have since had from the Government are wholly inadequate. We have heard today that the precept does not raise enough money, particularly for poorer councils. It is no answer; in fact, it just cynically devolves the responsibility for the whole issue to local government, even though councils did not create the problem. I still favour an all-in system. I will say it: I favour a system in which we ask older people to pay a set contribution, so that they have peace of mind in later life, with all their care costs covered.

Mr Jeremy Hunt: I am listening very carefully to the right hon. Gentleman. In the spirit of wanting to rise above party politics, will he agree that it was totally wrong of him to suggest at any stage in the last Parliament that the Government wanted to privatisate the NHS, when we have never had the intention to do so? It was wholly irresponsible to scare the public about that.

Andy Burnham: In a week when Virgin Care is taking on a huge community care contract, I do not think the Secretary of State should be making that point—particularly the Secretary of State who privatised ambulance services in Greater Manchester. I honestly do not think we need to go there.

The point that I am making is about funding social care. The Conservatives claimed that we were introducing a new inheritance tax. Do people not understand that just 3.4% of estates in this country attract inheritance tax? Why is that? Because the vast majority of estates are whittled down by the costs of care—tens of thousands of pounds, or hundreds of thousands of pounds for some people. That is not fair and it is not sustainable. We must be able to do better.

I feel so strongly about this because I saw my grandmother go through the care system in England 20 years ago and, frankly, it was nowhere near good enough. I arrived here saying that I would do something about it. I tried to do something about it, but we have not got anywhere near a solution to the scale of the challenge. People will need to put party politics aside and find common ground. The point scoring and failure to grasp big issues have led to a situation where people have low regard for this place.

We are left with a malnourished, privatised care system in England that is sinking lower as we speak. A culture of slap-dash 15-minute visits is entrenched, in which staff do not get properly treated, trained or respected. Standards in care homes have slipped even further, and stories of neglect and abuse abound—we hear them all the time. Countless vulnerable people and their families still have to pay these cruel dementia taxes, which have risen under this Government, losing everything they have worked for and going into later life with everything on the roulette table: home, pension, savings—the lot. That is not the care system we should
have in 2016 in this country. At what point are we going to say, “Enough is enough,” and actually do something about it?

5.21 pm

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I cannot promise anything as dramatic as what we have just heard from the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), who speaks with great authority and knowledge. I follow three fascinating speeches. He was correct that no one knows more about care and older people than the hon. Member for Warsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), who speaks for the Opposition. She always speaks in her quiet but incredibly knowledgeable way and puts a strong case. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out the challenge that he faced on coming to office and in dealing with many of the issues outlined by the right hon. Member for Leigh. The narrow nature of an Opposition day debate does not allow us to go into all the issues that have been raised between the three of them, but the truth is that we will need to do something different in due course to deal with adult social care. These issues have not been tackled as well as they could have been in the past. Everyone has had a go, but everyone draws back at a certain stage. The ageing population means that we cannot continue to do that.

There are two straws in the wind that the House should be conscious of. The first is the integration processes that I was asked to start delivering when I came to office. There was a determination from the former Chancellor and the Secretary of State to make sure that integration actually happened, to deal with the issues that have been outlined today. There is a determination right the way through the process to deliver that at last, instead of just talking about it—we have passed that stage.

The second is devolution in areas such as Greater Manchester, which will give the right hon. Member for Leigh the perfect opportunity to put into practice exactly what he has been talking about, along with the skilled and experienced director, Jon Rouse, who has moved from the Department of Health. No one knows more about it than he does. That provides the perfect opportunity to deliver on what the right hon. Gentleman has been saying.

I should declare an interest not only as a former Minister, but as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on carers. In the few brief minutes allotted to me, I want to take the opportunity to thank carers for what they do and speak about how this issue impacts on them. It is obvious that the difficulties of provision elsewhere impact very much on the 6 million carers in the United Kingdom, who provide largely unpaid services to care for their loved ones and who do an exceptional job.

I am very pleased to have kicked off a review of the carer’s strategy, which is working its way through the system. The Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), will deliver that review in due course, and I am very interested to hear what will be said.

To give some background on finances for a moment, the financial situation is very difficult. I want to support my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in the Lobby tonight because I know how hard he tried in the financial settlement of 2015 and the extent to which he succeeded. I will mention two things. First, he got an increased amount into social care. Secondly, in recognising that more money was needed and introducing the social precept, the former Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), crossed quite an important barrier. No longer would the Government’s position be that there was enough money in the system; allowing local authorities to raise more money was a recognition that more money was indeed necessary. The nature of the settlement means that the early years are difficult, but more money will be going in due course. The situation is exceptionally difficult. No former Minister or Member of Parliament would say that things are not incredibly stretched—they are—but I know how hard my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State fought to get that money coming through.

The key point my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made, which is desperately relevant, is this business of variation in practice. I was constantly concerned about how it could be that, at a time when it has never been easier to transfer knowledge from one area to another, two neighbouring areas could have radically different processes that meant one area had more difficulties than the other and the best practice in one area delivered better results. Until there is the sense that best practice can be followed everywhere, we will not get the changes we need—my right hon. Friend highlighted some of those. We see the same thing in terms of delivery of the Care Act 2014 and in relation to work on the better care fund.

As for areas where things will continue to improve, I am very pleased that my right hon. Friend said what he did about Andrea Sutcliffe and the Care Quality Commission in relation to care homes. It is very important that the work continues to identify bad practice and to deal with what I call a tolerance of standards of care in some places that would not be accepted in acute hospitals but are sort of tolerated in care and in mental health. It is very important to address that, so that there is no longer such a difference.

I want to put on the record some areas of concern. Yes, things are increasingly stretched. I want to raise the employment issues there are for carers. We have spent a lot of time and effort on looking at childcare and the ability of people to cope with their childcare responsibilities. We now need to look at those caring for people who may be older, and who are older themselves. I hope that an important part of the review that is coming forward will look at what employers can do to make things easier for carers.

I want to emphasise the dark corners that exist. There have been complaints to the ombudsman because people are afraid of making complaints about the care of their family members due to the fear of reprisals. That simply should not happen, and it is right that we are alert to it. I thank groups such as Your Voice Matters for their work; Jenny Moore from that group came to me with her concerns. Sometimes pressure groups can be an irritant—they are the stone in the shoe that makes the difference. I make a plea to them and others to work together to bring their concerns forward. People should not feel that they face reprisals for raising complaints. That is extremely important.
Mr Jeremy Hunt: Just before my right hon. Friend wraps up, I want to put on record my thanks to him for his outstanding work in my Department, both in mental health and in social care, and for his real commitment to the voluntary organisations and the patients and service users in those areas.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Alistair Burt: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend and to other colleagues. I loved and enjoyed the job. There is much more good work still to be done. I saw good examples everywhere. The concern we all share is how to make the examples of the best the quality of everywhere. There is no reason why that should not be the case.

In the extra minute I now have—I thank my right hon. Friend for his kindness there—I will look ahead. The things that will continue to make a difference include, first, more co-ordinated working and, secondly, new technology. We must look at how technology can be used, including remote monitoring and different ways of providing care, both in homes and for care workers. Increasingly, technology will make a difference.

Thirdly, on environments for living, there will be more retirement communities, more people will live together, and there will be a greater consideration of independence and self-care. I should always mention the work of Men in Sheds to combat loneliness and isolation, as they need more recognition.

Is there a need for more money? I encourage my right hon. Friend to continue what he started with the settlement process, for which he fought very hard. The whole Department needs to be behind the Secretary of State as he continues to make the arguments, because life for some is just too stretched. A combination of the right quality of care and the right amount of money will make a considerable difference.

5.30 pm

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): I am afraid it was the same old story from the Secretary of State: no response to the funding crisis. It is a national crisis and a national disgrace that social care is not being funded properly.

The social care system should of course become more efficient, but much work by local authorities and local health providers to make it more efficient and bring about improvements has already taken place. The simple fact, however, is that there is just not enough money. My local authority, Halton Borough Council, works closely with local NHS providers, but it has suffered a 50% cut in its budget, so how can it be expected to sustain and grow support for adult social care?

In the time I have, I want to quote parts the Care Quality Commission “State of Care” report of 13 October. It states that demands are increasing on health and social care, but that “despite increasingly challenging circumstances, much good care is being delivered”.

We know that, but it goes on to say:

“However, the sustainability of this position is in doubt...The financial challenges in the NHS have been extensively documented...there has been evidence of a deterioration in quality...and some providers...are struggling to improve their rating beyond ‘requires improvement’.”

By the end of 2015-16, NHS providers had overspent their budgets by £2.4 billion. Local authorities were reported to have overspent by £168 million. Delivering high-quality care, while achieving good financial management is therefore more important and more challenging than ever before.

The fragility of the adult social care market and the pressure on primary care services are now beginning to impact both on the people who rely on these services and on the performance of secondary care. The evidence suggests we may be approaching a tipping point. Profit margins are reducing because of pressures on fees and cost pressures that include the national living wage. Some providers are already starting to hand back home care contracts as undeliverable. Local authorities predict more of that to come.

The Treasury allowed local authorities to raise an additional 2% above the existing threshold, but this amounts to only £790,000 in 2016 for Halton Borough Council. That is well short of meeting the increased cost of adult social care. In addition to the costs, the council is facing its sixth year of austerity measures and has to find a further £30.3 million by 2020. Adult social care has delivered £17.4 million in savings in savings from 2011 to 2017, but this level of savings is no longer sustainable given the pressures on the service. That pressure is compounded by increasing demand and financial constraints from health services, which can have a direct impact on social care services. Halton has to find an additional £2.9 million, while the additional precept it has received amounts to only £790,000. The council tells me that the adult social care and funding reform allocations in the Care Act 2014, which moved into the settlement funding assessment, are insufficient to meet the requirements of part 1 of the Act.

The national living wage is the greatest financial pressure at present facing adult social care, and the Government are not funding it. The ageing population of Halton is increasing, and that is part of a general change in demographics. The number of residents aged 65-plus will increase by 43% by 2037. Care providers, on the other hand, are exerting pressure on the council for increases in rates over and above inflation. The expectation appears to be that local authorities should fully fund the additional costs. I pay tribute to our care workers, who work under great pressure with a greater workload and fewer staff. Things do go wrong from time to time and they have to be addressed, but the care workers do a fine job. I was struck by the findings in the Unison “Care in Crisis” report. In answer to the question, “Have budget cuts affected your work or workplace?”, 76% said there was a greater workload and over 60% said there were fewer staff.

I have been in touch with my local hospitals, too. Warrington and Halton Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust says it is currently engaged in the challenge of trying to achieve the four-hour A&E target, as well as an improvement programme. As part of that, an independent audit was recently carried out under the emergency care improvement programme. On the Warrington site, it reviewed 241 patients across 15 in-patient wards where the length of stay was longer than six days.

The feedback received was that 58%, or 140, of the 241 patients reviewed were deemed medically fit—in other words, did not require a bed in an acute hospital. Of these, 91 required the intervention of an agency
external to the hospital, such as local authority, social care or community care providers. The top three delays identified were: waiting for external agency assessments; waiting for a community hospital placement or other bedded intermediate care; and waiting for the start of social domiciliary care packages. The hospital of course acknowledges the difficulties that local authorities and commissioning bodies face around social care.

On the subject of Warrington hospital, the Minister will be interested to know that I asked the chief executive of Halton CCG whether, as part of the STP programme, consideration had been given to reducing the opening hours of Warrington A&E, but he refused to answer the question and gives no reason for that. I hope that the Minister will look into the matter and ensure that I get the information I should be entitled to.

The Government cannot go on ignoring the fact that there is not enough money. We heard the Secretary of State again today ignore this fact. He spent most of his speech not talking about the crucial point, which is funding, and that is clearly the feedback from all parts of the service. The CQC says that the system is fragile and at a tipping point. This is not Labour MPs or Labour councils; this is the CQC. I ask the Minister to tell the Secretary of State that he and the Chancellor need to come forward with a proper plan for funding social care. If they do not, the crisis will continue and deepen, and the Government will be responsible.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The limit on Back-Bench speeches has now to be reduced, with immediate effect, to six minutes.

5.36 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): A while ago, I spent a week in intensive care—not, I assure Members, as a patient—and I remember well how the unit was unable to admit a seriously sick patient because there were no beds free, and there were no beds free in the intensive care unit because there were none free in the hospital. The ward sister told me that that was because patients, particularly elderly patients, could not be discharged because there were no care home places for them. She described that as bed blocking. That is a familiar story, particularly to hon. Members in the Chamber, but I should tell the House that that was 20 years ago. Delayed transfers of care, as we now call them, are nothing new.

The fact that this is nothing new is a reminder that the problem will not be easily solved; there are no easy answers, but that is not to say that we should not try. In fact, I believe that we should and must try. We must address the problem of delayed transfers of care, not only because NHS hospitals need to use their beds for acutely sick people who need acute hospital care, but because hospital is a very bad place for patients to be, particularly older patients, if they are ready to go home. It is absolutely the worst place for older patients, when they could be at home regaining their mobility, as opposed to losing it stuck in a hospital bed. A few weeks confined to a bed in an acute hospital can mean that an older person never walks again, even though they went in perfectly able to walk and live independently. I say that from the experience of my own grandmother.

I appreciate the efforts being made across the system to solve this problem. I know that hospitals and the social care system across the country are working together to speed up discharges; to put in place packages of care; to identify who needs single-handed versus double-handed care; and to try to make best use of limited resources. I know that that work is being done in Kent in my constituency. A few months ago, I convened a meeting between East Kent NHS hospital and Kent County Council specifically to talk about what they were doing to reduce the number of delayed transfers of care. I should give Kent some credit, as this year the number has fallen significantly: it approximately halved between last June and this June, so it really is possible to make progress, even in a tight financial situation.

At the regional level, the STPs, the devolution deals in places such as Greater Manchester, emerging accountable care organisations and vanguards such as Encompass in east Kent are really working on how to bring health and social care together and how to improve the situation with delayed transfers of care. They must prioritise this and they have to go beyond questions of whose budget the money comes from, whose money it is, whose problem it is and whose patient it is. Instead, they need to look at the problem as a whole and take account of the patient as an individual. They should simply look at what care the patient needs, not whether it is part of one system or another. I would like to thank all those working on this across the country for their efforts. They are working not just to free up much needed beds, but for the sake of individual patients who need better care outside hospital.

That brings me to the question of money. As a society, we face the challenge of people living longer, needing more care and rightly expecting better care. Thanks to the work of the CQC inspecting care homes and care providers, we are seeing some transparency in the quality of care, and we are identifying where there is poor care. Thankfully, the vast majority—70% or so—of care providers are either good or outstanding, but a significant minority is not good enough. It is good to see, though, that the majority of those are, in turn, improving.

I welcome the improvements to care, driven in part by the CQC and greater transparency, but we cannot get away from the need for more money in the system. We all know that the Government have recognised that. Despite the large deficit and debt left by the Labour party in 2010, the Government have committed to funding the NHS through the five year forward view and to increasing funding to social care. Social care funding is rising in real terms. I enormously welcome the social care precept—the extra 2% that Kent and other councils are levying to increase the funding for social care. I have not heard a single person in my area complain about that levy—that increase in the amount of council tax that has to be paid—which I think shows widespread support for funding more care.

It is good to spend money where we can on social care as well as to maintain the commitment to funding the NHS, but there is a case for work to be done so that we know what any extra money spent on social care will achieve. To what extent might it achieve savings for the NHS? When I asked the experts questions in this area, I encountered a lot of vagueness about what could be achieved for the NHS by increased spending on social care.
Finally, I emphasise the importance of having a system that truly joins up health and social care, so that each pound is spent most effectively across both those areas and so that each person gets the right care for them. It should not depend on whether they are in the NHS or social services spheres; it should be the right care for every individual person.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): They say that growing up is optional, but growing old is inevitable. Our social care system is on its knees and, regardless of what has been said today, a lack of funding is the cause.

I invite you to picture this, Mr Speaker. You are sitting in your living room, unable to read or watch the TV as your sight is failing; you are unable to stand or go to the bathroom because your mobility has failed; and you are unable to delve into your deepest, happiest memories because your cognition has failed. This is the reality for millions and millions of people in this country. This is what they live with, day in, day out. They may be lucky to have family members who can help, or they may be reliant on the kindness of strangers to help them with basic everyday things such as washing, going to the bathroom or eating—things that you and I, Mr Speaker, may take for granted in our younger years.

Many councils, including Wandsworth Council, have removed vast amounts of money from their adult social care budgets. The most vulnerable in our society need safety, not insecurity. We need to ensure that robust systems are in place to provide care for people, many of whom might have fought so that we can have the liberty that we enjoy today. We do not need an unretainable workforce or the reduction of funds year on year.

The vast cuts and insecurities do not merely amount to cancelling a bus to the seaside for a day, or cancelling over-80s bingo; real, core care treatments are being cut. The Government: please listen to what I am saying, and do the right thing.

I spent 11 years working in the NHS, in A & E, on the frontline. Our staff at St George’s hospital in Tooting worked incredibly hard, but NHS staff throughout the UK also work hard. Day after day, I hear of family members having to hide in their cars just to prove to the council that the carers are not showing up, because the carers are saying, “Unfortunately, your dad has dementia. He did not remember that we came.” That is not good enough. It is not good enough for our families. This is a cross-party issue. I implore the Government: please listen to what I am saying, and do the right thing.

The current provision in Wandsworth, however, is the “most economically advantageous”, which is a euphemism for “cheapest”. Our country deserves better. It may be said that we are providing high-quality cheap care, but in many cases we are not, certainly in Wandsworth. Both the Secretary of State and the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) spoke about CQC inspections and high ratings. That is great, but Wandsworth council is having to contract out to agencies whose CQC ratings describe them as “requiring improvement”. Let me ask Members this, if they will look up from their phones for a moment. Would that be good enough for their families? Would it be good enough for my family? I think not. I think that all the families in the United Kingdom deserve care from people who do not “require improvement” but are delivering the best possible care, because they deserve nothing less.

In Tooting, I have heard reports of patients sitting in their homes waiting for the knock on the door from a carer who has not shown up. Day after day, I hear of family members having to hide in their cars just to prove to the council that the carers are not showing up, because the carers are saying, “Unfortunately, your dad has dementia. He did not remember that we came.” That is not good enough. It is not good enough for our families. This is a cross-party issue. I implore the Government: please listen to what I am saying, and do the right thing.

As I said earlier, I spent 11 years on the NHS frontline. Now I am in the House of Commons, and I am flying the flag for every single carer, every single NHS worker and every single patient. I am flying the flag for every single person in the United Kingdom who deserves better for their loved ones: for your parents, for my parents, for absolutely everyone. Not investing in social care leads to avoidable mistakes. Not investing in social care leads to more pressures on our already pressurised NHS. Not investing in social care costs lives and dignity.

How much more time do the Government need to recognise that not addressing the current funding crisis in social care is severely affecting lives and crippling our public services? Respectfully, I call on them to wake up and do the right thing.

5.49 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I shall not be supporting the motion. While I agree that there are pressures on social care, the answer is not just financial. As many
Members have pointed out, notably my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), we need to change the system and combine health and social care.

I have worked in the NHS for more than 20 years, and I still work as a nurse. I have always found it odd that health and social care are delivered separately, funded separately, and seen as separate entities. When I trained over 20 years ago, we were taught to treat people as a whole, not to treat them in terms of their social care needs or their health needs. I have spent most of my time working as a nurse in a hospital, and it is very different there. If someone needs personal care—if they need washing or feeding—we just get on and do it because we are looking after that patient as a whole. When patients are discharged home, they get their healthcare needs and medication delivered by the NHS, but if they need feeding, washing or dressing, they have to wait sometimes for many hours for someone else to provide that separately. I find that increasingly difficult to see.

Healthcare and personal care in hospitals is delivered by trained nurses and healthcare assistants who have had much training and are very well respected and valued. Personal care, however, is often delivered by people who are paid less than the living wage and who very often have had little or no training. Is it any wonder that this goes wrong, and that people are readmitted into hospital after ending up at home with healthcare problems? It is no wonder at all that we are facing this issue, and that is because the system is not working, not necessarily because there is not enough finance.

We need to appreciate the skill involved in social—or what I call personal—care. Washing someone is not just washing someone; if a person’s health needs are being looked after properly by a highly trained nurse who washes them, they will be checking whether they have eaten and taken their medication, and whether they are a little more confused today, and if so, why? Is a urinary tract infection brewing? Are their opiates too much? Are they hypoxic or constipated? There might be a whole host of reasons, and that nurse gets on top of those things and keeps that person well. Without that knowledge and skill, delivering social care on the cheap is never going to work.

We have seen hard evidence of this today from a pan-European study that says that the risk of a patient dying in hospital increases by a fifth for every nurse replaced by a healthcare assistant. I am sure if that study were extended to social care and into the community, those figures would be even worse. There has been an historical undervaluing of social care, which has been the Cinderella service in the care sector. I believe we should stop referring to healthcare and social care and just call it care.

The answer is not just to throw more money at the problem. I agree that money is needed, but the answer is to combine both things: health and social care need to be jointly commissioned, jointly paid for and jointly delivered. Currently, social care does not work for patients. They often have multiple visits—four or five visits in a day by four or five different people, with one person who can give them their medication but is not allowed to wash them, and the next person who has to say, even if they need medication, “Sorry that’s not my job. You’ll have to wait for your next visit.”

We heard from a previous Labour Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), that attempts have been made to join health and social care together, but these have not made progress. I congratulate the Government on bringing forward sustainability and transformation plans and the better care fund in an attempt to make that difficult transition to merging health and social care. We are hearing about the progress that is being made, and the Secretary of State said that in places where this is starting to work admissions are dropping by 40%, which is welcome.

I passionately believe health and social care need to be combined. That will improve outcomes and reduce spending and admissions, but most of all it will improve patient care. The only way forward now is to be bold and brave, and when we have groups such as the King’s Fund with its Time to Think Differently programme recommending this as a new model of care, we have to move swiftly.

I cannot support this motion. While I believe that social care is under huge pressure, finance is not the only answer; we need a combined service, and we need to free up healthcare professionals to look after their patients holistically and free up bodies such as CCGs to commission services jointly. I support the Government’s efforts in trying to do that.

5.54 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I really welcome the opportunity to have this debate today, and we have heard some excellent speeches. I want to pay particular tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), who made a powerful speech. I pay tribute to the work he has done, and to his passion and commitment to bringing health and social care together. He deserves credit for that and I wish him all the best as he takes that fight beyond this place. I think he will do great things with it.

My local authority, Calderdale Council, has already written to the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Health to outline its concerns about the crippling underfunding of social care. Following a motion passed at full council, council leader Tim Swift has called on the Government to bring forward the better care fund, to develop a workforce strategy and to accelerate progress towards establishing a single pooled budget for health and social care in all areas by 2020. The King’s Fund report has recently acknowledged that local authorities are having to make incredibly difficult decisions about where to make service reductions, with no room to make further savings. The report goes on to state that without further funding, most councils will soon be unable to meet even their basic statutory duties.

At a time when we are having yet another rethink about how we organise and structure NHS services with the sustainability and transformation plans, the NHS Confederation, which brings together all the different organisations that make up the NHS, has said in its representation to the Treasury that if the Government continue to fail to provide the right conditions to transform the service into one that is sustainable for the future, a tough challenge will become an impossible one. It cites the decisions to cut spending on public health through the local authority grant and to delay much needed social care funding until later in the Parliament as
examples, saying that while there is no doubt that these
have made short-term savings for the Treasury,
there are strong indications that this will come at the
expense of significant long-term costs and could hinder
the transformation that we all want to see. Rob Webster,
the chief executive officer of South West Yorkshire
Partnership NHS Foundation Trust and the lead on the
West Yorkshire and Harrogate sustainability and
transformation plan, made this clear when he said:
“...[Holly Lynch]
We must invest in social care and public health. Our STP
shows quite clearly that modern health and care services focus on
the whole person—and that means their mental, physical and
social care needs. If we do not invest in social care and prevention,
we may not have a sustainable NHS at all.”

I recently spent time with the Yorkshire Ambulance
Service in my constituency, and I was particularly interested in
how the paramedics would be affected by the proposed
downgrade of services at Huddersfield royal infirmary.
It was clear to me just how many ambulance call-outs,
and consequent hospital stays, could have been avoided
if appropriate mental health provision and social care
had been in place. We visited an older gentleman who
had initially simply become dehydrated. He had grown
increasingly confused and, in his confusion, he had
stopped taking his medication. His neighbours called
an ambulance when they realised that he had become
quite unwell as a result. According to the paramedics,
that was not unusual and they would expect to see a
number of similar calls over the course of a 12-hour
shift. He was a proud man and was clearly distressed to
think he had caused a fuss. That ambulance call-out
and hospital stay could have been avoided had social
care been in place, empowering him to live well in his
own home and saving the NHS the cost of more serious
interventions later on. That experience reinforces the
case made by the NHS Confederation to the Government
that without the appropriately funded delivery of mental
health support and social care services, attempts to
transform the NHS into a more sustainable model are
doomed to fail.

Another issue that I want to touch on is respite care.
My constituent, Mrs Burrows, came to see me in tears
last week. Her elderly mother has Alzheimer’s and a
variety of related health complications. Following an
assessment, Mrs Burrows was allocated eight weeks of
respite care a year for her mum. Despite this allocation,
she has to work with social services to find an appropriate
establishment that is able to care for her mother.
She also has to make the arrangements, but she struggles to
find a place for her mother in residential care because
temporary beds are just not available. Part of the problem
is that she is able to book respite care only a week in
advance, which means that she cannot plan ahead. She
finds it difficult to book holidays or confirm her attendance
at family events such as weddings. Mrs Burrows was
particularly distressed because her daughter required
urgent medical treatment and she desperately needed to
find respite care for her mother so that she could look
after her grandchildren while her daughter had the
treatment. However, there were just no beds available.

I want to take this opportunity to commend the
Alzheimer’s Society for the work it has done with its
Dementia Friends programme, which, as of 1 pm today,
has trained 1,752,419 friends, all of whom now have an
enhanced awareness of what it takes to support someone
to live well with dementia. It is a massive achievement,
and I am proud to be one of those dementia friends.
Worryingly, however, research undertaken by the
Alzheimer’s Society found that 38% of homecare workers
do not receive any dementia training and that 71% do
not receive dementia training that is accredited—despite
the commitments made in the Prime Minister’s challenge
on dementia. Some 850,000 people are living with dementia
in the UK and an estimated 400,000 of those are in
receipt of some form of home care. The scale of the
challenge is huge, but if we do not start working on
finding the answers to both the availability and the
quality of social care now, imagine the crisis we will be
facing in five, 10 or 20 years’ time.

Without an injection of investment into social care,
we will have no chance of balancing the demands on the
NHS. Good, proactive social care would require investment
but it is not just the right thing to do; it would ultimately
be cost-effective and prevent more costly and avoidable
interventions later on.

6 pm
Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich)
(Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for
Halifax (Holly Lynch), who articulately outlined several
of the human challenges facing some of her constituents
due to problems in the social care system. We have
heard many contributions from right hon. and hon.
Members today, many of whom drew upon their own
front-line experience of working in the health and care
system and of the difficulty in getting the right care that
people up and down the country are facing.

We must remember that we are debating issues that
affect real people and real people’s lives, which we
sometimes forget in the heat of political debate. We
need to remember that social care and good social
services are about providing basic dignity in the care of
older people and disabled people with things such as
dressing, eating and washing. No Member should forget
the importance of personalised care that provides dignity.
We need a system that is not only more integrated and
joined up, but better funded than the current system,
which is not adequately financed to meet the needs of
the people it looks after.

I want to talk briefly about welcome initiatives such
as vanguards, the better care fund and the STPs, which
are moves in the right direction. I also want to discuss
the future. The right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy
Burnham) was right when he highlighted some of the
missed opportunities over the past two or three decades
to grip the issues of improving social care and properly
funding a sustainable health and care service. Before I
do all that, it is worth pointing out some of the fundamental
challenges facing the health and care system today.

However one dresses up the figures, there is an undoubted
trend towards increasing delays in transfers of care.
That is the truth that the figures show us. Of course,
there are areas of good and bad practice, but the
national trend in delayed transfers of care shows increasing
pressure on the system. Budget reductions in the social
care sector are real and amount to about £4 billion over
the past decade. It is welcome that more money is
coming into the system through the local precept, but
that barely touches the sides when we consider the
challenge of also meeting the increased demands of
paying the national living wage. The NLW is a welcome
initiative that will raise the living standards and quality
of life of many care workers by properly rewarding them for their work—or make a much better contribution towards doing so—but the change is nevertheless putting budgetary pressure on local authorities, which manifests itself in difficult decisions about how care is provided and rationed on the frontline.

One of the big trends of the past decade has been that many local authorities have tightened the eligibility assessment for social care. It is effectively now the case that someone has to be in severe need to receive social care, so we must recognise that the tightened criteria mean that those who receive social care are no longer those in moderate need. That is symptomatic of some of the budgetary pressures that the system faces.

The welcome initiatives—the vanguards, the better care fund and the STPs—are all about the better joining up of what health and social care do together, but we must remember that STPs have perhaps come about in spite of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 rather than because of it. Prior to the 2012 Act, we had strategic health authorities, which helped to co-ordinate care at a regional level. Those were abolished and disappeared. STPs are now a welcome return to the recognition that we need a degree of regional co-ordination of our health and social care system in order to deliver the right care. That co-ordination must be across primary care, secondary care and social care. Housing providers are equally important, because many delayed discharges from hospital are due to the lack of appropriate housing for people with mental health conditions and dementia who do not have the right houses or the right circumstances at home. That is an important part of delivering those local plans to make sure that the system works better for people.

The elephant in the room is of course funding. Yes, we need to transform services, and more money is needed to do that. There are transformation budgets available through STPs to support clinical commissioning groups in delivering improvements in the NHS, but that will barely touch the sides and will not make enough of a difference. The great tragedy is that if we really want to drive integration, we must put the money into the same place. We must properly fund the integration and joining up of care. The loss of opportunity before the 2010 election was highlighted by the right hon. Member for Leigh. I urge the Government to look again at having cross-party talks to consider a sustainable future for the health and care system in which we all believe.

6.6 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I think we all agree that the way in which a society looks after its vulnerable and elderly is a mark of its humanity. By that measure, our Government are failing. Social care services are facing financial crisis under the Tories, with social care funding slashed by £4.6 billion over the course of the last Parliament. We know that demand for care is rising, yet fewer people are receiving services. Between 2001 and 2015, the number of people aged over 85 increased by more than 38%, and the number of people with limiting long-term illnesses increased by 1.4 million, which means that the challenges are great. Despite rising demand, fewer people are receiving support. Research by the King’s Fund and the Nuffield Trust shows that 25% fewer older people are receiving social care support today than just five years ago. Research by the London School of Economics shows that 500,000 people who would have had access to social care in 2009 are no longer entitled to it.

Funding for social care remains insufficient and that only increases the cost to our national health service, as many Members have observed. The Government have announced increased funding from 2017-18 for the NHS better care fund, which aims to integrate health and social care and allow councils to raise council tax by up to 2% to fund adult social care from April. However, there is a shortfall of £1.1 billion simply to maintain care levels at the 2014-15 level. According to the King’s Fund, £5.5 billion has been taken out of social care budgets in the past six years. The most recent budget survey by the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services in England highlights that an extra £1.1 billion of investment is needed simply to maintain care provision at the same level as last year.

Research from the Nuffield Trust, the Health Foundation and the King’s Fund demonstrates that, even if every council were to utilise the precept, the estimated funding gap, taking into account the impact of the living wage, will be between £2.8 billion and £3.5 billion in 2019-20. ADASS states that the social care precept this year raises less than two thirds of the calculated costs of the new national living wage. This significant and sustained underfunding is resulting in a loss of independence and quality of life for older and disabled people, and reductions in carer support, undermining the positive changes for carers introduced in the Care Act 2014.

In the past six months, 62% of councils have had residential and nursing home closures and 57% have had care providers hand back contracts. The closure of services and the handing back of contracts have affected more than 10,000 people using council-funded care.

There is significant regional variation, too. ADASS has already reported the inequality in funding for local authorities collecting the 2% precept, stating that it raises “much more in some areas than others and raises least in areas with the greatest need for social care.”

Although the Government have said that the additional funding from the better care fund will be used to top up funding for local authorities that will raise less from the precept, that extra funding will not be released until 2017-18 when it will deliver only £105 million.

I wish to talk very briefly about the impact on the national health service. Before doing so, let me say that, despite the Secretary of State’s warm words around STPs and local decision making, he is doing nothing to allay the fears of patients, carers and NHS staff in Wirral about the risks that are posed to services at Arrowe Park hospital in my constituency.

We know that good social care is far less costly than a hospital stay. The crisis in social care means that patients are forced to stay in hospital for weeks or sometimes months longer than they need to because they cannot get the care they need in the community. The social care crisis is affecting our NHS. The Care Quality Commission said recently that the level of cuts to social care is forcing hospitals to admit more patients as emergencies, who they are then unable to discharge because the social care that they need is not available for them at home. The number of patients unable to leave hospital because of the unavailability of social care has risen
70% since 2012. The CQC’s most recent annual report shows that the number of hospital bed days lost through patients being unable to leave because of social care not being available has increased by 70% since April 2012.

Delays in securing these vital social care services and the desire to free hospital beds can put extra pressure on families at the point of discharge. Evidence shows that of carers who have recent experience of hospital discharge, a quarter report that they were not consulted about the process. Almost six in 10 carers said that they did not feel that they had a choice about providing care to the person following their discharge from hospital. In other words, families feel that there are no alternatives available.

If a carer is unprepared or simply unable to care for their loved one when they are discharged and no support is put in place, families can find it difficult to cope. This not only has a huge impact on the individual needing care, but can cause significant cost to the NHS, as re-admission is more likely. It is important that in debates such as this, we remember those people who do not have family to help them. The implications for them are far worse. It is vital that we address the failings in our social care system. The Government must find the money needed to fund it properly.

Finally, I want to say a few words about the impact on carers. I have a large number of carers in my constituency who play a vital role in providing care, but it is unfair to expect them increasingly to prop up a social care system in crisis. With that in mind, I urge the Government to do all they can, to take note of the concerns expressed in today’s debate, and to find the funding both to address the current crisis and to put in place a long-term settlement to ensure that care is there for those who need it, whether they are elderly or vulnerable in any other respect.

6.12 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): The motion is wide ranging because when we talk about social care, we are talking about the needs of older people, the disabled and their carers. In my constituency, we have one of the fastest-growing ageing populations in the country, so I understand only too well the pressures placed on my hospital, Addenbrooke’s, when elderly patients cannot be discharged.

My county council, NHS trusts and CCG are well aware of these challenges and are working well together as a team to see what transformation is possible to break the cycle, just as the Secretary of State recommended. However, I know that although they are determined and very capable, they are not miracle workers. As local authority budgets are reduced and we are rightly asking for better value for taxpayer money, it is inevitable that the pace of change will be variable across the country, and my worry is that the standard of care may suffer while that transformation occurs.

I believe that our care providers have the potential to transform. The question is whether they can do so swiftly enough and whether they can do it without a short, fast boost of additional funding to release them from the unrelenting pressure so they can find the head room to manage and make change.

Many of the issues that we face in the care sector apply equally to the disabled and to the elderly. Supporting the vulnerable is a moral and political priority, so for those who cannot help themselves, including the 1.5 million people living with a disability in the UK, we must help our care providers adapt. I shall focus on the disabled, as we have heard a lot about the elderly today.

Our growing and ageing population means that the current terms for the delivery of these vital services are no longer sustainable. Many providers have nowhere left to turn and are withdrawing from services that help those most in need. I have visited such a provider in my constituency, Voyage Care, which delivers 24-hour support to adults with significant disabilities. The care staff are the most humbling and dedicated human beings I have ever met. I am so proud to have them looking after my constituents, but they cannot continue to deliver a service on local authority rates that are frozen year after year. Fortunately, this year I have managed to help them secure a very small uplift, just enough to keep their heads above water, but throw in rural geography, a higher national minimum wage, changes to payments for sleep-in shifts, and a likely reduction in the number of keen eastern European carers coming here, and we start to run out of options.

The Government’s transforming care programme sets out a clear vision for ensuring people with learning disabilities receive the right level of high quality care in their local communities to support them in living as independently as possible. We have some great tools at our disposal to facilitate pathways into independence and employment, such as Access to Work, so let us get smart about this. By supporting this community transition, we generate not only life chances but economic activity. Some 45% of young disabled people want their social care support to help them find and stay in work, but their care package does not include such support.

The debate must also draw attention to supporting our carers. I immediately thought of Alan, one of my constituents, who looks after his mum, Marion, who has very progressed Alzheimer’s, in one of my villages. He has dedicated his adult life to looking after her, but he needs a break, too. I know he has just about managed, but that is through huge personal and financial sacrifice. The value of the care that carers such as Alan provide is about £132 billion—almost equivalent to the UK’s total health care annual spend—so this little debate, Alan, is for you and your mum, Marion.

In financial terms, the Government has rightly allocated money via the better care fund, but we really cannot wait until the end of the Parliament—we need to do all we can to bring that money forward now. The precept is not enough; even if every council out there had taken up that offer, it would have generated £380 million, not the £1 billion shortfall. So we need to bring that better care funding forward, and it will provide an immediate uplift to councils so that they can pay care workers an appropriate wage. However, we should also be looking closely at how care is given, based on time spent, not tasks—and that means proper time, because I want to see an end to these 15-minute slots. Our country is more civilised than that, and cutting corners now means more costs later.

It is not enough for the Opposition to simply demand more money. The complexity of these issues and the current economic climate mean it is simply not good
enough to make such demands without offering solutions. To transform the social care landscape, we need to be as brave as those care providers we are asking to work in a new way. As the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) so eloquently put it, we need to work together to come up with new ideas, so let us get smart. We need to fund areas based on their proportion of older and disabled residents, not on deprivation, as the funding model currently does. We need to ensure—legislating if necessary—that councils, the NHS and CCGs pool their money and resources. The key to unlocking a new model of social care, as we have heard loud and clear today, is to make a team effort. Those in my area are working in partnership, but the Government need to set up a health and social care commission to pull these work streams together. Health and social care are entwined, but, currently, the decision-making and budget priorities are not.

The Care Quality Commission said the system has reached a “tipping point”, with providers starting to hand contracts back. I have seen it in my own county—it is true. So let us work together as a team and come up with a brand-new plan for social care in the 21st century. 6.17 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I want to pay tribute to the careworkers across the country who will be spending today and every day looking after vulnerable adults in their homes and in residential settings. The work they do is hard—often impossibly hard in the current context. On too many occasions, they are paid very little, and they are often provided with little training to equip them for their work.

I am a member of the Communities and Local Government Committee, which is undertaking an inquiry on adult social care. The Committee is yet to report, but, for my part, I think that much of the evidence we have seen and heard to date is damning. The proportion of GDP we spend on social care is falling at a time when need and demand are rising and will continue to rise. That is being felt in a system that is barely able to cope.

The Committee has heard evidence from local authorities that are having care contracts handed back by providers that cannot make them work, with careworkers facing impossible case loads. We have seen evidence of negligent providers, with owners paying themselves six-figure salaries while failing to provide even the most basic standards of care.

Last month, I attended the launch of the CQC’s “State of Care” report. David Behan, the chief executive of the CQC, spoke about how he and his team had agonised over whether to use the phrase “tipping point” in relation to social care, but, in the end, they decided that it was an accurate description for the state of the care sector. While there is much good practice and high-quality care, structural problems in the sector and with the resourcing of care are leading to more and more care being provided on a basis that is simply not sustainable. As that happens, the scope for error and neglect, and for vulnerable people to be let down, is growing.

The Government’s approach to funding social care simply is not working. While take-up of the 2% social care council tax precept is high, many local authorities have told the Committee that the funds raised simply do not cover the shortfall left by the cuts to their budget in preceding years—still less the cost of the national living wage, and still less the increase in demand. The back-loading of the better care fund to the later years of the current Parliament is not working. I asked a local government Minister earlier this year whether he thought that that back-loading created a risk that smaller care home providers would exit the sector in the short term, leading to a loss of capacity at a time when demand is growing. He assured me that that would not be the case, but we are now seeing evidence that that is exactly what is happening. Often, local authority funding does not cover the full cost of providing care, and there is no slack in the system to provide the investment needed to improve facilities and performance where necessary, so many providers are simply moving out of the market.

I recently visited a care home in my constituency that is provided by a small charity and is rated good by the CQC. The manager told me that, time and again, what the local authority agrees to pay does not meet the full cost of the care provided by the care home, and that it regularly subsidises residents from its reserves. That situation is completely untenable in the long term. I am very concerned that, by the time the increase in the better care fund is available in 2019-20, many small providers will have found the financial strain too much to bear, and that there will be a significant drop in capacity at the precise time when we will need capacity to meet growing need.

The quality of our care sector matters so much, because the way in which we look after our most vulnerable residents is a mark of our civilisation, and because the need to care for frail and elderly relatives is an issue for every single family in the country at some time in their lives. Our social care system is not delivering the quality of care or the dignity and compassion that our vulnerable residents need. Neither is it delivering sufficient support for our unpaid carers, whether that is due to a lack of respite provision or to the difficulties that too many carers face in obtaining the assessment of their own needs, which is their statutory right. The underfunding of adult social care is, in turn, having an enormous impact on our NHS through avoidable hospital admissions and delayed discharge, and there is also the mental health impact of loneliness and isolation.

The Government must act now to address the state of our care system. We need more funding for social care—that cannot be denied—and I call on the Government urgently to bring forward the increase in the better care fund. We need a commitment to training for care staff and to fair terms and conditions, and I call on the Government to adopt the Unison ethical care charter as the standard for care across the country, because we know that better paid, better qualified and fairly treated carers also provide better standards of care. We need a fully integrated system that recognises the benefits and savings that can come from ensuring that vulnerable adults are well cared for and supported to live independently and remain active for longer. We also need support for unpaid carers, who save the taxpayer billions of pounds by providing care that would otherwise need to be provided by the state. Cuts in respite care, a lack of mental health support and inadequate carers’ assessments are a false economy, and the Government need to support carers to do their vital work without being pushed to breaking point.
I hope that the Minister will respond to the debate by confirming emergency measures to address the crisis and a wholesale review of the care sector so that it can be established on a fit-for-purpose, sustainable footing for the future. I also hope that the Chancellor will use the autumn statement to introduce proposals for the sustainable funding of social care, to relieve the burden on our NHS and, most importantly, to enable all our vulnerable adults to live well supported, with dignity, for the whole of their lives.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): My constituency has one of the highest rates of over-65-year-olds. They comprise 28% of my constituents, compared with the national average of just 17%. Indeed, the town of Bexhill has more 85-year-olds per head of population than any other part of the UK. Given those statistics, adult social care is a key driver in the success of our local public services. Not only is it directly relevant to the wellbeing of many of my elderly constituents, but it determines the ability of all my constituents to gain rapid access to their hospital and GP. It also determines the amount of money that is diverted away from other local public services, such as education and transport.

I want to touch on two issues where there is more to do to improve social care. First, of 35 care homes in my constituency that have been rated by the CQC, none has been rated outstanding and only six have been rated good. The remainder require improvement or are inadequate, and they have six months to turn performance around or they may be closed. If our local schools were failing in the same way, there would be outrage. That our often vulnerable residents, who are often without a voice, are being subject to that standard is a national disgrace that I do not believe should be tolerated, and I welcome the Government’s tougher approach to the inspection regime.

Having met the CQC to get behind the reason for the failure of those inspections, I believe that much of it is down to the design of care home buildings, many of which, because of their age, cannot easily be adapted from traditional residential homes for the elderly into modern care facilities. More people can use technology to enable them to stay in their own homes, so care homes need to have a higher proportion of patients who have complex health needs.

Many homes are failing CQC inspections because they cannot demonstrate that they can evacuate residents in an emergency, and they do not have the right spatial design to keep residents active and engaged. The state of our care homes means that not only do residents not have the best wellbeing, but when individuals have to stay in hospital, authorities may be unable to discharge them back to care homes because no places are available if those homes are failing the inspection regime and are thus out of bounds. That leads to bed shortages in hospitals and to expensive longer stays.

There is an alternative. I recently attended the opening of a new state-of-the-art apartment block in Bexhill that offers shared ownership and rentals to the over-60s, some of whom are local authority supported. Residents live independently and share in-house restaurants and amenities, which are also open to the public. For younger residents, it feels like any other smart apartment block with its mod cons. Crucially, however, the building offers facilities and care packages, so that as residents get older, they can access care but remain in their apartments. They can arrive at 60, and the design allows them to remain there for life. It is an excellent model for the future, but it was possible only because our county and district councils provided land and funding for our amazing housing association, AmicusHorizon, to build out.

Across our constituencies, land is being developed for housing. Every developer is required to provide infrastructure such as schools, GP surgeries and other public amenities. Care homes are private businesses, however, so there is no requirement to provide them. Since 50% of our care home patients are funded by the state, I suggest to Ministers that they fold in a requirement for developers to provide land or section 106 moneys to enable housing authorities and care companies to deliver the innovative new accommodation that will take people to their last days. Such accommodation should be part of the design as much as a school or a GP surgery is.

The second issue pertains to the joining up of our NHS and local authority social care providers. Much has been made of sustainability and transformation plans and of integrating adult social care and care. I therefore congratulate East Sussex County Council and our NHS team in East Sussex, which have recognised that the £200 million of savings required from the STP and the delivery of a better care package can be better achieved if they join up and work together. Their “Better Together” project is designed, in their words, to “spend £850m wisely, not saving £200m badly.”

To deliver that programme, our local team is implementing a single point for health professionals to access support, integrating social and community care under one management structure, offering frailty practitioner support for the over-75s for early intervention and putting prevention teams together for high-risk members of our community. The results thus far have being encouraging for adult social care: the number of clients going under early intervention watch has increased by 20%; early intervention has kept people out of hospital; 77% of clients have remained at home following early intervention; and there has been a notable reduction in the number of falls. I highlight those issues because they are key drivers for the improvement of social care.

The delivery by the Government of an extra £3.5 billion is welcome. However, it is crucial that we question the operating model in social care. To do so will not only make resources stretch further, but deliver the ideas and innovation that will improve the lives of those who rely on social care in their latter years.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Across the UK, local government funding has been reduced by 37% in real terms between 2010 and 2016, and the Local Government Association has estimated that councils’ overall funding gap will amount to £5.8 billion by the end of this parliamentary cycle. Those cuts to council services have severely taken their toll on the health and social care provision that millions of people rely on. That now presents an immediate risk to those patients and providers. Councils face £1.9 billion funding gap in adult social care. We are at what the Care Quality Commission has said is “a tipping point”.

6.28 pm

[6.28 pm]
In my constituency of Heywood and Middleton, we have been hit hard. Rochdale Council has had to make huge Government cuts of £200 million in the past six years. Social care budgets face even more pressure in the next two years, as the council is forced to save a further £40 million. The social care precept of 2% on council tax this year will raise only about £1.4 million, which is a drop in the ocean of Rochdale’s total adult social care budget of £80 million.

Inevitably, there have been serious consequences as a result of this underfunding. Our hospitals and A&E departments report a 70% increase in bed-blocking. They identify the cause as the fact that social care is not available to allow patients to be discharged safely. The figure was 108,000 in April 2012, but it was a staggering 184,000 this July. Bed occupancy rates exceeded 91% during January to March 2016, which is the highest quarterly rate in the past six years.

These figures serve to emphasise that cuts to social care services have had an inevitable knock-on effect on the NHS, heightening the bed-blocking problem, as patients are forced to stay in hospital for longer because they are unable to get the support that they need at home. By properly funding adult social care, we could remove the burden from our hospitals, so that they could carry on the important acute work for which their services are intended.

I want to talk about home care providers and their staff. According to the local government ombudsman, they are “underfunded and over-stretched”. Sadly, there has been a rise in cases of neglect in patient care and a failure to deliver a decent and fair wage to carers. Some 63% of staff said they had less time to spend with the people they care for because of staff shortages, and nearly two thirds are doing their job alongside fewer staff than they were six years ago. The trade union Unison has said:

“Cuts have left a trail of destruction and this is affecting those in desperate need of care. Care workers do a vital job looking after the most vulnerable in society. But they’re not getting the support they need from their employers.”

I agree with Unison. Carers are an integral part of the healthcare system, and they must be valued and properly remunerated for the work they carry out, year in, year out.

I hope that now we have had a change of Prime Minister and Chancellor, we might have a change of mind and a change of heart on this issue. The autumn statement is the first opportunity to reassure the public that this will be a Government who not only work for everyone, but care for everyone. The importance of investment has been acknowledged on all sides of the debate. Stephen Dalton, chief executive of the NHS Confederation, has said:

“The critical and negative tipping point for the health and care system has been triggered by cuts to social care. It’s imperative the chancellor takes the opportunity, in the autumn statement, to prioritise investment in social care before the winter.”

This is issue needs to be addressed immediately. It cannot wait any longer.

Some people are of the view, locally, that the devolution deal in Greater Manchester might provide a solution to the underfunding of adult social care. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), who is now Labour’s Greater Manchester mayoral candidate, has long campaigned on the integration of health and social care, which he has talked about in this debate. If he is elected, that will give him an opportunity to put these plans into action. However, with devolution comes a £1.2 billion to £2 billion black hole in the finances. For healthcare to be properly devolved, it is vital that it is properly resourced and properly funded.

The Government must act to give health and social care services the investment and protection that they desperately need. In the long term, we must fully integrate health and social care, otherwise many of the most vulnerable and defenceless people will be left facing a prolonged winter of discontent and displacement.

6.34 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the thoughtful and heartfelt comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes).

Today is Unison’s SOS—save our services—day of action, so I join it in calling on the Government to ensure that social care is properly funded, so that people in this country can be properly looked after.

In the past six years, the largest share of cuts has fallen on local government. Given that councils spend a third of their budget on social care, the Government will have known from the very start that social care would be one of the biggest casualties of their spending programme.

The budget of North East Lincolnshire Council has been cut by more than £70 million since 2010, with a further £7 million of cuts to be made by next year, causing spending on adult social care in my constituency to fall by 20% since 2010. People have been forced to live in completely unacceptable conditions, because there is not enough funding to provide adequate care.

I know of wheelchair-bound adults living in a care home in Great Grimsby who have been waiting for over two years for the button that automatically opens the door out of their flat to be fixed. At the moment, until a carer comes to visit, they are effectively trapped in their own home. That is an unacceptable position to leave people in, but it is just one example of the state of social care today.

The council has had to limit access to adaptations by increasing the thresholds for accessing them and capping spending. Disabled and elderly people are therefore often left in unsuitable housing. Understandably, that is also hugely frustrating for carers who are trying their best to look after people in inadequate conditions, while having continually to fight the council and care providers for the improvements they need.

A constituent who cares for his adult son was told by occupational health about six months ago that his home needed the back door widened and a ramp and lift installed. He feels as though he is being deliberately fobbed off, rather than getting the help he needs to look after his son properly. It is as uncomfortable for the son to live in those conditions as it is frustrating for the father to be unable to look after him properly.

Today, the Communities and Local Government Committee took evidence from family and friend carers who save the state so much money. One issue that was raised was the disconnect between the NHS and local authorities at the point of discharge from hospital. There were reports of families feeling abandoned when...
discharge, with very limited support being accessible and no single point of contact or dedicated service to guide people through the options available to them and their families. That heightens the risk of readmission to hospital for many of those patients, costing the state even more money.

The carers spoke of the neglect of their own physical and mental health, with their overriding concern being for their loved ones. Respite that had previously been offered is ending. We heard the example today of two hours of respite being provided a week. That does not seem like an awful lot, but it was a lifeline to the women who came and gave evidence. That was provided by a local charity and funded by the local authority. It is now going to end because of cuts being made to and by the local authority.

We also heard about a looming crisis in intergenerational care, with a gap of hundreds of thousands of carers predicted over the next 10 years. The pressure on social care services provided by the state is only set to increase. As we heard at Prime Minister’s Question Time today from my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), there are also problems with dementia and Alzheimer’s services.

The social care precept is not the way to solve this problem. As we have heard, the areas with the highest demand for care are often those where the precept will raise the least. Furthermore, the Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), claimed earlier this month that the additional funds raised through the precept have been “entirely swallowed up” in higher wages for carers. Although I am glad that carers are being paid more, albeit still not a proper living wage, councils are therefore unable to allocate any of the new funds to improving care.

When the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) announced the social care precept this time last year, he said:

“The truth we need to confront is that many local authorities will not be able to meet growing social care needs unless they have new sources of funding.”

Although the Government have accepted the need to better fund social care, they still need to find that new money if the growing demand for care is to be met. This is not only about supporting people who need that support in their old age or because of a disability; it affects us all. As the then Chancellor also said last year:


Failing to fund social care properly means that patients are forced to remain in hospital for weeks longer than they need to, blocking beds for new patients who need them and pushing up hospital waiting times. Meanwhile, every day the patient is kept in hospital costs the NHS far more than caring for them in a suitable environment would.

6.40 pm

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I welcome the contributions made by Members on both sides of the House. They have highlighted the scale of the crisis we face in adult social care. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) set out passionately the long-standing need for integration. We had informative and knowledgeable contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Halton (Derek Twigg), for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), for Halifax (Holly Lynch), for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) and for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn). On the Government side, we also heard thoughtful contributions from the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) and the hon. Members for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman).

It seems we all agree that there is a crisis. I believe that 2017 will be a make-or-break year for our social care system. That system is currently teetering on the edge of a precipice. More and more, we find that local authorities can no longer afford to fulfil their statutory obligations regarding the social care of elderly and disabled people. Social care providers are handing contracts back to councils because they are no longer financially viable. Beds in hospitals are occupied for weeks—sometimes even months—by people who are well enough to leave but cannot because there is no social care available for them once they do.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): In a matter of months, within the still secret Staffordshire STP, the projected 2021 deficit for social care has jumped from just over £100 million to £256 million. With the NHS deficit, that makes more than half a billion pounds now, excluding anything from Stoke-on-Trent. Without further funding and investment, that gap is simply unbridgeable, so it is hardly surprising that in the past few days both the STP chair and its programme director have tendered their resignations.

Teresa Pearce: I am glad my hon. Friend has had the chance to raise that very important point.

The crisis is affecting elderly people across the country, as we have heard eloquently expressed by my hon. Friends the Members for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) and for Halton (Derek Twigg). More than a million elderly people in this country who need social care are getting no support. Half of older people who have difficulty bathing or getting dressed receive no support. One third of all older people who have difficulty going to the toilet on their own are receiving no support. An estimated 1.1 million are chronically lonely. Is it any wonder that almost 4 million older people in this country now say that television is their only source of company? That is happening on our watch, and we should all be both saddened and shamed by it.

The rise in demand for social care does not come as a surprise to any of us, however. We live in a society with an ageing population. We must concentrate on building a sustainable social care system to meet that rising demand. Members across the House know from their own constituencies, as I do from mine, that the spending cuts have already hit vulnerable people. One in 10 care homes has closed since 2010, and 400,000 fewer people accessed care in the last Parliament because of funding reductions. According to Learning Disability Voices, a shocking three quarters of all people who apply for social care support from their local council are now turned away.
For those who can access care, the bar for what can be described as care gets lower and lower. Staffing levels have been so severely reduced that workers have barely any time to actually look after people. As we have heard, some visits have been cut from 30 to 15 minutes. That is 15 minutes to make someone dinner, to bathe them, to give them medication, to change their sheets and to give them any other help they might need. It is barely time to take your coat off and say hello. In fact, 15 minutes is about the time we take in this place to divide. I hope Members will bear that in mind when they pass through the Lobby shortly.

The King’s Fund has described the care system as a “threadbare local authority safety net.” Although the majority of those receiving care are elderly people, roughly a third are younger people who have a physical disability, learning disability or mental health problem. These people are far less likely to have income to support them and far less likely to have children who can care for them as they get older. In fact, they are more likely to have elderly relatives who live in dread of what will happen when they are gone.

When disabled people are looked after in the community, with a local authority-provided care package, their needs are reduced by up to 50%. We often hear about needing to reduce the dependency culture, and the provision of social care, including day centres, does just that: it allows people with disabilities to live an independent and healthy life. Rather than allowing this sector to crumble, we should be looking at how to invest in and expand it. It has been said here today that the mark of a civilised society is how we treat the disabled, the elderly and the vulnerable. We are failing that test miserably.

Let us be clear about one thing: this crisis is not the fault of those working in the social care sector. In fact, they are among the most undervalued and underpaid workers in the country. Neither is this crisis the fault of local government. Nobody goes into local government and public service to cut care and support for the vulnerable. Local authorities are trying to plug the gap. In 2014 alone, councils diverted £900 million from other budgets to maintain the current level of social care, despite making efficiency savings. Local councils are on the frontline of government, providing the integral services that our communities rely on. It is simply impossible for them to plug the momentous funding gap in adult social care that they face. Let us make no mistake about the root of this crisis: it is the stark result of austerity policies pursued by the previous Chancellor. It is his six years of brutal and devastating cuts to local government that have brought us here.

If we let our elderly and disabled people languish in loneliness and frustration in unhygienic and inadequate conditions, it will be a stain on our collective conscience. What kind of country would we be? When the new Prime Minister took up her position, she stood on the steps of No. 10 and said she wanted “a country that works for everyone.”

Today, the Government have an opportunity to prove that the Prime Minister meant what she said. I would like the Minister to consider three questions when he responds to the debate. Will he confirm that the better care fund is not a one-off injection of money, but has in fact been taken from the existing NHS budget? What assessment has he made of the effect of the living wage on care contracts, and does he have an estimate of how many contracts will be exited in the next 12 months by providers? Will he let me know what steps and checks he is making to ensure that local authorities are not commissioning 15-minute care visits, as recommended in their own guidelines? If the Minister cannot answer those questions today, I hope he will write to me in the coming weeks.

We are all hopeful that the autumn statement will bring forward urgent funding to stem an impending crisis in social care, but there must also be a strategy to put social care on a sustainable, long-term footing so that people can grow old in this country without fear, and disabled people can live with dignity and safety. The Government must recognise that by stripping local government of its funding to the point that even statutory requirements are difficult to meet, we will not benefit the economy or productivity of this country, or the wellbeing of our society. As the sixth-richest economy in the world, this country can, and must, provide this vital assistance to the most vulnerable people in society.

6.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): We have had a good debate, with a number of very good speeches from both sides of the House. I will try to respond to the points, or the themes of those points, that have been made.

First, I want to address the accusations, made by Labour Members, of criminal behaviour in relation to the minimum wage not being adhered to. If such evidence exists—I think the hon. Members for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) and for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) raised this issue—please bring it to me. I will see that it goes to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. Those involved will be named and shamed. Such behaviour is illegal and is not to be tolerated. I think the hon. Member for Tooting also said she had evidence that a care home or domiciliary supplier was forging attendance sheets. Again, if there is evidence of that I would like it to be brought forward. It should not just be bandied about here in a political way. We should investigate it and we will. If she brings that evidence to me, we will look at it.

One of the big themes in this debate, and one with which Members on both sides of the House can agree, is the importance of carers. The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) spoke about that and, rightly, about the need for a better career structure and clearer training requirements, a point the Cavendish report also addressed. Some 1.5 million people work in domiciliary and care homes, but—and this is a very difficult statistic—the annual turnover is about 25%. That is caused not just by poor pay—I am proud to be part of a Government who have increased the pay of many of these people—but by a lack of career structure and, frankly, of regard, and we need to do more on that. She was right to raise it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) made the important point that, as well as the 1.5 million paid carers, there are 1.1 million unpaid carers. In many ways, these are the unsung heroes of the entire system, and we can all agree we need to do better by them. When he was doing my job, he kicked off the carers’ strategy, which we will be coming forward with. It is a cross-Government initiative and will result in concrete actions to make the 1.1 million strong unpaid carer cohort better off.
Several people talked about finances and money. Of course they are tight. The Secretary of State made it clear that in the last Parliament, in order to respond to the situation we inherited, there were cuts to local government funding. During the course of this Parliament, there will be a real increase in the rate of adult care funding, but that is not to say we do not understand that the system is under pressure. We understand that, as Simon Stevens said, if more money was available, it would be good if it went into the social care system.

Members on both sides of the House spoke about bed-blocking caused by a lack of money, and about delayed transfers of care, and it is true. Of course there is a correlation between the amount of money in the system and the number of delayed transfers of care, but one of the most extraordinary things about the numbers is that, between the best and worst 10% of local authorities, in terms of the number of DTOCs, the difference is a factor of 20 to 25. That is not just about budgets—budgets are not 20 to 25 times different—it is about leadership; about good people doing good work; about spreading best practice; about shared assessments, early discharge and discharge to assess; and about integration in the widest sense, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire said. Those councils, local authorities and health systems that have gone fastest and furthest with integration—the holy grail that the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) talked about—are those at the top end of the DTOC statistics. We should all think about that when we say, “We want more money.” We should all think about the reasons for that difference.

I would make another point about finance. An Opposition Member talked about the GDP equation getting worse in this Parliament. That is not true, but I would just make this point: in 2016, the OECD looked at the money spent on adult social care right across the major economies of Europe, and we in the UK spend about 20% to 25% more than other major industrialised countries such as Germany and France. That is not to say that the system is not under pressure in our country—it clearly is—but the facts are that other countries do a

**David Mowat:** Let me make some progress, and I shall give way again later.

Another theme has been closure. Several Members have talked about contracts being handed back, and there is a bit of that going on in both domiciliary care and care homes. Let me put on record the fact that the number of bed places in care and nursing homes is broadly the same as it was five years ago. There has been no reduction. As for domiciliary care providers in the market, the number is now 47% higher than it was five years ago. There has been, rightly, a trend away from care homes to domiciliary care—and we should all welcome that, because people broadly want to spend more time in their own homes. I was asked a good question about the issue of 15 minutes of domiciliary care and what we are doing about the problem. When the CQC is doing its quality reviews, it has a specific question to ascertain whether 15 minutes is the norm, and if so, it would result in a poor quality assessment.

Members have raised broader issues of quality. Let me therefore say that 72% of care homes—a sector that is under a great deal of stress—are good or outstanding. This Government have been the first to do any kind of inspection to find that out. Of course some care homes are inadequate. As the Secretary of State said, inadequate care homes go into special measures and can be closed down after six months. That is the right thing to do, and we should be pleased and proud that that happens.

Also, users of care homes have been asked whether or not they are satisfied, and just under 70% said that they are either extremely satisfied or very satisfied with the level of care provided for them. Members of all parties should come together on this point and thank the people who work in these care homes for the dedicated care and the humanity that they provide.

The former Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), who is no longer in his place, talked interestingly about the vanguards, the STPs and what we are doing to bring in leading-edge better care models. A lot of work is being done on the STPs, and I heard a couple of Opposition Members say favourable things about their STPs.

The hon. Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) asked me a number of specific questions about his STP. I will probably not have time to answer in detail, but I can say this. His STP and my STP are the same, and it is being published today—[Interruption.] It is certainly not secret, and we should have some dialogue about it. The hon. Gentleman made the point that his council was under pressure, and councils are under pressure. I think we should join together to congratulate both Halton and Warrington Councils on being two of the best performing councils in the country on delayed transfers of care and on increasing their budget.

I finish by—
Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Question put accordingly (Standing Order No. 31 (2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 200, Noes 279.

Division No. 83] [6.59 pm

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Tellers for the Ayes: Thangam Debbonaire and Jeff Smith
That the proposed words be there added.

Tellers for the Ayes:

Christopher Pincher

Tellers for the Noes:

Chris Heaton-Harris and

John

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)),

That the proposed words be there added.

Question agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Government’s Spending Review settlement for health and social care, which ensures that the amount of money available to local authorities for adult social care services will rise significantly across the Parliament, and ensures that up to £3.5 billion more will be available by 2020; commends the work and dedication of those in the social care sector; and further welcomes the introduction by the Government of the social care precept which allows local authorities greater autonomy in making decisions about how they best meet their local communities’ needs for social care.
Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Inquiries into Fatal Accidents and Sudden Deaths etc. (Scotland) Act 2016 (Consequential Provisions and Modifications) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 13 October, be approved.—(Mark Spencer.)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Bank Services in Corwen

7.13 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I am presenting a petition on behalf of the residents of Corwen and the neighbouring villages.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Corwen,

Declares that the loss of local branches of national banks is having a dramatic effect on local communities; further that it is leaving towns and villages cut off from local financial services; further that the loss of banking services in Corwen is forcing people to travel to other towns to use their banking services; and further that this is resulting in the reduction of visitors to Corwen and a decline in income for local retail businesses.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

PETITION

Prison Officer Safety

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

7.14 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): What a pleasure it is to be here under your command, Madam Deputy Speaker. This debate on prison officer safety is rather well timed given what has been on our TV screens and in our newspapers. Before I start, I want to thank all those who work in the Prison Service—prison officers, managers, governors—and the numerous organisations, both charitable and voluntary, that support the service to ensure that prisoners have a chance to rehabilitate and that we are kept safe. We owe them a huge debt. I also praise the prison officers who serve at The Verne immigration centre, which was a prison until quite recently and is now under the auspices of the Home Office.

I welcome the Secretary of State’s recent announcement about the recruitment of 2,500 more prison officers by the end of 2018 and her aim for every offender to have a dedicated prison officer providing regular one-to-one support. More officials will certainly help to deter attacks on them, which have risen worryingly over recent years. In the 12 months to June 2016, there were nearly 6,000 assaults on staff—up 43% on the previous year. Of those, 700 assaults—an increase of 20% on the previous year—were regarded as serious and required hospital treatment. A recruitment drive is most welcome, as I have said, but the problem of retaining staff remains. In 2015, of the 2,250 officers who were recruited, only 440 were retained. We must remember that there are 7,000 fewer officers now than in 2010, when the prison population was about 2,500 lower.

The recent action by prison officers, which I do not support, was driven by a genuine concern for their safety—I am certain of that. We must take note of that. If we do not, not only will we fail to recruit sufficient new officers, but the exercise will be a complete waste of money as they all leave. Understaffing is the root cause of their discontent. Savings have understandably been made in the public sector, and I have voted for such savings on many occasions, so I do not condemn the Government for making the savings necessary for us to learn to live within our means. However, if we make savings, we must note the consequences and act if they are unintentional and serious. My next point refers to the prison estate in general, not to the young offender institution in my constituency, which is excellently led by James Lucas, a former soldier with whom I do a lot of business. The increased workload, lower morale, poor leadership in some cases, a higher retirement age—more on that in a minute—and an increased risk of being assaulted have all contributed to the problems we see today. Frankly, who can blame the officers?

I touched on the pension age and the necessity for prison officers to work until 68, which does affect their safety. Let me explain. I witnessed a demonstration laid on by prison officers of how to remove a troublesome prisoner—on this occasion, actually a prison officer—from his cell. The officers were equipped with all the necessary protective gear and they went in to remove this troublesome fellow. He did not react violently. He simply stood in his cell, not co-operating and using his weight and strength
not to move. Those three beefy officers eventually got the man out, but it took them an awfully long time. I am 58 and in reasonably good nick, but I am not so sure that I would be able to drag someone out of a prison cell in 10 years’ time, particularly if they were behaving violently or were under the influence of drugs, as they often are. I ask the Minister to respond to this particular point about the physical demands on a prison officer when they get to the age of 60 and above.

I have also seen pictures of riots, which were taken on the body cameras that the Government are introducing—again, I entirely commend what they are trying to do—to ensure that evidence can be gathered. In addition, the cameras are a deterrent, because the prisoners who might offend know that they are being filmed and therefore that they will be found guilty if caught. I have faced crowds in Northern Ireland, but I was always surrounded by guardsmen armed to the teeth. In one particular riot, I think one prison officer had a shield, but the rest were caught out at quite short notice. Two of them were female prison officers, and they were facing a baying crowd of thugs, who were really geared up for the moment of weakness. Had those prison officers shown that weakness, I am convinced that 10 to 15 of the prisoners would have pounced, and those prison officers shown that weakness, I am convinced that they will be found guilty if caught. I have therefore that they will be found guilty if caught. I have

Richard Drax: I sought the hon. Gentleman’s permission to intervene before this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The £1.3 billion investment that the Government have offered over the next five years is good news, but there is a short-term issue to take care of, which the hon. Gentleman has outlined very well. Does he agree that, when it comes to discussions on safety, they must take place with counterparts in Northern Ireland, and that those who have experience of how to deal with difficult cases across the prison system in Northern Ireland over some 30 to 40 years could help, as there is a lot of knowledge that could be used for the betterment of the service in Northern Ireland? I make that point as a careful and gentle suggestion to the Minister.

Richard Drax: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Like anything in life, those who are trying to achieve something turn to those who have experienced it. They listen to their experiences and, if they are wise and if the advice is good, they will adopt it. Perhaps the Minister will respond on that particular point.

I pay tribute to the officers who faced this baying crowd. They stood their ground and maintained control of the prison. As it happened, the most thuggish of the men, who was bouncing up and down on the wire netting that was there to prevent people from falling, actually fell off the end of the netting and damaged his ankle. It was extraordinary. At the point that the ring leader went down, calm returned almost instantly. It just shows how little things have to be affected in a prison before these very brave men and women are faced with some very unpleasant experiences. I have a question for the Minister. Can the Government—I would be very grateful for an answer to this—bring prison officers up for the same retirement age as the uniformed services to reflect the occasional physical testing characteristics of the job?

There is no doubt that the presence of drugs in prison is contributing to attacks on officers. I welcome the Secretary of State’s assurance that dealing with drugs is high on her agenda. Spice is the modern curse in prison. It fuels violence against officers because of its mind and behaviour altering effects. Worse, it exacerbates existing mental health issues, personality disorders and behavioural issues, causing unpredictable bouts of violence. This point was picked up by the report of the Independent Monitoring Boards for the year to March 2015. Under problems, it says:

“The widespread and apparently un-checkable presence of so-called ‘legal highs’ or ‘Spice’ on the wings. This is leading to trading, debt, bullying of more vulnerable prisoners and their families, criminal networking and gang activity, violence and unpredictable behaviour among prisoners.”

That of course has a knock-on effect on those who are guarding them. Dogs are one solution, but in my constituency the young offender institution has only one dog, and, as we all know, much as we love them they cannot work seven days a week. They have to be rested. More dogs may be a solution. Perhaps the Minister can expand on that. I believe someone mentioned that the number of dogs would be increased.

Spice is endemic and is seemingly brought into prisons via drones and social visits, thrown over prison walls, brought in by new or returning prisoners and, apparently, by soaking letters in it. As I said, drugs lead to bullying and debt, increasing the risk to both prisoners and officers.

Another way of improving safety for officers is to hold more regular searches. As I understand it—perhaps the Minister can help me—they used to happen once a month or thereabouts. Searches are more irregular now because in order to search one cell, officers have to shut down a whole wing, and they do not necessarily have the resources to hand when that needs to be done. A lockdown of an entire wing in one prison recently revealed a range of illegal goods.

More officers would reduce the need to lock prisoners in their cells for longer than is necessary. The report from Winchester prison today underscores that point. Taking part in purposeful activity would counteract the inevitable resentment that builds up behind a locked cell door. A fairly treated prisoner—I am not all flowery on this, but I believe that prisoners should be treated fairly—is less likely to resort to violence.

There are concerns about whether the courts take assaults on prison officers as seriously as they take assaults on police officers, despite the fact that, as I understand it, both have equal standing and protection under the law when on duty. In early 2015 a joint protocol was published on the appropriate handling of crimes in prisons, but the issue remains a very real one. Will the Minister review the range of sentences handed down to prisoners who assault prison officers? Anyone who assaults a prison officer or any other public servant in uniform should face an automatic custodial sentence. A strong deterrent and message is needed, and a tougher stance should be taken by the courts. Anything that the Government can do to assist me and other colleagues in the House, and certainly prison officers, would be helpful.

Let me highlight that point with two brief examples. In the first case, a prisoner who was due to be released the next day “potted” a female prison officer. “Potting”—if there is anyone in the Gallery, I apologise for being so crude—involves urine and excrement being thrown over...
an officer. It is disgusting, demeaning and outrageous. That prisoner was released the next day, when he was arrested for assault, fined £200 and given a suspended sentence. That is farcical. In another case, another female officer was “potted” and the prisoner received a mere 21 extra days on his sentence. That officer was then goaded and teased by the prisoner when she returned to work. Again, that is unacceptable. Perhaps because “potting” causes no physical damage, the courts tend to be more lenient, but the effect on officers who have been subjected to such disgusting humiliation is traumatic, and offenders should be dealt with harshly. I would be grateful if the Minister commented on that.

The prison population is becoming more violent, with the number of those sentenced for violent offences rising by 30% in the past 10 years. Officers are clearly struggling to cope on many occasions, and their concerns have been expressed in a number of ways to me personally and by taking the action which I did not agree with, but which many of us understand. A survey of Prison Officer Association members in 2014 found that the demands of the job are particularly high and support from managers is low. I am not commenting, as I said, on any prisons in my constituency, but we had a saying in the Army that there are no bad soldiers, only bad officers. I suspect that that is true in every walk of life and I am sure it applies in the case of prison staff.

I do not know whether the Minister is prepared to comment on what control is kept over managers and governors to ensure that prisons are managed properly. Let me give a tiny example from a prison I visited some time ago. I said to one of the prison officers, “I’m sure the manager comes round every day with his board and pencil and says, ‘Bob, good morning. It’s your wife’s birthday. Happy birthday to her. Your little son is 10 today. How marvellous. I hope you have a very nice day. If there are any problems, do come and see me.’” This officer’s jaw hit the floor, and he said, “I don’t think so, Richard. That is not exactly how it works.” As it happened, he had not seen his governor for some time. That is a tiny example, and I do not know, but I would say that the governor was not in touch with the men and women he was commanding.

The warning signs are therefore clear, and we would be irresponsible to ignore them. In my humble view, the line that used to exist between prison officer and prisoner has become increasingly blurred. The forgotten army, which many of us understand. A survey of Prison Officer Association members in 2014 found that the demands of the job are particularly high and support from managers is low. I am not commenting, as I said, on any prisons in my constituency, but we had a saying in the Army that there are no bad soldiers, only bad officers. I suspect that that is true in every walk of life and I am sure it applies in the case of prison staff.

7.30 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) on securing tonight’s debate. I start by joining him in saying that our prison officers are indeed brave, but the work they do—important work that keeps the public safe, but also helps to turn around offenders—often goes unnoticed, and it is worth putting on record that we do value them immensely.

I am determined to improve prison safety for our prison officers and for prisoners themselves. Recent events, including incidents at HMP Bedford and HMP Pentonville, emphasise how important it is that we act now on prison safety and security. In my hon. Friend’s constituency, prisoners at HMP Portland have displayed significant levels of violence against staff, so I would like to echo his concerns, and I reassure him that the Government are taking decisive action to tackle this serious problem—to stabilise it in the short term and to overhaul the system to deliver reforms of longer-term benefit.

I thank my hon. Friend for his support in the House yesterday in condemning the actions of the Prison Officers Association and stressing that strike action was neither constructive for prison officers nor safe for prisoners. I welcome the POA’s decision to stop its unlawful industrial action and the fact that prison officers have returned to work. That incident does not, of course, diminish the principle that underpinned the POA’s action: that prison officer safety is a key challenge and concern.

A point was raised about the lessons we can learn from Northern Ireland. I welcome that point, and I will take it on board. The Department is determined to learn lessons wherever it can to deal with the different challenges across the prison system, be it safety, security or turning prisoners around, but also extremism. So I welcome that point, and I would like to engage directly with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) to take the issue forward.

The levels of violence our prison system has seen over the past five years are unacceptable. There were over 23,000 assaults in the year to June 2016, and over 3,000 of those were against staff. Rising violence against the very officers who devote their lives to public safety must be tackled as a matter of urgency, and that is what the Government are doing.

As we set out in our new “Prison Safety and Reform” White Paper, the Government will be investing over £100 million to recruit an additional 2,500 staff across the estate by the end of 2018. Prison officers do a vital job. I want them to benefit from the improvements we are making on the frontline and to safety to change prisoners’ lives for the better.

We recognise the challenge faced in recruiting an extra 2,500 staff, so we are launching a number of initiatives, including a new apprenticeship programme to recruit more people. We are about to launch an “Army officer to prison officer” recruitment programme, and we also have a programme to encourage the brightest and best graduates to become prison officers.

Of course, those things will take time, but we are making serious and significant progress, including with the 400 extra officers that we have pledged to recruit by March 2017 for our most challenging prisons. We are on track to deliver and meet that target.

Increased staff numbers will give prison officers more time, as my hon. Friend has said, to turn around the lives of prisoners and ensure that they turn against criminality and violence in increasing numbers. Nearly half of all offenders who leave prison go on to commit crime within a year. Investment will provide the capacity for prison officers to play a dedicated officer role, engaging with about six prisoners on a one-to-one basis. They will build constructive relationships with prisoners, listening to their frustration, defusing tension and ultimately reducing the level of violence.

Staffing is only one component of the challenge that we face in our prisons, where there is a game-changing situation involving drugs, phones and drones. The rise
in the use and trade of psychoactive substances has been a game changer for the Prison Service. Along with phones, their use and trade drives a destructive cycle of bribery, debt, violence and self-harm. Assaults against staff have increased in that context, so it is essential that we get those issues under control, in tandem with new staffing approaches.

Richard Drax: What can we do physically to stop those drugs getting into prisons? Apparently the situation is endemic across the country. We cannot search people—I do not think that we have the machines to identify the drugs—so how do we stop them?

Mr Gyimah: That is a very good question. The initial challenge posed by the new psychoactive substances—otherwise known as legal highs—was that there was no test that could detect them. It was, therefore, very easy for people not only to get them into prison, but to make them up from a number of components. We now have a test that can identify the drugs so we have introduced mandatory drug testing, but we are also going further to tackle the criminality that drives the smuggling of the drugs into prisons. We will invest £3 million in a new, prison-wide intelligence and search capability that will allow us not only to gather intelligence across the system about which criminal gangs are behind the drugs and trying to get them into our prisons, but to stop them.

Tackling the use of mobile phones is also vital, because, while some prisoners want access to them in order to contact friends and family, a vast number of prisoners use them for criminal purposes, including arranging a time for drugs to come in and telling someone where to send the drone. Dealing with the illicit smuggling of mobile phones into our prisons is absolutely key. Like drones, it is a technological problem, and I believe that technology is the way to deal with it. That is why we are working with the mobile network operators to find a way to prevent mobile phones from working in our prisons, and with drone manufacturers to create no-fly zones across our prison estate.

My hon. Friend specifically mentioned violence against staff. Alongside measures on drones, drugs and phones, it is essential that we increase staff confidence in the prison system. That starts with achieving swift justice when assaults occur. My hon. Friend and I share that concern. We are rolling out body-worn cameras across the estate in order to give staff added confidence, while also supporting bringing timely and effective trials for prisoners when necessary. We will work with other parts of the criminal justice system, including the National Crime Agency and the police, to improve the evidence-collection process, to ensure a “right first time” culture. By clamping down on staff assaults, we will help to break the vicious cycle of violence committed by some of our most challenging prisoners.

My hon. Friend mentioned the retirement age of prison officers, which ties into yesterday’s action. The Government are actively engaged with the Prison Officers Association in negotiations around pay, pensions, the retirement age, retention and health and safety. That is why we were surprised by the action of the POA yesterday. We have an outstanding offer to the POA as of last Friday, and the POA is yet to respond to it. I believe that by coming back to the negotiating table, we will be able to discuss these issues to secure the safety of officers and to ensure that the jobs in their profession are as well rewarded as they obviously should be.

The Secretary of State and I have made it clear over recent weeks that we are taking decisive and urgent action to improve prison safety. The safety and security measures in our White Paper will work alongside key measures such as the £1.3 billion that we are investing to regenerate the old Victorian estate and reforms to empower prison governors. We have a genuine commitment to alleviating violence against our staff, which we cannot ignore in the current context.

My hon. Friend mentioned prison management, and I believe that our reform programme will really help in that context by empowering governors and giving them control over their budgets. That will enable them to make decisions about the employment, education and training of prisoners. It will also enable them to deploy staff in a way that best allows them to deliver a prison regime that not only provides safety and security, but turns prisoners around. Prison governors will be real managers and leaders of their shop. At the moment, too much comes from Whitehall. We want to give prison governors responsibility and freedom, with, obviously, the right accountability framework. With that, we will see the change in management culture that my hon. Friend pointed to.

My hon. Friend mentioned the prison population, which comes up in numerous debates. Prison has to be the last resort for anyone who has committed a crime. Our job is to make sure that where people have committed an offence and are sentenced, there is capacity in the system for our prisons to deliver on the orders of the court. I do not believe that the way to deal with the prison population issue is to let prisoners out arbitrarily, especially considering the impact that that would have on victims and families. I believe that the best way to deal with the population in the long term is to cut reoffending. By reducing reoffending, we will reduce the prison population.

I hope that my hon. Friend is reassured that the Government are pressing forward with these measures at great speed and intensity, because, like him, we value the admirable work that our prison officers do. We want them to benefit from the improvements we are making, both on the frontline and to safety and security, which will ultimately help them to change prisoners’ lives for the better.

Prison safety is an integral part of the health of the system in which prison officers operate. As I have said, we encourage the POA to come back to the negotiating table so that we can work together to tackle the safety challenges that concern us all.

Question put and agreed to.

7.43 pm

House adjourned.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The Government are committed to ensuring that courts have sufficient powers to deal with dangerous driving and will soon commence a consultation looking at driving offences and penalties. Rental companies can check Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency driver records and should not be renting vehicles to unsafe drivers. The British Vehicle Rental and Leasing Association has a code of conduct it expects its members to comply with, and, if concerned, the public can contact the BVRLA or trading standards.

Andrew Stephenson: In my area, and across the UK, a large number of accidents and deaths have been caused by inexperienced drivers, who often hire high-performance cars for just a few days at a time. Later this month, the Lancashire Telegraph will launch a dangerous driving campaign looking at this and many other aspects of road safety. Will the Minister join me in supporting the campaign, which aims to shine a light on what is happening on our roads?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes an important point about road safety, which is a critical issue, because, despite our enviable national record, 1,730 people lost their lives on British roads last year. Media campaigns in this area can be very helpful, so I do, indeed, support the Lancashire Telegraph campaign in principle, and I look forward to hearing more when it starts.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I, too, am supporting that campaign, and we have seen numerous incidents across east Lancashire, but would the Government not accept that one thing that is not helping on motorways is the fact that local government cuts mean that motorway lights are being turned off?

Andrew Jones: There is no evidence that any of the changes taking place on our motorways are impacting on road safety; in fact, it is the other way round—our motorways are some of the safest roads on our network, and our network is among the safest in the world.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that anyone with points on their licence indicating a number of offences should be excluded from the rental of cars with above a 2-litre engine? Would he consider co-operation with the police and insurance companies on this issue?

Andrew Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes a very interesting point. I do not think we can necessarily exclude people from a marketplace, but, of course, all the rental companies do have access to driver records, and I will take that idea forward.

Glasgow South) (SNP): Whether he has had discussions with the Attorney General on investigations into car manufacturers and emissions irregularities.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): The Secretary of State has regular discussions with the Attorney General on a range of issues.

The Government take any matters regarding the safety and environmental performance of vehicles on UK roads extremely seriously.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: We hear that quite often, but as consumers in this country look around the world—to New Zealand, Brazil, France, Germany and South Korea—they see action being taken against companies such as Volkswagen, while this Government let people down and drag their heels. Can I hear something firm about what the Government have been doing to take these companies to task?

Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman underestimates me. It is true that, in a hard world, I have a soft heart, but companies that care less for their workers or treat their customers without integrity will soon learn that, in my velvet glove, there is a steely fist I am not afraid to use. To that end, I have met Volkswagen twice. I am absolutely determined it should meet its legal obligations. It will meet in full the costs that we have endured as a Government. I can tell the House today that I have received a pledge from Volkswagen to pay £1.1 million, which taxpayers have had to spend as a result of its behaviour, and I expect to receive that cheque before Christmas.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Drivers have been very concerned by pollution rulings on diesel cars. Would it not be wholly wrong for drivers of diesel cars to be punished for buying cars they were encouraged to buy by the Labour Government?

Mr Hayes: It would certainly be right to encourage people to behave in a way that met the Government’s objectives for emissions. To that end, my hon. Friend, who is a knowledgeable and assiduous Member of this House, will know that the Government have taken direct action to promote the use of electric vehicles and
to encourage those who choose to purchase vehicles with lower emissions. He is right that we must act with moderation, but, equally, we must act with determination to ensure that our vehicles are as clean as they can be, for it is emissions that lead to particulate material, which we know—this is a matter not of speculation but of evidence—is injurious to our health and wellbeing.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): This is a scandal of huge proportions. Thousands of people have died in this country because of the defeat devices that Volkswagen inserted. The fact is that the European Union’s legislative framework is weaker than the framework of capitalist United States. Does the Minister agree that the European Union does not deserve its reputation for protecting the environment?

Mr Hayes: I am tempted to say that I find it difficult to believe that anything that emanates from the European Union is virtuous, but I will not say that. What I will say is that the Volkswagen scandal is, as the hon. Gentleman says, unacceptable. It would be unacceptable whether we were members of the European Union or not. There are other aspects to this, however. There is the programme of technical fixes that Volkswagen is engaged in, which I pressed it to get on with. There is also the issue of its legal obligations, which I mentioned a moment ago. Let me also be clear that I have not ruled out a separate investigation into these affairs by this Government, and I have told Volkswagen that.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am sure that the Minister is aware that modern diesel vehicles have either exhaust gas recirculation systems or diesel particulate filters fitted to stop the emission of harmful gases and particles. Is he aware of the increasing practice among the owners of diesel vehicles, including taxis and buses, of illegally removing these systems and causing these harmful gases to be emitted into the atmosphere? If he is aware of it, what is he doing about it, and if he is not will he investigate it and write to me about the action that he intends to take?

Mr Hayes: To write to the hon. Gentleman, who is a distinguished Member of this House whom I met briefly earlier this week, albeit not on these issues, would be inadequate. I will meet him to discuss this matter in some detail, because he clearly has expert understanding to bring to bear.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman feels enormously privileged at the prospect of a meeting with the Minister of State, as of course would most sane people.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I wish he would meet me. Question 3, please, Mr Speaker.

Rail Stations: Disabled Access

3. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): When he plans to announce the next tranche of railway stations to be provided with disabled access to all platforms; and if he will make a statement.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): All the funding under the current pot of money for Access for All has been allocated to stations. We intend to seek further funding for the next rail control period. We will seek nominations from the industry and start to announce the successful projects in 2018.

Michael Fabricant: Lichfield happens to be one of the smallest cities in the country, but Lichfield Trent Valley railway station is an important interchange between the west coast main line and the cross-city line that connects Lichfield with Birmingham and with Redditch. Yet two out of the three platforms are completely inaccessible to anybody who is disabled, or indeed anybody who has baggage with them and wants to get to one of those platforms. We were meant to get disabled access in October this year, so when is it going to happen?

Paul Maynard: I am glad that my hon. Friend shares my commitment to and passion for improving disabled accessibility. I understand that he has met Network Rail at the station to discuss its plans for the project. It intends to start work as soon as possible and it should take about a year to complete, so I hope it will be seen within a year. Network Rail should appreciate that Access for All projects are as important as any of its major prestige projects.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): On Saturday there was a tragic suicide at Pencoed station in my constituency. One of the issues is that it has a level crossing, which is the only way in which disabled people are able to go between the lines. It is far too accessible in terms of the station lines, and there is a very high suicide rate. Network Rail has allocated funding via the Department for Transport to improve the level crossing, but I would like to see it closed. Will the Minister meet me to discuss additional funding to try to close off the access at that station?

Paul Maynard: I am always happy to meet hon. Members. I know that level crossing safety is a particular concern across the country. Every level crossing has its own characteristics and difficulties, so I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss this case.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): There is obviously no cause for complacency in relation to disabled access, but it is worth putting it on record that in the past 15 years there has been a sea change on our railways; I certainly see that from a London and home counties perspective. While I hope that we can continue this progress on disabled access, substantial improvements have been made in recent years.

Paul Maynard: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. He is right to indicate the progress that has been made. However, we cannot accept a situation where some of our busiest stations remain inaccessible, so work will have to continue into the next rail period and beyond. I intend to keep up the pressure on Network Rail and train operating companies, as I am sure Members across the House will, too.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Despite the fact that so many disabled people rely on public transport, the Government have slashed the Access for All programme, which pays for improvements to access at stations, by 40%. Some 19% of stations currently have step-free...
access via lifts and ramps to all their platforms. Given that record, we can hardly describe ourselves as an inclusive society when so many stations are inaccessible to disabled people. What representations will the Minister make to the Chancellor ahead of the autumn statement to address that appalling state of affairs?

Paul Maynard: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman also shares my commitment to the issue. We have made important progress in delivering improved accessibility at many of our busiest stations, but there is still more to do. I will not pre-empt the autumn statement, however much he might like me to do so, but I will seek more money for Access for All in control period 6 of our rail investment. That will deliver far more accessibility at far more stations.

Railways: South-west

4. Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to invest in the railways in the south-west.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): We need to continue to improve transport and rail links in the south-west, and my No. 1 priority is to deal with resilience near the Dawlish sea wall and the Dawlish cliffs. The next stage of the project requires a further £10 million to continue to develop the programme and deal with the issue once and for all, and I can announce to the House today that that funding will be granted and the work will go ahead. That is an important part of ensuring that we protect the essential rail links to the south-west, and I hope that people there will see it as a commitment to making sure that they have a proper transport system for the future.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): That is fantastic news and it shows that this Government really are investing in the south-west. Given that resilience work, will they consider a potential branch line to Okehampton as part of the wider south-west rail package?

Chris Grayling: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and, indeed, to all my south-west colleagues, who are vociferous champions of the need to make sure that we have the best possible transport links to the constituencies that they represent. I will be very happy to discuss with him the needs of his constituents in Cornwall and, in particular, the potential for improving links to Okehampton.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The National Audit Office’s verdict on the Great Western Railway electrification fiasco was absolutely damming. It described it as “a case study in how not to manage a major programme.” It is estimated that passenger growth on the line will be 81% over the five-year period leading up to 2018-19. Anyone who uses the line will know how overcrowded it is. What reassurances can the Secretary of State give that there will be an improvement in our area?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady will not be surprised to learn that I am not happy about the way in which the modernisation and electrification programme has been managed. The NAO report also said that, since 2015, my Department has had a much firmer grip on the programme. I am still not satisfied with the progress that is being made. New trains will, of course, be rolled out across the network sooner rather than later. I am committed to making sure that the project is delivered and that the improvements it brings will happen for passengers.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement on the Dawlish line, given how vital it is in ensuring that my constituency actually has a train service. Does he agree that it was not acceptable for CrossCountry trains to bury in a lengthy timetable consultation document a proposal to axe virtually all of its direct services between the bay and the midlands and Manchester?

Chris Grayling: We have discussed the issue with my hon. Friend. When timetable changes are proposed, it is important that they are as transparent as possible, and I want the cross-country service to grow rather than shrink in future.


The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): Improving northern transport infrastructure is vital to the success of the northern powerhouse. The Government are committing £13 billion in transport improvements over this Parliament, and we have created Transport for the North, a partnership of key organisations to drive forward a northern transport strategy. Our announcement this week on HS2 phase 2b is further confirmation of our commitment.

Conor McGinn: We are told that HS2 will cut journey times from the north to London and therefore benefit places such as St Helens, but surely the real driver of economic growth and regeneration in the north is good transport infrastructure across the region from west to east. When will we see a commitment to, and action from the Government on, connecting our great northern cities and towns to each other, not just to London?
Andrew Jones: The action the hon. Gentleman is calling for is already under way, with the electrification of the trans-Pennine rail links, the road investments that are taking place and HS3, which we have called “northern powerhouse rail”. That project is being developed by TfN and we will be seeing its proposals early next year.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Notwithstanding what the Minister has just said, when I attended the UK Major Ports Group reception on Monday evening, the port director for the Humber stressed to me how urgently needed east-west connections from Immingham and the Humber ports to Liverpool and Manchester were. He talked about trans-Pennine tunnels and so on, which are decades off, so can the Minister reassure him that action will be taken immediately?

Andrew Jones: I can provide my hon. Friend with much reassurance. I entirely agree on the importance of connecting businesses to our key modes of transport, especially our ports. Developing the connectivity of our ports is a project being taken forward by the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes).

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Liverpool2 has recently opened, with a new deepwater port, which raises the possibility of the whole of the north becoming an economic powerhouse. What can the Minister tell us about plans to improve freight access to ports right across the north, in an integrated approach with road and rail?

Andrew Jones: The Liverpool2 development is a very exciting one, opening up the port of Liverpool to 95% of world shipping. Access to the port is, of course, part of the project being taken forward by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes).

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Does the Minister agree it is vital for infrastructure in the north that we electrify the midland main line through the midlands to start, but my hon. Friend’s point will have been heard and I will pick that up with him afterwards.

Andrew Jones: The next stage to Corby is just about to start, but my hon. Friend’s point will have been heard by the rail Minister and I will pick that up with him afterwards.

Andrew Jones: Ninety-five per cent. of the steel used on our railways already comes from Scunthorpe, and that is a key part of all of our procurement. We want to see British steel used in our transport infrastructure, and Scunthorpe will of course play a key part in that.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): By the time HS2 eventually opens from Manchester Piccadilly, it will take some of my constituents, who live within Greater Manchester, longer to drive to Manchester, especially at peak times, than to travel by train from Manchester to London. What plans do the Government have to improve that?

Andrew Jones: It is not as though HS2 is the only investment taking place in the north: more than £1.25 billion is being spent in the north-west on local transport schemes through the growth deal; £800 million-plus is being spent on north-west road schemes; and a further £1 billion is being spent on other parts of the rail network. It is HS2 plus all the other investments that makes the comprehensive transformation of transport in the north.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree with a group of leading north-west businesses that the gap between investment in north-west transport infrastructure and investment in London transport infrastructure is unacceptably high? Does he agree that if we were to close that gap, we could really transform the commuter services, trams and buses, and we could get the Oyster card of the north, which we so desperately need to transform our transport?

Andrew Jones: Transport investments around the country are not necessarily happening at the same pace, but I suggest to the hon. Lady that £340 million is being spent on rail in the Liverpool city region right now, and nobody could really doubt our commitment to the north after this week’s announcements on HS2.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I do not want to prick the bubble of self-congratulation, but new analysis published yesterday by the TUC reveals that the UK ranks towards the bottom of the table of OECD countries for capital investment in important areas of economic development, and worst of all is transport. As a percentage of 2014 GDP—these are the latest figures—UK investment was the lowest ranking, in last place out of 34 countries. With pauses and unpau ses, and shunting programmes off into the distant future—be it HS3, northern powerhouse rail, or whatever we want to call it—is it not time that the Government started delivering instead of continually breaking their promises?

Andrew Jones: I remind the hon. Gentleman how we collapsed in OECD league tables under the last Labour Government, and that we are spending £13 billion on transport investment in the north during this Parliament, as I outlined earlier.

Rail Passengers: Delay Compensation

6. Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): What steps are being taken to improve compensation for rail passengers who experience delays.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): As my hon. Friend will be aware, we recently announced an improved compensation scheme for passengers that will apply if their train is more than 15 minutes late. All franchise competitions let by the Department will include that policy, and we will be exploring how to roll it out for all our existing franchises during this Parliament.
Amanda Milling: I thank the Minister for his response. On the Chase line, passengers face not only delays, but cancellations and part cancellations. Services often do not reach the two Rugeley stations, leaving passengers stranded and resulting in overcrowding on subsequent services. Will my hon. Friend outline how the compensation scheme will benefit those who are affected by part cancellations?

Paul Maynard: This is the third time that my hon. Friend has brought me to the Dispatch Box to discuss the Chase line, so no one can say that she is not assiduous on the matter. As she may well be aware, if a passenger’s journey is delayed by 30 minutes, for whatever reason—be it cancellation, part cancellation or a train turning around short of its destination—they are entitled to claim delay repay compensation. Under the new invitation to tender for the west midlands franchise, we are looking at how we scope the “delay repay 15” scheme, which will be brought in under that franchise.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): My constituency is not served directly by the London underground or the docklands light railway, much as we would like it to be, which means that we are heavily reliant on rail services. I receive a stream of complaints almost daily about delays on Southeastern railway. This cannot be allowed to continue, because people are heavily reliant on that service. One thing I would say for Southeastern is that it needs extra capacity—it needs extra carriages. The carriages that become available when the Thameslink programme is complete must be made available for Southeastern so that we can deal with the capacity problem, but we must also deal with Southeastern’s performance.

Mr Speaker: I think that the question was rhetorical in nature, but if the Minister wants briefly to reply, he may.

Paul Maynard: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question and look forward to seeing him at our meeting on Southeastern for all affected MPs later this month. He will know the impact that the London Bridge works have had and the extra capacity that they will unlock. We are having a meeting later today with Southeastern to discuss performance issues further, to make sure that we are on top of ensuring that this is an adequate service, delivering for passengers.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): However welcome the investment in infrastructure in Sussex, including in longer platforms on the Uckfield line, a new Thameslink depot and upgraded power systems. That said, I want to be clear that I am well aware of the frustrations felt by passengers in her constituency. Quite apart from the disgraceful and unwarranted industrial action that is taking place at the moment, one of the key issues is that this network is not reliable enough. I give her and her constituents an assurance that I am looking very hard at how to step up a programme of incremental improvements to stop the day-by-day breakdowns that are making the current issues much worse.

Maria Caulfield: I welcome the investment in infrastructure, which is causing 50% of the delays. Does the Secretary of State not agree that, in the long term, a second rail main line between Sussex and London is needed to increase rail capacity in the south-east and to improve journey times for my constituents?

Chris Grayling: I am well aware of the degree of campaigning behind the Brighton main line 2 concept. My hon. Friend the rail Minister and I have discussed that, and I am aware that a report has sat on the desk for much too long. I intend to make sure that it does not sit on the desk for very much longer.

Mr Speaker: Sticking to Sussex, I call Pat Glass.

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): No, I am not at all content. Of course, the biggest step that could be taken would be for the rail unions to call off their action so that we can deal with some of the underlying infrastructure problems, which I described a moment ago. One of the things I find sad is that, far from joining us in calling for the strikes to end so that we can improve the situation, Labour Members seem keener to line up with the militants rather than opposing them.
Pat Glass: Southern rail was a disgrace before the current industrial action, and it will continue to be a disgrace long after the current industrial action is complete and the dispute is settled. The Department for Transport sets the routes, allocates the franchises, dictates the number of trains that run and sets fare increases, so when will the Secretary of State stop pretending that this is nothing to do with him, stop blaming everybody else around him and act to stop the daily hell on this line?

Chris Grayling: I have every intention of addressing the issue and I am working as hard as I can to do so. I would tell Labour Members that figures published this morning show that, across our railways, far more—more than twice as many—problems arise as a result of infrastructure, which is in the public sector, than as a result of train operations, which are in the private sector. Their persistent arguments that nationalising would solve the problems are just plain wrong. We need to invest; interestingly, we, unlike the Labour party, are doing so.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The utility of any rail infrastructure investment on the Brighton main line in Sussex will depend on the trains running effectively throughout Surrey. Will the Secretary of State undertake to look at proposals from people in my constituency about extra infrastructure investment in Surrey, alongside the Sussex proposals?

Chris Grayling: This is a Surrey, Sussex and south London problem, and we must look at the whole thing holistically. My hon. Friend will be aware that I have asked Chris Gibb, a senior rail executive, to look at the issues and to identify ways of addressing resilience problems. He has now put in place detailed plans, and some of that work has already started. For example, a joint team to control the railway on a day-by-day basis was put in place three weeks ago—at Three Bridges, one person will be in charge on a day-by-day basis—and individual infrastructure issues are now beginning to be addressed. I am determined that we do as much as we can, as fast as we can, to improve the resilience of the network.

High Speed 3: Bradford

8. Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): If he will ensure that trains on the proposed High Speed 3 route stop at Bradford.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): Northern powerhouse rail, which is sometimes called HS3, is the Government’s vision for dramatically faster and more frequent rail journeys across the north, to help to build the northern powerhouse and strengthen the British economy. With Transport for the North, we are investigating the benefits, both to passengers and to the economy, of northern powerhouse rail serving key markets such as Bradford.

Philip Davies: It is absolutely essential that a city the size of Bradford has a station stop on the HS3 route, otherwise the economic benefits in West Yorkshire will be only for Leeds, which will be like throwing apples into an orchard that is already full. Will the Minister therefore commit to making sure that Bradford is on the route so that the Bradford district can also benefit from the northern powerhouse?

Andrew Jones: We are expecting Transport for the North to publish its priorities for northern powerhouse rail development early next year. I will make sure that the voice of my hon. Friend is heard in that planning, and I will keep him informed of progress.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give a good talking to to the infrastructure tsar—who waxed lyrical on the radio this week about how important it was to link Oxford and Cambridge—about concentrating on the links across Yorkshire and Lancashire? That is the emphasis we want. We do not want Huddersfield left off the map on any occasion.

Andrew Jones: It is impossible to think that Huddersfield would be left off the map on any occasion. Obviously, we are investing in transport in all parts of our country, including connectivity in the north, and between Oxford and Cambridge.

Overcrowding: Calderdale Line

10. Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the level of overcrowding on the Calderdale line between Leeds and Manchester. [907302]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I am very aware that that is a busy line, which is why we are seeking to ensure that the new northern franchise tackles overcrowding with investment in new rolling stock that will increase capacity by 37% on peak services into our northern cities. There will be the improvements on the line that the hon. Lady seeks.

Holly Lynch: I am grateful to the Minister for that response but, further to the comments made by other hon. Members from the region, HADRAG—the Halifax District Rail Action Group—tells me that two morning trains from Halifax to Leeds have been cut from four carriages to two, leading to quite serious overcrowding. Services connecting our major northern towns and cities are essential to delivering the northern powerhouse, so will the Minister tell me what he is doing to avoid the crush that we are seeing on those commuter services?

Paul Maynard: I recognise that we have a number of issues with trains arriving in Manchester and Leeds with passengers standing because of issues with capacity. That needs to change, which is why in the new northern franchise we have ensured that the pacer will be removed, and we are investing in new carriages that will mean more seats for passengers. We are also investing specifically in the Calderdale line. We have just completed work on the west section, and we will start on the east section in the new year. I hope that the hon. Lady will start to see improvements on that particular network soon, not least because that will help to improve connectivity to Bradford as well, which will bring joy, I am sure, to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies).

Light Rail: Leeds

11. Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with Leeds City Council on the provision of a light rail scheme for that city. [907304]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I have had no such discussions with Leeds City Council.

Greg Mulholland: That is a worrying answer. The Government made an excellent decision when agreeing with the inspector that the new generation trolleybus scheme was not right, while allowing Leeds to keep £173.5 million to be match funded with £81 million from local authorities. The Department said that that money was clearly for the right system and that NGT was the wrong one, so does the Minister share my dismay that authorities have failed to consider any other system, and specifically failed to consider light rail?

Paul Maynard: We should congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on his work to ensure that that money was retained in Leeds, but it is now a matter for Leeds City Council to decide the appropriate scheme for Leeds. It is not my role as rail Minister to dictate to Leeds what scheme should be selected.

Mr Speaker: Let us hear the voice of Pudsey.

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): A survey by Rawdon Parish Council showed that Leeds’s solution of getting passengers to the airport through the road system would not cope with the number of passengers and where they would be coming from. Surely using money for the road and the £173 million for a rail link to the airport would give us an opportunity to address that problem, and would also be the first stage of the properly integrated transport system that the city deserves.

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend’s question demonstrates the range of ideas in the wider Leeds region about how the money can be spent. I understand that the combined authority is also looking at matters. I am more than happy to meet him to discuss such ideas further, but it has to be Leeds City Council that decides what the best option is for Leeds.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Thousands of people in Leeds, and my constituents in Wakefield, use buses to travel to work, school and college every day. In the absence of a new light rail system for Leeds, will the Minister look at the Bus Services Bill, which is about to be introduced in this place, and giving powers to integrate and regulate bus services not just to the metro mayors of Manchester and Liverpool, but to the cities of Leeds and Wakefield? That would have the advantage of not costing the Government one penny piece.

Paul Maynard: I recognise the importance of bus services, particularly in many of the great northern communities—they are vital to Blackpool, too. We will have ample chance to discuss the Bus Services Bill in this place, and I am sure the hon. Lady will make her voice heard.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Wolverhampton has much to commend it, but it is a long way from Leeds.

Rob Marris: It was about rail.

Mr Speaker: This is about light rail schemes for the city of Leeds, which is a very considerable distance from the constituency so ably and eloquently represented by the hon. Gentleman.

National Minimum Wage: Seafarers

12. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What discussions he has had with officials of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs on enforcement of the national minimum wage for seafarers employed in the North sea.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): The right hon. Gentleman will know I am a proud trade unionist. This is an area of great concern to me. I have met my friends in the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, and Nautilus International—I have Nautilus’ charter with me. My officials have been working closely with officials in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and HMRC, as well as stakeholders, on the application of the national minimum wage to seafarers in UK waters more generally.

Mr Hayes: I worked with the right hon. Gentleman in government and he knows of me what I know of him, which is that he does his homework. I have the statutory instrument and the original legislation in my hand as I speak. Let me tell him this: I am committed to reviewing the legislation to ensure that it applies to the offshore sector.

Heathrow Airport Expansion

13. Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that air connectivity between Northern Ireland and London is improved by the proposed expansion of Heathrow airport.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Heathrow airport expects to add six more domestic routes across the UK when the new runway opens in the middle of the next decade. This will strengthen existing domestic links to regions such as Northern Ireland, Scotland and the north of England, and allow the development of new connections to regions such as the south-west. We expect Heathrow to meet these pledges. We will ensure that the Government hold the airport to account; that is an obligation, not a desirable.

Ian Paisley: I thank the Secretary of State for that excellent answer, and for the hope and expectation contained therein. Is he, like me, taken aback by the EU’s decision to block a multimillion pound aid package to United Airlines, which has effectively removed one of
our air carriers out of Northern Ireland? Will he investigate who lodged the complaint to the EU that has effectively destroyed this business in Northern Ireland?

Chris Grayling: I fear it probably will not tell us, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the decision was deeply unwelcome. My Department spent a fair amount of time working alongside the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Executive on trying to make sure that we sustained this route for Northern Ireland. The loss of the route because of EU action is deeply unwelcome and precisely the kind of unnecessary decision from Brussels that led this country to vote to leave the European Union.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Could air connectivity between Northern Ireland, Heathrow and other parts of England be improved by changes to air passenger duty, especially in response to the impending cut to APD in Scotland?

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer is listening carefully to representations on this issue. The Scottish National party stood on a platform of getting rid of air passenger duty in Scotland, but it is now discovering that it is more difficult to make ends meet than perhaps it had previously realised. That is one of the challenges of actually having to take decisions, rather than just talking.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): What further discussions have taken place with the Treasury and the Northern Ireland Executive on lowering air passenger duty to underpin our local economy?

Chris Grayling: The Treasury has held detailed discussions about this, and lots of Members representing different parts of the United Kingdom have made representations, but I fear that it is a matter for the Treasury to indicate whether it plans to do anything in response.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): Lord Empey’s complaint to the EU that has effectively destroyed this business in Northern Ireland, Scotland, the south-west and the north of England have proper, good, effective international links. My commitment to the hon. Gentleman is that we will ensure proper protection for that connectivity, but the actual mechanism needs to await more detailed work.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Just to correct the Secretary of State: it is Ruth Davidson and the Tories who are trying to stop the APD cut in Scotland.

Additional regional capacity is of use only if there are airlines willing to fill it. The lack of a Brexit plan has seen businesses literally in flight from the UK. For instance, easyJet has confirmed that it is in the process of setting up a separate airline based on the European mainland. It said:

“We are not saying there will be no agreement. We just don’t know the shape or form. We don’t have the luxury of waiting”— and neither do we or those counting on these services. What is your plan?

Mr Speaker: I do not have any plan on this matter. The hon. Gentleman is a well-meaning fellow, but the question was too long.

Chris Grayling: Let me tell the hon. Gentleman who does have a plan. Bombardier has a plan: it is now investing in a major international rail hub in the UK based on the excellent work in Derby. Nissan has a plan: it is expanding its plants in the north-east. Honda has a plan: it is investing more money in Swindon. Google, Facebook and Apple have plans: they are opening new headquarters in London. In an economy that continues to grow well post-Brexit, that proves that this country will do well regardless.

Mr Speaker: Hoping for laser-like precision and succinctness, I call Mr Drew Hendry.

Drew Hendry: Instead of deflecting, will the Secretary of State at least agree to a meaningful update of route development and assistance for supporting additional services on existing routes, as well as new services, and—crucially—will he bring forward, before March 2017, firm proposals for specific airport-to-airport public service obligations?

Chris Grayling: The Government have not shied away from public service obligations when necessary—most recently, between Londonderry and Stansted airport. There are routes in and around the UK that are essential to the maintenance of our regional economies, and we have always been committed, and will remain committed, to ensuring that those obligations are met when necessary.

Electric Vehicles: Charge Points

14. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What assessment he has made of the level of availability of charge points for electric vehicles.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): The UK now has 11,000 publicly accessible charge points, with Europe’s largest network of rapid charge points and provision at 96% of motorway service areas. We will continue to support the roll-out of electric vehicle charging infrastructure to ensure that we realise our ambition that almost every car and van on UK roads is a zero-emission vehicle by 2050.

Jeremy Lefroy: I welcome the Minister’s reply. I also declare an interest: I am in the process of buying a Nissan Leaf to show my support for Nissan’s welcome investment in electric vehicles and, indeed, in other vehicles. Will the Minister explain how he is looking to support small businesses investing in electric vehicles for their staff and their businesses?
Mr Hayes: I am delighted that my hon. Friend is taking that step. I had the joy of driving a Nissan Leaf for the first time last week, and I know that he is as committed to this cause as I am, but he asked a very particular question. Disraeli said that justice is truth in action. Now, I am going to offer him some justice for those who want to get this right. I am pleased to inform the House that the £7.5 million grant scheme for charge points at workplaces will be rolled out—applications will begin—this Monday.

Mr Speaker: I think that we can agree that Disraeli did not drive a Nissan.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): Sorry to break the consensus, but is there not a danger of the Government putting too much emphasis on electric vehicles and not enough on liquefied petroleum gas and hydrogen cells, which do not require the same level of infrastructure?

Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is right that technology is changing in all kinds of ways, and there will be all kinds of results from that in respect of the zero emission ambition that I set out. The electric vehicle developments that I described, and to which the hon. Gentleman referred, are important. The Government’s role is to make sure that we do what we can to make them as attractive to consumers as possible. Charge points are at the heart of that.

Leaving the EU: Passenger Rights

15. Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): What assessment has he made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the protection of passenger rights in the UK?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): The Prime Minister has made it clear that we will convert existing EU regulations into UK law when we leave the European Union. Once the great repeal Bill is given Royal Assent, Parliament will be free—subject to international agreements and treaties with other countries and the EU on matters such as trade—to amend, repeal and improve any law it chooses.

Roger Mullin: The collapse of low-cost holidays this summer emphasises the importance of the EU package travel directive, which offers consumers protection in the case of insolvency. Can the Minister give me a guarantee that any rights to which UK passengers are currently entitled will not be eroded by Brexit?

Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman must understand that this Government remain entirely committed to putting passengers at the heart of our transport policy and ensuring that we have the right regime for passenger rights. In the end, it comes down to this simple fact. As Ruskin said, quality is never a matter of accident, but the result of intelligent effort. I believe in the determination of this House to do right by passengers. If the hon. Gentleman does not believe that, I suggest that he comes into the new light of the dawn of our leaving the EU rather than staying in the murky darkness of Scottish nationalism.

Topical Questions

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): In the wake of last week’s dreadful accident in Croydon, I would like to start this topical questions session by paying tribute to the British Transport police, for which I have ministerial responsibility, to all the emergency services and to the transport staff who worked so hard in the aftermath. I want to send all the good wishes of this House to those injured and our condolences to the families who tragically lost loved ones.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Recently published annual figures for those killed or seriously injured on our roads at the end of the second quarter of 2016 show a 3% increase on last year. For the third year running, deaths are higher than they were the year before and went up by 2% last year and this year. Thirty deaths may not sound that many out of 1,800, but for every grieving family, they are a tragedy. What is the Government’s plan to arrest and reverse this disturbing trend?

Chris Grayling: Of course every death on our roads is one death too many. It has to be said that our roads are among the safest in Europe and the world, but that is no reason for complacency. A trend in the wrong direction is an unwelcome one. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who is in his place alongside me, has responsibility for road safety. He is actively engaged, and will continue to be actively engaged, in looking at measures we could take that will improve things. We will look at different investment measures and different ways of educating motorists and those using the roads, and we will work with anyone who can come up with suggestions about how we can improve the situation.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I am fully aware of the merits of the scheme, and I will make sure that officials from the Department, the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and Bradford Council sit down to sort this out. There is no reason why Government mechanisms for approval should hold back schemes in Bradford. We are seeing schemes progressing all over the country, so I shall make sure that Bradford knows what to do so that the people of Bradford can see the investment they need.
Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): May I associate Opposition Members with the Secretary of State’s comments about the tragedy in Croydon? The latest statistics from the Department for Transport show a marked decline in bus patronage across the whole country—a drop of some 3%, along with a drop of 2% in bus mileage. Given that we are trying to get passengers out of cars and on to buses, is this not a mark of Government failure? What is the Secretary of State planning to do about it?

Andrew Jones: We are, of course, maintaining our support for buses, which we see as the workhorses of our public transport system. They make more than 5 billion passenger journeys per year, compared with 1.7 billion on our railways. We are maintaining, for instance, the bus service operators grant and the £1 billion for the concessionary bus pass scheme, and the Bus Services Bill will be introduced next week.

Daniel Zeichner: I rather expected the Minister to refer to the Bus Services Bill. Given that franchising is the answer, why is he denying the choice to many swathes of the country? Why cannot parts of England which do not take on elected mayors—and which are represented largely by his own side—have powers to improve their services as well?

Andrew Jones: I think the hon. Gentleman is mistaken when he says that franchising is the answer. All the conversations that I have had with local authorities have produced a mixture of solutions, but most of have focused on partnerships: good partnerships between local authorities and bus companies which will meet local needs.

T5. [907280] Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): At the request of the HS2 Committee, to ensure compliance with the aim to achieve “no net loss in biodiversity” during the construction of the project, Natural England produced a report on the subject. The Department appears to be dismissing that report, if the brevity of its response is anything to go by. Will the Secretary of State undertake to give detailed consideration to fulfilling Natural England’s recommendations, and will he put the protection of our ancient woodland at the top of his list of priorities?

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, rural Wales is the most beautiful part of any country in the world to drive through. I wonder what more he can do to press the Welsh Government to improve investment in roads in my area, so that our world-class countryside is accessible via a world-class road network.

Andrew Jones: I do indeed know how beautiful rural Wales is, and my hon. Friend. Friend is right to stress the importance of good connections to the tourism industry. I, too, wonder what I could do to press the Welsh Government. Perhaps we could simply highlight to the people of Wales the greater priority placed on investment in infrastructure by Conservative Governments.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): On the midland main line, East Midlands Trains often gets it in the neck for train delays when often the responsibility is failures by Network Rail. Will the Secretary of State and the rail Minister design a rail compensation scheme that sends the correct signals to Network Rail to raise its game?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr John Hayes): The hon. Gentleman has already attended a round table discussion with me on just such matters, and I believe he will be attending another this afternoon. I am spending more time with him and the truckers than with almost anyone else. He can be assured that the case that he makes is dear to my heart, and that it will inform Government policy. He is right to say that we need to look after the smaller operators as well—he has taken a proud and informed stance on that—and I will ensure, through him and through other mechanisms, that they are involved in the discussions.

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T3. [907284] Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s positive comments about the quality of British steel, and the fact that 95% of steel in rail is UK steel. Does he believe that that record will be matched by the steel used for HS2?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely, but that does not apply only to the steel industry. I believe that HS2 is a great engineering project for the United Kingdom, and I was pleased to note a substantial British presence in the first set of contracts that we announced this week. I have made it very clear that the firms that hope to participate in this project should expect to leave a skills and expertise footprint behind in the United Kingdom, and that those that fail to do so should not expect to find themselves at the front of the queue when it comes to contracting.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): On the midland main line, East Midlands Trains often gets it in the neck for train delays when often the responsibility is failures by Network Rail. Will the Secretary of State and the rail Minister design a rail compensation scheme that sends the correct signals to Network Rail to raise its game?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I recognise the situation my hon. Friend describes. We have a number of compensation schemes...
Much work to be done. I recognise the need to make sure that that remains a very clear system for passengers to understand why delay attribution occurs and recognise that there is much work to be done.

T6. [907287] Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Deep in the Airport Commission’s papers is the hugely costly and disruptive proposal to double the capacity of the M4 at its London end with a tunnel coming up in Brentford or Chiswick. Will the Secretary of State confirm the Government’s estimate of the cost of service transport infrastructure needed for a third runway at Heathrow, and what proportion of that will Heathrow airport be required to pay?

Chris Grayling: There are two separate issues here. Improvements are needed to local roads in west London, and the M4 is one of those where plans are afoot now to deliver improvements way before we have a new runway in place. Heathrow airport will be expected to pay for the infrastructure improvements directly linked to the new runway. There are of course other improvements, such as M4 improvements, that are not directly linked and that have for some while been envisaged as part of the ongoing road improvement programme this Government are pursuing. My commitment is that where a transport improvement is required to make the third runway possible, that will be met by Heathrow airport.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I thank the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), for his commitment to tackling illegal HGV fly-parking across roads in Kent and throughout the country. Does he agree that ending this blight requires not only more lorry parking spaces, but more effective enforcement?

Mr Hayes: My hon. Friend knows I have also held a round table on that issue—as I have said before, my table is ever more round and I always welcome hearing from hon. Members across this House. My hon. Friend has made this case forcefully; she has done so at Westminster Hall and again today. She is right that we need to look at these matters because they affect local residents in exactly the way she said. We want to get a balanced package for HGVs, but a package that takes account of the overtures my hon. Friend has made in the interests of her constituents.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): When the Minister has discussions with Leeds City Council about the light rail scheme, will he also discuss trolleybuses? I drove a trolleybus for three years; they are very efficient and are a lot cheaper in infrastructural costs, and it would be a lot cheaper for Leeds and elsewhere if we had trolleybuses rather than trams.

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman does not need to localise it any more to Leeds or Wolverhampton. I am in constant discussion with UK Tram and am very keen to lower the cost of all options, whether it be light rail, tram, train or trolley bus, but it is for local councils to decide on the most appropriate scheme for their local area.

Mr Speaker: I never cease to be impressed by the varied life experience of the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris).

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Does the Secretary of State share my concern that the reduced growth deal 3 offer made to the Heart of the South West local enterprise partnership has threatened a number of important road and rail improvement schemes in Somerset? Does he also agree that driving growth through improvement to transport infrastructure should trump the devolution agenda?

Chris Grayling: First, it is important that the funding we allocate to different parts of the country delivers real improvement, whether to congestion and connectivity, economic development or housing. I met the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government earlier this week to discuss the issue. No offers have yet been made on funding to LEPs; that will happen shortly.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The electrification of the line to Hull was included in the Government’s northern transport plan published in March. The hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), now the Minister for the northern powerhouse, said: “The problem if you are not included in the electrification is the risk that you then become just a shuttle service connecting into the main line.”

So can the Secretary of State explain to me why yesterday the decision was made not to include the electrification of the line to Hull, and to leave the TransPennine electrification finishing at Selby, 30 miles outside Hull?

Chris Grayling: The train companies got there first, and the good news for Hull is that both Hull Trains and TransPennine Express are going to be running on this route with new generation state-of-the-art hybrid trains that will run on both electric and diesel, and will connect Hull across the Pennines and connect Hull to London. That is good news for the passengers.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but we must move on.
Chagos Islands

10.35 am

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to make a statement on the future of the British people of the Chagos Islands and the British Indian Ocean Territory.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The islands of the Chagos archipelago have been British territory since 1814, when they were ceded to Britain by France. In 1966, the UK agreed with the United States to make the British Indian Ocean Territory available for the defence purposes of the US and the UK, and the Chagossian people were removed from the islands. Like successive Governments before them, this Government have expressed their sincere regret about the manner in which Chagossians were removed from the British Indian Ocean Territory in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is right that the UK Government paid substantial compensation to Chagossians—nearly £15.5 million in current prices—and the British courts and the European Court of Human Rights have confirmed that compensation has already been paid in full and final settlement.

We must now look forward, not back, on decisions about the future of the British Indian Ocean Territory. The Government have considered this complex issue very closely and carried out an independent feasibility study of the practicalities of resettlement and a public consultation, which sought better to gauge the demand for resettlement by illustrating the most realistic way in which resettlement would hypothetically take place. The Government have looked carefully at the practicalities of setting up a small remote community on low-lying islands and the challenges that such a community would face. We were particularly concerned about the difficulty of establishing modern public services, about the limited healthcare and education that it would be possible to provide—which would create difficulties for any new population and especially for elderly Chagossians returning to the islands—and about the lack of realistic economic opportunities.

The Government have now considered all the available information and decided against the resettlement of the Chagossian people on the grounds of feasibility, defence and security interests, and the cost to the British taxpayer. Although the Government have ruled out resettlement, we are determined to address the aspirations that drove Chagossians to seek to resettle—for instance, their desire for better lives and their wish to maintain a connection to the territory. To meet those aspirations, the Government are creating a significant and ambitious support programme to provide Chagossians with better life chances and developing an increased visits programme. The British Government intend to liaise with Chagossian communities in the UK and overseas and to work closely with the Governments involved to develop the kind of cost-effective programmes that will make the biggest improvement in the life chances of those Chagossians who need it most.

Andrew Rosindell: I thank the Minister for his reply, but does he not understand the shock, anger and dismay among members of the Chagossian community in the United Kingdom, in Mauritius and in the Seychelles who were displaced from their homeland in the 1960s at the Government’s decision not to allow resettlement? Does he not realise that they are British subjects who are entitled to the same rights and self-determination that all British citizens should have? How can the Government defend the right of self-determination for the people of the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar and other British overseas territories, while completely denying the same rights to the people of the Chagos Islands?

Why have the Government ignored the arguments put forward over the years by the all-party parliamentary group on the Chagos Islands and by experts concerning viability, sustainability, cost, funding, defence and security, international human rights obligations and the views of the courts, which since 2000 have deplored the treatment of the Chagossians? Have the Government properly considered the Supreme Court conclusion that, in the light of the KPMG study, maintaining the ban on Chagossian return might no longer be legal?

Does the Minister accept that the United States was not opposed to resettlement and that any security concerns would be easily manageable, just as they are when indigenous people around the world who live around military installations are accommodated? Will he clarify whether the right of abode, which is different from resettlement, can be restored, giving Chagossians the right to visit their homeland whenever they wish? Does he not see that this decision continues to undermine the United Kingdom’s human rights record and the British sense of fair play? Why should Chagossians, who are British, be treated any differently from other nationals of overseas territories? How does this leave the Government’s so-called “unwavering commitment” to human rights?

British Chagossians should have the right of self-determination that is afforded to all Her Majesty’s subjects, who rightly expect the protection of the Crown, which is being denied to the Chagossians today.

Sir Alan Duncan: I fully accept my hon. Friend’s passion on this subject, which he has demonstrated for many years. He has become a champion of this issue. However, as he will appreciate, the Government and I do not agree with many of his points. First, we do not consider that the right of self-determination actually applies to the Chagossians. In fact, the issue here is one of sustainability and viability—[Interruption.] Well, let me go into that.

When I was an International Development Minister, looking at communities such as the Pitcairn Islands, one needed to appreciate that it is demographically difficult to sustain a population of that size in such a remote area: services cannot be provided; the travel distances are enormous; and the costs are quite significant. The costs here have been estimated to vary between £55 million for a mere 50 people and something like £256 million for 1,500. The obligation on Her Majesty’s Government to pay on an annual basis the costs of sustaining the population would be triggered. When no hospital is available and when care cannot be delivered urgently, it is unsustainable to expect a community of any such size to exist in such a setting.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. After four decades of intense debate on the
disgraceful relocation of the Chagossians, after the campaign for their resettlement and after all the legal disputes, the marches and rallies, the parliamentary debates and the reviews and inquiries, it is disappointing that the Government thought they could deal with the issue with a 500-word written statement in the other place yesterday.

After KPMG provided a comprehensive analysis of the resettlement options, why have we not at least seen an equally detailed evaluation of those options from the Government, so that we can understand the rationale behind the decision? We are told that cost is one of the three factors, but that comes from a Government who have spent £285 million building an airport on St Helier—[HON. MEMBERS: “St Helena.”] Whether it is called St Helier or St Helena, the fact is that we have spent £285 million on an airport where it is impossible to land planes. If cost is of such importance, let us put it in that context. If the Government are prepared to spend such amounts on an airport that does not work properly, why not evaluate this situation in those terms?

We are told that the agreement with the United States on the Diego Garcia military base is another factor, but that agreement is due to expire at the end of this year. Has the Minister even discussed with the incoming US Administration whether the renewal of the agreement could be made conditional on both parties facilitating the resettlement of the Chagossians?

Finally, we are told that feasibility is also a factor, but why has that not been tested by means of a pilot programme of relocation, as considered by KPMG? The treatment of the Chagossians is a dark stain on our country’s history. Yesterday’s decision, and the manner in which it was made, has done nothing to remove that stain. It is another disgraceful attempt to cover it up, but it will not be covered up. The Chagossians can be assured that the Opposition, led as we are by someone who has campaigned for them for 30 years, will never give up on their right to return.

Sir Alan Duncan: May I at least agree with one thing the hon. Lady, which is that we all deplore the relocation of the Chagossians, after all the legal disputes, the marches and rallies, the parliamentary debates and the reviews and inquiries, it is disappointing that the Government thought they could deal with the issue with a 500-word written statement in the other place yesterday.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): It has been my privilege, since 2010, to represent one of the largest communities of the Chagos Islands anywhere in the world—it is certainly larger than that on the Chagos Islands. I have pursued this issue since before being elected to this place and it has been my honour to do so. I believe that the Chagos islanders have a right of return, and I am very disappointed with yesterday’s statement by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I note that a compensation package of £40 million over 10 years has been proposed. Can the Minister say a little bit more about how that will be spent in local communities such as mine in Crawley? And rather than just regretting the forced eviction of Chagossians from their homeland, will the British Government now apologise?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, I am very prepared to—and do—apologise. That is why compensation has been paid, and the matter has been recognised by the courts. My hon. Friend, who has a large Chagossian population in his Crawley constituency, has taken a keen and proper interest in this issue ever since he was elected. That must be respected, as must his views and opinions. He has touched on something that is very important, which is that, in looking forward, the Government intend to allocate £40 million, shared between the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office, to address the needs of Chagossians wherever they are—whether in Mauritius, the Seychelles or the United Kingdom. In respect of how that will be paid, some of it will qualify as official development assistance—the DFID element—and the rest will do lots of other things in conjunction with the communities and with the Governments in the countries in which they reside. I very much hope that this £40 million over 10 years will be well spent and particularly address the needs of those older Chagossians, who might have been displaced in the ’60s and ’70s, but who are still alive and who are perhaps the ones in greatest need.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): Has it occurred to the Minister that, in the era of President Trump, an island group in the middle of the Indian ocean, thousands of miles from anywhere, might be one of the safer and more desirable places on this planet? In the late 1960s, the community on the Chagos Islands was fully employed and perfectly sustainable. How can the Minister seriously argue now that it would not be so in modern times, particularly with the advantage of an airport with a very long runway? Finally, the Minister has said that the right of self-determination does not apply here. Why exactly is that? The shame of successive Administrations is not something to do just with the 1960s and 1970s. It covers the past 15 years, where successive Administrations have used every effort through the courts to block and tackle the rights of the Chagossians, including the use of the royal prerogative, disgracefully, against Her Majesty’s subjects. Indeed, by apologising for the past, will the Minister properly address the future and allocate to these people their right of self-determination and their right of return?
Sir Alan Duncan: The right hon. Gentleman’s reference to the runway refers to only a very small part of the archipelago, where there are 58 islands. There is no obvious manner in which a few people on low-lying islands will be able to sustain themselves economically without outside help.

As for what the right hon. Gentleman describes as the runway, and hence implicitly Diego Garcia, the nature of the employment there did not prove attractive to those Chagossians who were consulted, because in most cases they are people who cannot take their families and work in a solitary manner, and they did not find the likely package of employment attractive. The right hon. Gentleman may shake his head, but that is the response that came through in the consultation.

On self-determination, the legal advice that we have received is that the Chagossians were not and are not a “people” for the purposes of international law and hence self-determination.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): There are many issues that we could raise in connection with the statement, and many of us did raise them on 25 October, when there was a Westminster Hall debate on the issue. At that time, I asked the Minister what the timeframe was for announcing his decision about the islands, and we were told that it would be announced before the end of the year. Does he accept how regrettable it is for many of us to have read the contents of the written ministerial statement in The Guardian on Tuesday night and how concerned we were, whether the written ministerial statement was published in this House or the other place, that it was published two hours before a long-standing meeting of the all-party parliamentary group to discuss the matter? Many of us feel that that was an affront to many Members. Will he undertake an investigation to determine how the statement ended up in a national newspaper, rather than here on the Floor of the House?

Sir Alan Duncan: I understand what my hon. Friend is saying, although the Minister to whom he refers was not me. What I am doing today is repeating a statement that was made in another place. I hope and believe that the hon. Gentleman gave to the matter when he was a Minister. He is right that the creation of a marine protection area or zone has no bearing on what we are discussing today, but in respect of his subsequent question, I am pleased to say that I was in Washington last month at the ocean summit and, because we have a number of these islands as part of our historic legacy, I was able to announce a 4 million sq km marine protected area around many of them, which puts the UK in the forefront of marine biodiversity and protection.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Did any of the estimates for the cost of resettlement include the building of a prison such as we have had to build in Pitcairn?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am not aware that they did, but my right hon. Friend and successor as Minister in the Department for International Development puts his finger on an example of a small community on a remote island that has had serious difficulties—demographic, behavioural and economic difficulties. Under our legislation we are obliged to offer reasonable support to such a population, even though on the Pitcairn Islands there are only 46 people. Simply for child safeguarding, when I was a Minister I insisted that all teenagers go to New Zealand to be educated, rather than suffer improper behaviour on the island.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I know the Minister quite well, and I detect a bit of embarrassment about his statement today, perhaps partly because of the way this whole thing has been handled, with a statement being rushed out yesterday, having been leaked to the papers. This is a very sad day for our country and it reflects so badly on our attitude to human rights across the world. Is there anything he would listen to that would make the Government change what I think is a deplorable decision?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am afraid I have to say directly to the hon. Lady that I diametrically disagree with her. I am not in any way embarrassed, although, of course, when it comes to leaks, I neither like nor approve of them. However, this is the final decision. I do not think it is deplorable. Certainly in my direct experience, and looking at the evidence—and, indeed, in response to a consultation where so few people actually said, given what they thought the conditions would be in living there, that they wanted to go—it is not deplorable or a breach of human rights to say that, in our judgment, this would be creating a community that would actually not be sustainable and that, probably, at the end of the day, would be neither safe nor happy.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): This is a sensitive decision, but it is the right decision. Is the Minister of State aware that, when I was Minister for overseas territories, I actually travelled out to the Chagos Islands and also went out to the outer islands? I think I am the only person in the House today who has visited. It was certainly quite a difficult experience; over five days, I spent only 15 minutes on land in a bed. This is a massive area, and it is very difficult to get to. It would be wholly impossible to populate the islands, as other Members of the House have argued. Does the Minister agree that, while this is a sensitive issue, it is good to have what I hope will be closure on it going forward?
Sir Alan Duncan: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who has served, of course, as a Minister. As he says, he is probably the only one of us who has visited. I really think that what he has said is right: it is wise to realise that, despite the many arguments we have heard for repopulating the islands, that would not lead to an attractive existence for those who lived there, in what we foresee as the circumstances in which they would live. For instance, if someone has appendicitis and it takes them five days to get to a hospital, they are probably not going to get there alive. I hope the House will listen to my hon. Friend’s first-hand evidence and experience.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What have the Government actually decided here? They say they will not facilitate resettlement, but do they accept or not that the Chagossians have a right of return or a right of abode? If I won the lottery and decided to spend my winnings on building a paradise retreat for myself on one of the Chagos Islands, would that kind of development be permitted?

Sir Alan Duncan: It would potentially be illegal. In my view, it is quite clear that our decision is that there should not be resettlement or repopulation on these islands.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): When we renegotiate this treaty with the Americans for the use of the Chagos Islands, could not part of the conditions of agreement be that Chagossians should be the people of choice for employment in the American airbase there? They would then be sustained by the American infrastructure and be looked after. That would be an honourable thing for us to do; what we decided to do yesterday is dishonourable.

Sir Alan Duncan: I do not agree with my hon. and gallant—Friend. I do not think this is dishonourable. As I have already said, Diego Garcia is only one small part of this large archipelago. The nature of the employment there would not necessarily prove attractive, and it is not seen as practical to link subsistence payments for a repopulated series of islands to the use of the defence base, for which, at the moment, there is no payment anyway.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I assure the Minister that I understand better than most people in this House the challenges of providing public services in remote island communities? However, if the Chagos Islands are where people belong and that is where they want to be, they have an inalienable right to be there. What the Minister describes today as practicalities exist only because of what this country did some decades ago. Paying £40 million over 10 years cannot buy out our responsibilities.

Sir Alan Duncan: Notwithstanding the fact that, as I said earlier, the manner in which the Chagossians were displaced in the ‘60s and ‘70s was deplorable, we think it inappropriate to return them. We have to look to the future, not the past. Compensation has already been agreed and upheld in the courts, so we are now trying to offer a forward-looking support package of £40 million in the manner that I described.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): If resettlement went forward as an option, how resilient would that be to climate change and changes in sea levels, which have been a problem elsewhere in the area? Will the Minister explain the background on the business of ceding the archipelago to Mauritius if it is no longer used for defence purposes?

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend answers his own questions in a way. Yes, the islands are low-lying and so do face some of the perils of climate change, although I hope that recent decisions and the actions of Governments will stop the water level rising any further. He is correct in saying that there is an understanding that we would cede the islands to the Mauritians in the event that they were no longer needed for defence purposes.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I believe this decision to be wrong. I also believe that the FCO has not comported itself well in how this information has come out. This morning I spoke to my constituent, Louis Elyse, who is the leader of the small Chagossian community in Wythenshawe and Sale East. He is utterly heartbroken and said that it was cruel and unusual that the KPMG report gave so much hope only for it to be undermined in such a way by Government yesterday.

Sir Alan Duncan: It is not entirely fair to say that the KPMG report was undermining by Government. The report gave a whole range of possible scenarios, and consultation followed. I say again that only 25% of the 832 people who responded after further discussions indicated that they would want to return. These are very, very small numbers that would, under the KPMG report, trigger a very high cost per capita. I very much hope that the package we have announced will benefit those of the hon. Gentleman’s constituents who qualify for assistance as Chagossians. It is on those people on his own doorstep that I would like to concentrate the expenditure of this money. We are very happy, in the FCO and DFID, to discuss how that might take place.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s commitment to increase the number of visits to the Chagos Islands, and the package of measures for elderly people who were removed forcibly from the islands. Will he undertake to ensure that priority is given particularly to enabling elderly former residents of the islands to return to see the land of their birth, and their children and other parts of their family to see the beauty of the area?

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend puts his finger on a very important element of the support package that has been designed. It is a heritage package, in most respects, such that those who were born there and are still alive can go back and see the place of their birth, while those who are descendants can see the origin of their heritage. I very much hope that an appropriate amount of the £40 million will be directed to that end and will promptly facilitate exactly what he has described.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): A study by the coalition Government in 2014-15 concluded that resettlement was possible and affordable if Diego Garcia was involved. What consideration was given to that option? How have we moved from the resettlement that
the previous Government decided was a good idea to a statement today that says there will be no resettlement at all?

Sir Alan Duncan: The link with Diego Garcia as a potential payee, as it were, for all this is illusory, particularly because following consultation and the discussions that followed the KPMG report, it was clear that few, if any, Chagossians really wanted to work on the base.

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): On the rights of Chagossians, the United Nations has found in their favour in regard to return, and recently the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has found against the UK Government and criticised their policy. Why is the Minister ignoring the view of the United Nations?

Sir Alan Duncan: We are not ignoring the view of the United Nations, and I do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s interpretation. For all the reasons that I have described at length today, this would be an impractical proposal that would not lead to happy lives for those who might choose to go there.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The original decision is a throwback to colonial thinking, and the support package currently on offer does not even match the original discount given to Polaris nuclear missiles, so more money should be made available. More recently, the KPMG report says that it is feasible for Chagossians to return, and despite the Minister’s comments on the quality of life that they would get, the consultation showed that more than 200 of them want to do so. How can the Government decide that they are not allowed to return because they would not get a good enough quality of life?

Sir Alan Duncan: Because of the expense and, indeed, because they would not get a good quality of life. Only 200 maximum said that they wished to do that, and it is not the case that the KPMG report said that it was straightforwardly feasible. It presented a number of scenarios, most of which came out at a very high cost that could not justify the resettlement of Chagossians on the islands.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am sure that the Minister knows his history. A couple of hundred years ago, his predecessor would have stood in the same place and assured Parliament that the colony called America could not possibly deliver a decent standard of life to its people. Does not he accept that if the decision whether it is in the interests of islanders to return is made here and they are not given the right to decide, that is a return to the days of the arrogant, colonial, Britain-knows-best days, which should have been consigned to the dustbin of history 100 years ago?

Sir Alan Duncan: No, because, as I have already said, that right of self-determination is not considered legally to apply. We have gone through all the arguments today and explained why we think that would be impractical. It is better to look to the future and to make sure that the help that the islanders need, wherever they are, be it in Mauritius, the Seychelles or the United Kingdom, is properly given by Her Majesty’s Government.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Last but certainly not least, I call Ian Paisley.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Minister’s statement about no right to self-determination will have much wider implications and will be listened to by many people on other islands and rocks around the world. Will he make it clear to those people who may have felt a shiver down their spine when they heard that statement that Her Majesty’s Government do not intend to roll back self-determination anywhere else?

Sir Alan Duncan: My interpretation of the hon. Gentleman’s question—I think that this will be to his satisfaction—is that he is implicitly also referring to sovereignty. May I make it absolutely clear that questions as to the existence or presence of a population on the British Indian Ocean Territory do not affect our position on sovereignty? We have no doubt whatsoever about our sovereignty of the British Indian Ocean Territory.
Business of the House

11.8 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): The business for next week is as follows:

Monday 21 November—Remaining stages of the Higher Education and Research Bill.

Tuesday 22 November—Opposition day (13th allotted day). There will be a debate on education and social mobility, followed by a debate on the national health service. Both debates will arise on an Opposition motion.

Wednesday 23 November—The Chancellor of the Exchequer will present his autumn statement, followed by a general debate on exiting the EU and transport policy.

Thursday 24 November—Debate on a motion on reform of the support arrangements for people affected by contaminated blood and blood products, followed by a debate on a motion on reducing health inequality. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 25 November—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 28 November will include:

Monday 28 November—Remaining stages of the Digital Economy Bill.

Tuesday 29 November—Second Reading of the Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill, after which the Chairman of Ways and Means is expected to announce opposed private business for consideration.

Wednesday 30 November—Opposition day (14th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party. Subject to be announced.

Thursday 1 December—Debate on a motion on transgender equality, followed by a general debate on the future of the UK fishing industry. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 2 December—Private Members’ Bills.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 21 and 28 November will be:

Monday 21 November—Debate on an e-petition relating to free childcare.

Monday 28 November—Debate on an e-petition relating to child cancer.

It may be for the convenience of the House if I also say that in view of the intense speculation in the media this morning about the Strathclyde report, my right hon. and noble Friend the Lord Privy Seal intends to make a statement in the House of Lords later today, and I shall place a copy of it in the Library of the House and in the Vote Office as soon as it is available. The Government intend to respond very soon to the Strathclyde report and to the Select Committee reports of both Houses on that subject. I can confirm that although the Government found Lord Strathclyde’s analysis compelling and we are determined that the principle of the supremacy of the elected House should be upheld, we have no plans, for now, to introduce new primary legislation.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the information he gave, particularly on the Strathclyde report. Obviously, we will wait to see what it says when he places a copy of it in the Library, but I understand that problems may remain despite the report’s contents.

We have heard nothing from the Leader of the House about the dates for the next recess and the next terms. We appear to stop at 9 February—then there is radio silence; there is absolutely nothing after that. Is there any business? Are we on an election footing? Who knows? Even if the Government do not have plans, the staff and Members, and their families, all have to plan for Easter and summer. We might want to go to see Dippy the dinosaur, who is leaving the Natural History Museum and going on tour—there are rumours he might end up in 1,600 Pennsylvania Avenue in January 2017. The Prime Minister knows what it is like to talk to the winner of the votes of the electoral college—not the popular vote—in the US presidential election. She made the call and heard, as the rest of us do when we try to make an appointment with our doctor or we are talking to our banks, “Thank you for holding. You are ninth in the queue.”

In the Prime Minister’s first foreign policy speech, at the Lord Mayor’s banquet, she said that globalisation—and liberalism, a dirty word—“in its current form has left too many people behind”.

What we say is that people have been left behind by the past six wasted years of this Government. They have been left behind by: austerity measures; freezes on wages; zero-hours contracts, which now extend to lecturers; current childcare provision; cuts in grants to local authorities, which have decimated local services and caused the closures of libraries; the bedroom tax, which has now been ruled in two cases to be unreasonable; and the reduction in Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs staff, which has stopped us addressing tax evasion and tax avoidance schemes, and therefore stopped money flowing into the Treasury coffers. Will the Leader of the House give us a debate in Government time to analyse how people have been affected by their policies in the past six years?

May we also have a debate on the sustainability and transformation plans in the NHS? We have had an Opposition debate, but we need a debate in Government time. The British Medical Association and the King’s Fund have added their voices, saying that the plans are not transparent and there is no legal or clinical accountability. Clinicians, patients and the public should be involved, or we will all be left behind by the new NHS plans. I do not know whether you have heard, Mr Deputy Speaker, but they are called STP footprints—that reminds me of Dippy the dinosaur. STPs will form a group with clinical commissioning groups, local authorities and goodness knows how many other people, adding another tier of bureaucracy. We have had a reorganisation of the NHS, under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, and it cost £3 billion. Is this another one? Where are patient care and patient safety in this? These plans need to be made public immediately.
May we have a debate on reaffirming the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law? A judge made an analysis of a case in a lecture to students, and the comments about that are extremely threatening. An hon. Member said:

“If judges dip their toes in political waters by making speeches outside the courtroom, they are asking to get splashed back.”

If anyone says something the Government do not like, they are trolled and trashed. Judges give speeches outside the courtroom all the time. Lord Denning and Lord Scarman did so in the Hamlyn lectures. Lord Bingham did so in the Sir David Williams lectures in Cambridge, and he produced a book called “The Rule of Law”. As I have done before in this House, I encourage all hon. Members to read that book. The situation is a far cry from the Youth Parliament last week, which wanted to debate a better, kinder democracy.

And now to Brexit. The Prime Minister yesterday said that our democracy is underpinned by the freedom of the press. However, No. 10 does not like the fact that the press have said that Whitehall is struggling to cope and that there is no plan for exiting the Union. Will the Leader of the House make a statement on whether there is a plan and whether extra civil servants are required for the 500 projects that relate to leaving the EU? The Leader of the House was the longest-serving Minister for Europe, and he has built very good relationships. He is best placed to be there to negotiate with friends rather than out of secrecy and fear. He must be despairing of the right hon. Members for North Somerset (Dr. Fox), for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) and for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), who are like “Three Men in a Boat”, only without the oars. The sequel to that is “Three Men on the Bummel”. Bummel is a German word, so let me explain what it means. Jerome K. Jerome—who was, incidentally, born in Walsall—described it as a: “journey, long or short, without an end; the only thing regulating it being the necessity of getting back within a given time to the point from which one started”.

That seems to describe the Government’s policy on exiting the Union. The British people are being left behind by this Government.

Mr Lidington: I join the hon. Lady in welcoming and celebrating the sitting of the UK Youth Parliament in this Chamber last Friday. She and I, and the Minister with responsibility for civil society, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Mr Wilson), were present. We all came away feeling energised by the enthusiasm of those hundreds of young men and women for open, vigorous debate and for the process and the institutions of parliamentary democracy. I hope that following their experience here they will go and spread the word in all parts of the country about how important it is for young people, whichever political party they sympathise with, to become involved in helping to shape the future of their country.

Apropos of recess dates, I am keen, too, to bring an end to the suspense as soon as possible, and I recognise that colleagues in all parts of the House wish to have clarity on future recess dates. Equally, the hon. Lady will appreciate that any Government have to bear in mind the pressures that there will be on handling Government legislative business, but I hope to make an announcement as soon as possible. I can promise the hon. Lady that her appetite for additional legislation and other Government business will be more than satisfied in the months to come.

I was surprised that the hon. Lady made slightly disparaging comments about the Prime Minister’s efforts to build, from the start, a strong and robust relationship with the new President-elect of the United States of America. I had always thought it was common ground between the main political parties to accept that it is in the fundamental interests of the people of the UK for a British Government, whatever its political complexion, to seek to maintain a strong, intimate relationship with the US Administration, whether it is Democrat or Republican.

The hon. Lady asked about EU exit. I am sorry if she was not listening during my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister’s response to the Leader of the Opposition yesterday, because my right hon. Friend spelled out the fact that the Government have a very clear plan. It is to secure for British business the maximum access to, and the greatest possible freedom to operate within, the single European market. It is to continue our strong tradition of close co-operation with our European colleagues on police and judicial matters, fighting together against terrorism and organised crime. It is to continue the essential network of relationships on which our foreign and security co-operation is founded. It is certainly to bring an end to the freedom of movement of people as it currently exists. It is also about forging a role for the United Kingdom as a champion of freedom of trade and investment worldwide. I would once have hoped that the Labour party aspired to support those objectives as well.

Equally, I was sorry that the hon. Lady painted such a bleak and inaccurate picture of the Government’s record in office without acknowledging this week’s employment figures. The figures show that more people are in work in the United Kingdom than ever before, and they show that more people with disabilities have secured employment than ever before. The Resolution Foundation has hailed the past 12 months as the best year in history for low-paid employees because of this Government’s introduction of the national living wage.

The hon. Lady said that she was looking forward to following the tour of Dippy the dinosaur around the country. It is somehow appropriate that Opposition Members should pay such attention to that event. It probably brings back fond memories of their recent political extinction.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Like the shadow Leader of the House, I believe in the freedom of the media to report, but the BBC increasingly appears to be becoming the “Brexit Bad Corporation”. I was listening to the “Today” programme at 8 am this morning, when
it reported on the launch today of four satellites as part of the European Space Agency and the EU’s Galileo programme. At the end of the report, the BBC said that British businesses would not be able to co-operate fully with the programme following Brexit. I did a bit of research and found out that China, Ukraine and Morocco are part of the programme, but the last time I looked, none of those three countries was in the European Union. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the Secretary for State for Culture, Media and Sport to come to the House to tell us what discussions she is having with Lord Tony Hall about having some fairness in the coverage of our Brexit?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is right to say that there is active participation by a number of non-member states in the Galileo and various other EU programmes. That indicates that it is possible for a country outside the EU, but enjoying friendly relationships with it, to forge such a partnership. It is probably fair to say that the BBC got a lot of flak from both camps during the referendum campaign. The best position for Ministers to take is to respect the independence of the BBC. We should make complaints if we feel that the Government’s position is misrepresented in some way, but, in a free society, we ultimately have to respect the editorial judgment of the broadcasters and newspaper editors.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week.

Well, well—it looks like the unelected circus down the corridor has just won the battle of the statutory instrument, as the Government hastily and embarrassingly withdraw all their plans to rein in the powers of the unelected ones. With the imminent ennoblement of the dark lord Farage it seems as though the only intention the Government have for the House of Lords is to increase the numbers in that grotesque place down the corridor.

Today’s piece of Tory Brexit cluelessness does not come from the prosecco-swilling Foreign Secretary as he goes around Europe upsetting the diplomatic community but from the Treasury, as we learn that £100 billion is to be sucked out of the economy because of this shambolic Brexit. Given that dramatic news I presume we are not going to be getting our £350 million for the NHS. May I suggest a way in which we might be able to resolve that situation—could we perhaps get some of the Brexit clown who made that absurd statement during the referendum to come forward and apologise for what they said during the campaign?

We are now anticipating that the Government will be defeated in the Supreme Court when it comes to the appeal on the High Court ruling. Will the Leader of the House tell us what provisional plans he has for legislation as it comes forward? As Leader of the House—this House—will he pledge that there will be opportunities for Members to properly debate that legislation and for amendments to be tabled, and there will be no attempts whatever to curtail any debate on it?

Lastly, after business questions the Labour shadow Leader of the House and I will be doing some recording for the Jo Cox Foundation, as we reclaim the song “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”. It is for a great cause, and I am sure that the Leader of the House will be prepared to support it; perhaps he will even help us get to No. 1 in the new year.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to put questions to the Chancellor of the Exchequer after the autumn statement about the implications for the economy of EU exit and many other matters.

The Government believe that we have a powerful case to argue in the forthcoming Supreme Court case. We intend to make that case. We should not forget that the High Court in Northern Ireland came to a different conclusion from the High Court in England on the matter. Both the Belfast and the London cases are to be heard together by the Supreme Court later this year. The Government are of course completely respectful of the role of the courts and their independence, and of the rule of law. That is written into the ministerial code and the civil service code alike.

I am certainly happy to wish the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues well in their chart-topping endeavour. Given the character of some of the songs that have managed to top the charts at Christmas and the new year over recent decades, he could follow in the footsteps of Clive Dunn and children’s choirs in becoming an emblem of this country’s somewhat eclectic tastes in music.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I read with interest today in the Telegraph an article by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about the conference she has been to in Vietnam. May we ask her to give an urgent statement next week to explain why she is saying that we are leading the world in banning ivory but the fact is that we are only consulting on it after Christmas?

Mr Lidington: There will be questions to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 24 November, which will give my hon. Friend the opportunity she seeks. I think hon. Members on both sides of the House will want to support strongly the lead my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is taking in trying not just to highlight this issue in terms of British public opinion, but in persuading other Governments, in particular those from which the demand for ivory and other products from endangered species largely comes, that it is in their interests and in the interests of the people of the world to maintain wildlife, habitats and the biodiversity of the planet.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the welcome development of giving the Backbench Business Committee notice of available dates. That has allowed him to announce this morning the next two Thursdays’ Backbench Business debates. Long may that continue.

I was not able to get in on Transport questions this morning, but the delay to the electrification of the Great Western main line is having a knock-on impact. That electrification was going to release class 150 and class 153 diesel trains for use on the northern rail franchise. There is a massive differential in investment in rail between the north and the south, but I am afraid
to say that even delays to the investment proposals in the south and the south-west are having a knock-on effect on rail in the northern “poorhouse”.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments about my efforts to try to give greater notice to him and his Committee about forthcoming Backbench Business days. I am committed to trying to maintain that good practice.

The Government are committed to pursuing the electrification of the Great Western main line. As the recent announcement reflected, however, we need to ensure that constant attention is paid to the need for best value for the taxpayer in how we go about that. I will draw his concerns about the possible impact on the northern rail franchise to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the system of testing at key stage 1 and key stage 2? Concern has been expressed about whether teachers are being adequately trained in the new rules. There also seems to be some inconsistency in the implementation and moderation of the testing, with particular regard to reading at key stage 2 and the disadvantageous effect it may have on children with special educational needs.

Mr Lidington: I ought to declare an interest, as my wife is a primary school teacher who teaches key stage 1 and key stage 2. A wide-ranging consultation, which will commence in the new year, was announced on 19 October by the Secretary of State for Education. It will give teachers, headteachers and others the opportunity to have their say on the current arrangements for primary assessment. The objective surely has to be to have a system in place that seeks always to drive up the standards attained by children in primary school, while of course at the same time making sure that children with disabilities and special educational needs have their particular needs taken into account, and that they are themselves able to succeed to the very limit of their own talents and determination.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Fourteen-year-old Nasar Ahmed, who lived in my constituency, died on Monday this week after falling ill at school last Thursday. His family are, naturally, devastated. His death is being investigated by the police as unexplained; by the local authority, which has a duty of care; and possibly by the Health and Safety Executive. I have every confidence that the authorities will conduct a thorough examination, but in the event of wider implications and lessons to be learned my request of the Home Secretary is that I can rely on his support for access to appropriate Ministers outside this Chamber—and, with your approval, Mr Deputy Speaker, inside this Chamber—should that prove necessary in due course.

Mr Lidington: First, may I express my sorrow and deep sympathy for the family of Nasar Ahmed? What has happened to them is the most appalling and unappealable tragedy that any parent or relative can imagine. Clearly, as there are ongoing investigations, the hon. Gentleman would not expect me to comment further in detail, but I can assure him that the Government will want to pay close attention to the findings, and I am confident that should central Government need to reflect on current law and practice the relevant Ministers will be happy to talk to him.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last weekend, we commemorated those who sacrificed their lives in service to this country to enable us to live in freedom and democracy. This weekend, we will celebrate the role of the Indian army in the great war and world war two, and on Sunday the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women will march at the Cenotaph, and I will be pleased and honoured to join them. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate in Government time, particularly in the centenary of the great war, to commemorate the role of the various parts of what was then the empire, and is now the Commonwealth, in securing our freedom?

Mr Lidington: I cannot promise my hon. Friend a debate in Government time—this might well be a suitable subject for an Adjournment debate either here or in Westminster Hall—but I think that the House will be at one in joining him in saluting the sacrifice and service of those who served in the Indian army during both world wars and in saluting Jewish servicemen and women who also fought for freedom.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Will the Leader of the House facilitate a statement from the Home Secretary regarding the position of non-EEA fishermen, mainly Filipinos, who are critical to the fishing industry in the County Down ports and the ports of the west of Scotland and who have already been subjected to raids by UK border agencies? We urgently need proper regulation in this area. We have already had meetings with the Immigration Minister, but we now urgently need a statement from the Home Secretary outlining a solution.

Mr Lidington: Having visited Kilkeel a few years ago, I am aware of the importance of the fishing industry in the hon. Lady’s constituency, and I will certainly draw to the Home Secretary’s attention the points she has made. It is clearly important that we have arrangements to ensure that people from other countries who come and work here are legally entitled to be here, not least because legal status enables them to take advantage of the opportunities to work and, to some extent, access services they might need. Without legal status, they can so easily be exploited by rogue employers. I accept, however, that the fishing industry has for some time needed to take on labour from the Philippines and other countries, and I will make sure that Home Office Ministers are aware of this problem.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): The House of Commons briefing paper on the northern powerhouse, issued on 1 November, states that the ability of the north-west to retain talented graduates was identified as a key factor in the success of the northern powerhouse. May we have a debate on how the Government, in partnership with north-west universities and business, will work to better retain skills developed in the north-west?
Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. When we look at how to encourage a revival of the civic dynamism that characterised the growth of the great northern cities during the 19th and early 20th centuries, we need to think about economic stimuli and about how we can further encourage those cities as centres of educational and research excellence and as centres of culture and the arts. That is why the devolutionary model initiated by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) and being taken forward by the present Government is so attractive. It enables elected authorities in the region itself to work across the piece on policies that address the cultural and educational issues, alongside those simply to do with economics.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): Will the Leader of the House assure us that next week’s debate on Europe will be broad enough to encompass today’s opinion poll finding that 90% of the country wants to be within the single marketplace? Given that I want to be in the single marketplace, that I know the Leader of the House wants to be in the single marketplace and that anybody with an ounce of sense understands that in this Trumpian world of protectionist economics where the special relationship means being 11th in the telephone queue for a call with the new American President, we had better be in the single marketplace, will the Leader of the House now get up to the Dispatch Box and tell us that he actually understands the difference between access to a marketplace, which the association of Patagonian shoe manufacturers has, and being within the single marketplace, which should be the overwhelming priority of the Government to secure?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Business questions are about understanding—that is the only slight difference.

Mr Lidington: I remind the right hon. Gentleman that, as the Prime Minister repeated yesterday, her declared objective is not just the maximum access for British companies to the European market, but the greatest possible freedom to operate within that market as well. Clearly, the detail of that future trading and investment relationship is going to be an absolutely core element of the negotiations that we intend to start next week. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will be ingenuous and experienced enough to find ways of weaving his particular concern into next week’s debate or indeed on other occasions.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): My right hon. Friend may not be aware that Walsall Council is proposing to close all the libraries within the borough, save for one in the town centre. There are six libraries in my constituency and they are all under consideration for closure. What advice can my right hon. Friend give me about this, and will he consider allowing time for a debate on libraries? Of course local authorities in the region itself to work across the piece on policies that address the cultural and educational issues, alongside those simply to do with economics.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is right to challenge the present Government is so attractive. It enables elected authorities in the region itself to work across the piece on policies that address the cultural and educational issues, alongside those simply to do with economics.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Following the publication of the Cheshire and Merseyside NHS sustainability and transformation plan on Wednesday, a senior manager from Liverpool clinical commissioning group has admitted in the Liverpool Echo that the plans are financially driven, were drawn up in secrecy and are already being implemented—yet none of my constituents has had any say in how the proposals were formulated. May we have a debate in Government time so that we can properly consider the impact on my Garston and Halewood constituents of the proposals to reduce the opening hours at Whiston A&E and supposedly “reconfigure” the Liverpool women’s hospital while merging the Royal, Aintree and Broomhead Trusts?

Mr Lidington: As the sustainability and transformation plans are published, it is important that they are examined closely. As I said earlier, local authorities have the power in law to exercise scrutiny and a check on proposals for changes in service delivery. The Government have delivered to the NHS all the money that the NHS chief executive asked for to fund reforms to the NHS to make it suitable for the health policy challenges of today and the future. When any of us talk to clinicians in our constituencies, we often find that it is the doctors and the nurses who say that there sometimes needs to be a change to the pattern of the location of services, particularly to deliver more specialist units, to provide patients with better treatment.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): With today’s news that Boeing is planning to open a new aviation maintenance facility at Gatwick airport, supporting over 100 jobs, may we have a debate on the importance of the aviation industry—particularly post-Brexit, given that we are an island trading nation—hopefully including the issue of reducing air passenger duty?

Mr Lidington: I shall take my hon. Friend’s last comment as a late bid to the Chancellor of the Exchequer prior to the autumn statement, but he has made a good point about the importance of the aviation industry to the country’s economic health and job creation. I think that Boeing’s investment at Gatwick is a further sign that, despite the political turbulence that is bound to follow the referendum result, our country is still seen as an extremely attractive destination for global investors.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): This building is one of the most iconic in the world, and millions of people take photographs of it every day, but it has problems. Last week the House of Lords had to go into “Pleasure”—its word, not mine—because of the noise of the building work that was going on. It is now 10 weeks since the Joint Committee, two of whose members were Ministers, produced its report on what should happen here, and all the evidence suggests that any delay of this nature costs millions of pounds more. Why can we not have a debate as soon as possible, and certainly before Christmas?
Mr Lidington: Both the Leader of the House of Lords and I want Parliament to have an opportunity to debate this matter and make a decision as soon as possible. As a responsible Government, we have felt the need to seek the advice of the independent Major Projects Authority about the Government’s proposals in particular, but I hope that we shall be able to announce a date before much longer.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Voting in my shop competition closes in a couple of weeks’ time, on 1 December, and I shall be announcing the results on Small Business Saturday. I urge those who have not yet voted for their favourite shops to do so before voting closes. May we have a debate about the role that our high streets play in creating new jobs and ensuring that we have thriving local communities?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is right to speak up for the importance of high streets as a focus of both civic identity and economic activity in towns and villages throughout the country. I applaud the initiative that she has taken, and I hope that not only many Members of Parliament but many members of the public will play an active part in the poll she has launched.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): May I press the Leader of the House a little further on his response to the earlier question about the Joint Committee’s report on restoration and renewal? Does he intend the motion and debate proposed in the report to be dealt with in the House before Christmas?

Mr Lidington: I am not yet in a position to announce a firm date. I am, however, as aware as anyone else of the intense pressures on services in the building that need to be completely renewed, and of the links between the R and R project and the timetable for other restoration work that needs to be done.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): As we approach the winter months, it is essential to ensure that people have access to the best possible tariffs for their energy. May we have a debate about competition in the UK energy market?

Mr Lidington: That is an important point, especially as winter is now approaching. We have a more competitive domestic retail energy market than ever before, and nearly 4 million energy accounts were switched between January and June this year, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy wants to do more. He is particularly anxious to ensure that customers are not penalised for loyalty, and that energy companies treat all their customers fairly, not just those who switch between suppliers.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I remind the Leader of the House that our constituents will be deeply affected by the decision to take action on article 50, which will, it seems, be made in March? It will make a dramatic change to their lives—indeed, to all our lives. Is it not about time the Leader of the House told us that we shall have a major opportunity every week to debate our progress towards that date? This is such a big issue that my constituents demand accountability of that kind from the House. Will the Secretary of State introduce special measures to meet their needs?

Mr Lidington: I have just announced the second in a series of debates in Government time about aspects of the public’s decision in the referendum that this country should leave the European Union, so the Government are committed to providing the opportunities the hon. Gentleman seeks. He will also have the opportunity to put questions to the Foreign Secretary on 22 November, and to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on 1 December.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend assist in securing a debate on the preservation of ancient woodland and veteran trees? People are writing to me, along with my hon. Friends for Winchester (Steve Brine) and for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery), about the possible bulldozing of ancient woodland and its loss to our communities and the environment. This needs further protection where there are no neighbourhood or local plans, but options B and C in our proposed local plans are putting my constituents and their green spaces in peril.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend’s point will strike a chord with many Members on both sides of the House. She may get an opportunity to raise that matter on Monday 28 November during Communities and Local Government questions, but I should add that the sooner local authorities get their local plans in place, the sooner they will be able to assure local people that there will be proper protection for ancient woodlands and for other key environmental amenities.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Yesterday the Exiting the European Union Committee heard evidence from Dr Hannah White, director of research at the Institute for Government. It has warned that there will be a full-blown constitutional crisis unless all nations of the UK are involved in the negotiations around leaving the EU. Under questioning, Dr White said it would be almost unprecedented for one of the devolved legislatures to express concern and refuse to pass a legislative consent motion but for the UK Government to go ahead none the less. May we have a debate about how we can avert the constitutional crisis that the Institute of Government has warned about by involving all the devolved nations fully in negotiations to leave the EU?

Mr Lidington: The Government have made it clear again and again that we are committed to engaging in detail and constantly with all three devolved Administrations, whether that is at the level of the Joint Ministerial Committee, or at operational level between Ministers here and Ministers in the devolved Administrations or between officials in the different Administrations.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): May we have a debate on responsibility for repairing damaged culverts? They result in flooding in certain parts of my constituency every time there is heavy rain, and there is a problem with determining who is responsible for the damage,
who is responsible for repairs, and what can be done if nobody accepts responsibility, or if they do but cannot afford to pay for the damage.

Mr Lidington: I will draw my hon. Friend’s concern to the attention of the relevant Minister at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but I can say to him that under the Flood and Water Management Act 2010, unitary authorities and county councils have a duty to be the lead local flood authority. That Act also requires all authorities to co-operate and exchange information.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Is the Leader of the House excited by today’s news of a unique parliamentary series of events next year with the performance of a brand-new musical under the snappy title of “The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee takes oral evidence on the relationship between Whitehall and Kids Company”? Does he not think that arrangements by him to have a performance in this House would be both politically instructive and culturally enriching?

Mr Lidington: I can barely contain my excitement. I look forward to the Chairman of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), who has a fine baritone voice, playing himself in such a performance.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Let’s hear from a man who should be able to deliver well: Conor McGinn.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. My Bill to introduce Helen’s law would deny parole to murderers who refuse to reveal the location of their victims’ remains. It has the support of 400,000 members of the public and many Members on both sides of the House, but will only become law if the Government support it or incorporate it into their legislative programme. Will the right hon. Gentleman and perhaps the Justice Secretary meet me and Helen’s mum, Marie McCourt, to discuss how we might work together on this?

Mr Lidington: I will ask the relevant Minister in the Justice Department to contact the hon. Gentleman about this case. No one in the House today will have anything but unreserved sympathy for the family involved, or indeed for any other family in the same appalling situation. There will be also opportunities for him to highlight this issue further through Adjournment debates.

Mr Lidington: I am not familiar with every detail of this case, but my understanding is that the regulator in question was appointed following the normal public appointments process involving all the Nolan principles. I also understand that the criticisms that the hon. Gentleman and others have made have been carefully considered and that there was no evidence to justify a change to the original decision.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On 15 September, the rail Minister, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), told me that I could expect “good news” about rail electrification to Hull shortly. Yesterday afternoon that scheme was scrapped, despite it appearing in the Government’s northern transport plan. May we please have a debate in Government time about whether people in Hull, who pay their taxes and often pay higher rail fares, can believe anything that a Tory Minister says to them about being included in the northern powerhouse?

Mr Lidington: As the hon. Lady knows, the Government are investing large sums of taxpayers’ money in improvements to transport infrastructure and, more generally, in northern cities, but I will alert the rail Minister to her particular concern about the situation relating to Hull.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The city of Dundee has spent years and hundreds of thousands of pounds preparing a bid to become the 2023 European city of culture, which would bring funding from Brussels, as well as being a major boost for tourism and cultural, social and economic development. This has now been thrown into doubt, bizarrely by the UK Government’s Culture Secretary, who wants to withdraw from the competition. This has led to the Foreign Secretary having to write to suggest that this move would be framed as “pulling up the drawbridge”. The Culture Secretary should check her job title—the clue is in the name. May we have an urgent debate on this matter before yet more Brexit folly leads to a devastating blow for Dundee?

Mr Lidington: Cities of culture will be one aspect of the forthcoming negotiations between the United Kingdom Government and the EU 27. This is tied up with our EU membership and our eligibility to draw upon EU funds.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Four months have passed since the end of the Government’s consultation on tips, gratuities and service charges, but abuses are still happening, with workers being told that they will receive a share of the service charge only if their pay is cut by a third. The former Leader of the House promised some months ago that the Business Secretary would update the House about this, but there has been a deafening silence. Will the Government now provide time as soon as possible for the new Business Secretary to make a statement on this matter?

Mr Lidington: If that commitment was given in the past, I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is made aware of the hon. Lady’s wish for such an announcement as soon as possible.
Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Twice visitors from the diocese of Hyderabad have been refused visas to visit the Church of Scotland Presbytery of Glasgow, despite the Church having committed to bear the costs. The reason for the refusal suggested that the visitors were not genuine, despite the existence of an ongoing winning relationship. I hear similar spurious reasons for visa refusals week in, week out. May we please have a statement in Government time on how the Government plan to sort out this sorry situation?

Mr Lidington: I know from my constituency experience that decisions by immigration officers about individual visa applications are often difficult and sensitive. My advice to constituents is always to ensure that the paperwork—the audit trail—is wholly in place so that it is absolutely clear that people are going to abide by the terms of the visa, if granted, and that they will return to their own country at the end of the visa term. The hon. Lady will clearly not expect me to know about that particular case, but if she writes to me, I will pass the details to the Immigration Minister.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Yesterday, the National Assembly for Wales unanimously supported a motion led by my colleague Steffan Lewis calling for an urgent review of the mineworkers pension scheme. Over the years, the Treasury has cashed in around £8 billion of surpluses from the scheme for acting as a guarantor. May we have a Treasury statement on the matter so that MPs who represent mining communities can make the case for a review?

Mr Lidington: Treasury questions on 29 November may well provide the hon. Gentleman with that opportunity.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May I check with the Leader of the House whether the Government will publish Sir John Parker’s national shipbuilding strategy prior to the autumn statement? If so, may we have a debate in Government time to discuss this iconic, highly skilled industry, which employs many of my constituents and other workers in the United Kingdom?

Mr Lidington: I will ensure that the shipping Minister knows about the hon. Gentleman’s wish. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the Ministry of Defence’s commitment to spend more money on building new ships in Scottish shipyards, which will maintain the jobs and expertise that he rightly celebrates.

Mr Lidington: I completely understand why Welsh-language broadcasting is important to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents. I note that Welsh questions are on 30 November, which might provide him the opportunity to raise that matter.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Pakistan’s poverty rate is some 39%. It has weak governance and political institutions. It has been gripped by violent extremism—it is No. 22 in the league table—and its levels of persecution of Christians and other ethnic minorities put it at the top of the league table for that. It is affected by climate change and natural disasters, which have exacerbated migration and food insecurity. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on the important issue of the shrinking space for civil society in Pakistan?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman is a formidable champion of religious rights in parts of the world where those rights are under threat. I think everyone here would want to join him in arguing passionately for freedom of worship and religious expression everywhere. Foreign Office questions are coming up on 22 November, at which he might wish to raise this subject. We do need to continue to help the fragile authorities in Pakistan, but we try to target our aid through non-governmental organisations and others to ensure that it reaches those who are in such desperate need.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Following inquiries from constituents who are serving prison officers, I tabled written parliamentary questions 46654 and 46655 on 15 September regarding officers’ life expectancy, and their medical and injury awards. To date, I have had no answer, and not even a holding response to what were named day questions submitted more than two months ago. That is unacceptable. May we therefore have a debate in Government time on the response times to parliamentary questions?
Mr Lidington: The Government not only set expected standards for replies to parliamentary questions, but publish regular bulletins showing how each Department has performed against those standards. I am concerned by what the hon. Gentleman says and I shall make sure that it is chased up today with the Department concerned.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Earlier, the Leader of the House waxed positive about the Government’s commitments to city deals and regional growth deals. May we have a debate in this House on the range and reach of such deals across the UK, including the very positive developments and prospects in Scotland and Wales? That might help to illuminate the resistance and negligence on the part of the Northern Ireland Executive in failing to take up what previous Whitehall Ministers have said would be their readiness to support deals—if they get proposals—including cross-border deals.

Mr Lidington: It may well be that either a long debate in Westminster Hall or a Backbench Business Committee debate would provide the opportunity for the kind of exchange of best practice that the hon. Gentleman wants, so that Members from different parts of the UK can all share their relevant experiences. Clearly the Northern Ireland Act 1998 devolves important powers to the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, and it must be for the authorities in Northern Ireland primarily to decide how to take this policy further.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The business statement gives us no indication of when the Brexit Secretary will come to the Dispatch Box, as required by a resolution of this House, to explain why he signed up to the comprehensive economic and trade agreement without waiting for it to clear parliamentary scrutiny, and nor does it give us any indication as to when an urgent debate in Government time, which is also required, will be held. I raised this matter in business questions on 20 October. During the intervening four weeks, will the Leader of the House tell us what he has done to get those two items of urgent business on to the Order Paper?

Mr Lidington: The position is that CETA has to be ratified by all 28 member states of the European Union. Under our system, that means that the treaty—for that is what this is—must be laid before Parliament under the terms of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 and that can, if Members so wish, provide the trigger for a debate.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): How many more times do the Government expect to end up in court? Not only have they been taken to court over the article 50 shambles, but they lost their appeal against the Terence Higgins Trust and are now compelled to provide PrEP—pre-exposure prophylaxis—anti-HIV drugs to those who badly need them. Given that, can we have a debate in Government time on the commissioning of this treatment, which will make a massive difference to rolling back the tide on the spread of HIV across the United Kingdom?

Mr Lidington: We welcome the clarity that the recent court judgment on PrEP provided. As the hon. Gentleman knows, there was a genuine difference between the view of the NHS and the view of local authorities as to where legal responsibility ought to rest, and we now have that clarity. Over the years, Governments of every political shade have got used to being taken to court by way of judicial review or other challenge. That is what living in a free society under the rule of law is about.
Backbench Business

Employment and Support Allowance and Universal Credit

Mr Speaker: To move the motion, in a contribution that should not exceed 15 minutes in total—I make this point by way of reminder, as there has been slippage in recent times—I call Mr Neil Gray.

12.9 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I beg to move, that this House notes the Government’s plans to reduce the Employment and Support Allowance work-related activity component and the corresponding limited capability for work component in universal credit in April 2017; further notes that this measure will cut the weekly amount received by recipients with long-term health conditions or disabilities by £30 and that these cuts are due to take place before the promised Work and Health programme Green Paper can be considered or implemented; and therefore to postpone the cuts to Employment and Support Allowance work-related activity component and the corresponding limited capability for work component in universal credit until appropriate alternative measures to progress the commitment to halve the disability employment gap have been considered, in order to secure support for current and future claimants so that sick and disabled people are supported adequately when they are unable to work.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for accepting my application for this urgent debate today. It was brought to the Committee at short notice and with my added time pressures ahead of the autumn statement, so I am grateful to the Committee. I am grateful also to the MPs from nine parties in this Parliament who supported the motion.

From April 2017, new employment and support allowance claimants who are placed in the work-related activity group will receive £29.05 less than do current Employment and Support Allowance WRAG claimants. The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 legislated for this cut, and the Government promised “new funding for additional support to help claimants return to work.”—[Official Report, 8 July 2015; Vol. 598, c. 333.]

This afternoon, I intend to set out why the Government should use the opportunity of the autumn statement, a new Prime Minister, a new Chancellor and a new set of Department for Work and Pensions Ministers to pause the cuts to Employment and Support Allowance WRAG and the corresponding universal credit work allowance elements, at least until the new system that they are to propose has been scrutinised and implemented.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I agree with the motion. Does the hon. Gentleman recall, as I do, that the Conservative party manifesto said that the target for increasing employment support for disabled people was to halve the disability employment by 2020, and does he share my dismay that that target has been abandoned?

Neil Gray: I sincerely hope that it has not been abandoned and that the Government will continue to work towards it. I will come to that later in my speech.

It is clear to me that it is not Opposition politicians but Government Back Benchers who are most influential in changing the minds of Ministers, especially when those Ministers currently have such a narrow majority, so I am pleased to have the support of at least five Conservative Members for this motion. In their action in supporting this debate, they are indeed honourable, for it is not an easy thing to go against the current thinking of their party. I am aware that a number of other Conservative Members are expressing their concerns in private, and some have made more public statements of concern, such as the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) and the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). I am not standing here today to lambast the Government. I am here to make a cross-party appeal to the Government: please press pause on these cuts.

Today is about this new set of Government Ministers having an opportunity to look at this issue again—to look at the timetable of events that have led us to this point and to look ahead to the impact that these cuts will have on nearly half a million sick and disabled people who have been found unfit for work. Yesterday, I attended an event in Westminster with Disability Agenda Scotland, which is an organisation of six disability charities north of the border. One of the speakers at the event really highlighted for me, and should highlight for us all, why this issue is so important.

John Clarke from Stirling spoke about his experience of trying to enter the employment market. He volunteered for 10 years in a charity shop. He took on all the responsibilities that an employee would be expected to take on. He did cash handling, was customer facing and turned up for his shifts in a timeous fashion at all times. He has been making a very meaningful attempt to find work. John has been trying to find paid employment, using the significant experience that he gained from his time at the shop to progress that, but has failed to do so.

John just happens to have a learning disability and is in receipt of Employment and Support Allowance WRAG. He is not financially incentivised to be out of work because he is on Employment and Support Allowance WRAG; he is desperate to get a job. He needs his Employment and Support Allowance WRAG, because he has additional costs associated with finding work, but John also needs the Government to come forward with that additional package that the Prime Minister talked about yesterday—such as supporting employers, publicising Access to Work more widely and helping employers see that someone like him would be an asset, not a liability, to their workplace.

What is most concerning for me about John’s story is that he has a new volunteering role after moving on from the charity shop, but the jobcentre wants him to stop so he can come in to carry out job searches. I put it to those on the Treasury Bench today—what is more beneficial to John, not just for his ability to get a job, but for his emotional wellbeing, his self-worth and his feeling of contributing to society?

This is where we come to the crux of the issue, and John summed it up so well. He said, “Everyone has needs and it is important that these needs are met.” That is the starting point from which the UK Government should be working. We cannot escape the fact that part of that need is financial. It is worth remembering that the rationale for paying some claimants more than others was considered by Richard Berthoud in his 1998 report on disability benefits. He found that the primary reason historically was that those who have to live for a
long time on social security could not be expected to survive on the very low income available as a temporary measure for a short-term claimant.

Some people may argue that those who currently receive ESA WRAG, like John, will not be affected by the cut, but as people fall in and out of work, with many of those who receive ESA WRAG the subject of fluctuating conditions, they could well be affected. So if John gets a job after April next year, which I hope will happen sooner for him, and if, unfortunately, it does not work out, although obviously I hope it does, John will reapply for ESA, but will receive £30 per week less than he does now. That is a reduction in income of almost a third between what John receives now and what he would receive next year.

This cut will create two tiers of disability support and create an arbitrary cut-off for people to receive a reduced support rate, purely by virtue of their application date. The Scottish Association for Mental Health agrees. It says that this cut could provide a perverse disincentive to work for people with mental health conditions, who make up 49% of ESA WRAG recipients. It says that people who are currently in receipt of ESA may be affected by the forthcoming change in April 2017 if they have been claiming the benefit and move into work before they are well enough to do so.

Why should John’s peers who apply for ESA WRAG next year get two thirds of the support that John gets now and could continue to receive if, sadly, he does not find a job? John just wants a job. He is not incentivised to be out of work because of ESA WRAG payments. Such a suggestion is an insult to John and to the hundreds of thousands of sick or disabled people like him who want to work but struggle to get noticed in the employment market. The Government will add to that frustration and the feeling of rejection by telling them that the £30 a week lifeline is being pulled away because it somehow holds them back.

The payment of a higher rate of ESA WRAG compared to jobseeker’s allowance was supposed to acknowledge the longer time that someone in that position will take to find employment. It was also supposed to acknowledge the additional costs that someone with a long-term illness or disability incurs as they carry out work-related activity. Scope is particularly concerned at this aspect and says that this cut to disability support will have an impact on the financial wellbeing of sick and disabled people, leaving them further from work, not closer. Its research suggests that 49% of disabled people rely on credit cards or loans to pay for everyday items such as food and clothing.

New figures today from the StepChange Debt Charity show that a third of ESA recipients were running a budget deficit, and that figure could rise to over a half if they had a cut to their income, however small that cut. John’s experience shows us that it is not easy to tell ESA WRAG recipients to find work to make up for that cut. He has done everything he can to do that.

This leads me on to the timing issue before us. During the debates on the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, the Government at the time said that they would find new funding for additional support to help claimants return to work—new money and a new system, which was included in the work and health programme White Paper, now the Green Paper. I argued then and I repeat now, that the Government cannot cut away this lifeline support before the new system of support is in place, otherwise there will be a vacuum of support from April. ESA WRAG will no longer be available for new or returning clients, but the new system, which the Government hope will do a better job, will also be unavailable.

The Government need to get the horse back in front of the cart. They need to put these cuts on pause, at least until we can see what is coming forward. Their new system is still in Green Paper consultation form. The ESA cuts happen in four months. Even if the new system will be better, we have seen nothing more than consultation proposals, and we do not know when the new system will be implemented.

That view is supported by the Disability Benefits Consortium, which represents 60 disability charities. It has published an open letter today, which is signed by 74 disability charities and other organisations, including Action on Hearing Loss, Age UK, the National Autistic Society, Enable Scotland, Action for ME, Carers UK, the MS Society, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, Scope, Mencap, the Royal British Legion, Citizens Advice and dozens of others I wish I had time to mention individually, as they represent health conditions and disabilities that hon. Members’ families, friends and, certainly, constituents will have. Those organisations say that this cut will undermine the Government’s welcome commitment to halve the disability employment gap. Their survey of over 500 disabled people found that seven out of 10 said that ESA cuts will cause their health to suffer. More than a quarter said they sometimes cannot afford to eat on the amount they currently receive from ESA, and nearly half said that the cut will probably mean they will return to work later than they would have done.

The Government predicted that savings of £450 million a year would be realised from these cuts. Just two weeks ago, we saw the welcome publication of the health and work Green Paper, which sets out the options for the Government to create a replacement system. The budget for that for next year is £60 million, rising to £100 million by 2020-21. That does not equate to new money; it does not even match the cuts being made to ESA WRAG—a point echoed by today’s open letter from the charities, which cannot see where the additional support for disabled people to find work will come from, or how it will mitigate the effects of the cut.

There must also be concern on the Treasury Bench after the Supreme Court ruling on the bedroom tax. Letters, which have been published, between the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) highlight the concerns the EHRC has regarding the Government’s impact assessments on these cuts.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Most disabled people I know in my constituency are desperate to work if they can and would give every penny they have to get back into work, but can I just press him on one point? He said at the start of his speech that the only way we will persuade the Government to change their mind is through a Conservative back-bench rebellion. That is not going to happen, so can I plead with him to join me in persuading this Conservative Government to use the welfare powers they have to replace ESA for disabled people in Scotland? They have done it with the bedroom tax; let us persuade them to do it with this as well.
Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the House that interventions must be brief.

Neil Gray: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am disappointed in the hon. Gentleman. He knows well that ESA has not been devolved, and it is not in the Scottish Government’s competence. I genuinely believe that there is a feeling on the Conservative Benches that the Government can change their mind and that there are workings under way to make that happen, so his pessimism about where the Government might be going is, I hope, unfounded.

Parkinson’s UK points out that the Government’s statutory obligations may not have been met, leaving them open to further legal challenge.

In conclusion, I want today to be a time for reflection for the Government. I want them to reflect on whether they truly believe that people such as John will benefit from this cut without a replacement support system being in place. I want them to listen to those 74 disability charities and other organisations, and to right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House, and I want them to pause these cuts, at least until they have delivered what they promised would be a better system. Everyone has needs, and it is important that those needs are met. I hope those are the words ringing in the ears of Ministers today.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I advise the House that, on account of the number of would-be contributors, we need to start with a limit on individual Back-Bench speeches of eight minutes, and we will see how we get on.

12.23 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I do not think I will be taking the full eight minutes, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) and to colleagues on both sides of the House for securing this important and timely debate.

Any welfare-to-work system needs to satisfy four criteria. First, it should support people and families in their times of need. Secondly, it should provide every assistance to people in moving forward and in getting back into work, where that is a realistic objective for them, taking into account their personal circumstances. Thirdly, there should be an underlying theme that work must pay, so that welfare does not become a lifestyle choice. Fourthly, any system must be affordable to the nation as a whole.

The system we have, which has evolved over many years, has, I am afraid, become incredibly complicated. It would be great if we could start with a clean sheet of paper, but I fear that is not possible, given where we are at present. The Government should be commended for taking on the challenge of seeking to reform the system and for not filing it away in the “too difficult” tray. Credit is also due to them for some of their initiatives in this Parliament and the last Parliament: taking the low-paid out of tax altogether, the introduction of the national living wage and the provision of 30 hours of free childcare.

The question today is whether the proposed changes to universal credit and ESA satisfy the four criteria I outlined. I would just like to make three observations as to whether they do or not. First, I would like to look at whether the changes are properly researched, backed up by evidence and supported by impact assessments.

When the Welfare Reform and Work Bill was going through Parliament in the spring, it was made clear to me that reductions in ESA WRAG would be followed by a full consultation on the package of support measures to help the disabled into work. At that time a White Paper was proposed, and we were assured on the Floor of the House that it would be published before the summer recess. In the event, a Green Paper, which is actually very good, was published at the end of last month, and a consultation will now run until 17 February. What two I say to the Government that it surely makes sense to digest the outcome of that consultation—to get feedback from non-governmental organisations and other groups that have the detailed first-hand knowledge as to what changes we need—before making any radical changes.

There is a concern, as we heard from the hon. Gentleman, that there has not been a full and proper impact assessment on the proposed changes. It has been suggested that the impact assessments published with the original Welfare Reform and Work Bill may fall short of the Government’s statutory obligation to properly analyse policy, according to the Equality and Human Rights Commission. In its report, “MS: Enough—Make welfare make sense” the MS Society has recommended that the Government undertake a full impact assessment of any changes they make to disability benefits.

There is also a concern that what is emerging is a lottery, with some family types being more adversely affected than others. Research has highlighted that two thirds of single-parent families will be hit particularly hard by the work allowance cut and the delay to childcare support.

I move on to my second issue—support for vulnerable groups. Again, there is concern that particular groups are being unfairly hit, and I have in mind those with fluctuating conditions such as Parkinson’s and MS. There is also a worry that it has not been recognised that not every disabled person is able to work. The MS Society has highlighted that two thirds of single-parent families will be hit particularly hard by the work allowance cut and the delay to childcare support.

It must always be borne in mind that Parkinson’s and MS are degenerative conditions: people do not get better, there is no cure, and the severity of symptoms fluctuates not just from day to day but, very often, from hour to hour. The consultation on the work capability assessment is to be welcomed, but the feedback I receive, such as that from Waveney Suffolk Help in Multiple Sclerosis—an MS support group—I will be with tomorrow—is that more needs to be done.

My third issue is the roll-out of universal credit. The full roll-out of universal credit went live in Waveney on 25 May. While I acknowledge the hard work of Jobcentre Plus and DWP staff on the ground, I have to report that it is not going well. Those in my constituency office are spending most of their days addressing very real problems that people face in having nothing to live on, nothing to pay for food, and no money to pay the rent. The DWP is being helpful in addressing these cases, but I have to
question whether it is right to make further changes to universal credit at a time when there are major practical problems in its roll-out.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Is the universal credit that my hon. Friend has in his constituency the full version or the initial straightforward version just for single claimants?

Peter Aldous: We have the full version being rolled out at the moment.

I am concerned about research showing that people in areas now on universal credit will, as a result of these changes, be significantly worse off than their neighbours and those in other regions who remain within the tax credit regime. Will the Minister address these concerns? Why should the people I represent in Waveney, and indeed those in other areas where universal credit has been rolled out, be unfairly treated in this way? It is a really unfair postcode lottery.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): There is also early evidence that those on universal credit are 13% more likely to go into work, and are getting in-work support to help them progress. They will often enter low-paid work and continue to progress, so in some cases the lottery is very beneficial to my hon. Friend’s residents.

Peter Aldous: I thank my hon. Friend. We are yet to receive those benefits in my area, where universal credit was rolled out only on 25 May, but I am happy to look at that information.

The Government have the time to get this right. They should use the autumn statement to address these concerns, consider targeting support at those who need it most, and pause and consult. If they do those three things, they can get it right.

12.31 pm

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak on a matter that affects a large number of my constituents.

The latest employment figures show that unemployment in my constituency is twice the national average, but as we know, this forms only a small part of the problem. Both this Government and their predecessor have systematically targeted the most vulnerable in our society. Our welfare state has become a game of numbers and a debate about the bottom line, and once again Members of this House find themselves debating cuts to the incomes of those who can least afford it.

It is clear that for the vast majority of the 693 of my constituents claiming it, universal credit has been nothing short of a punitive disaster. As we sit here today, we all know of constituents across the country who struggle to choose between heating and eating, and where actually living takes second preference to just surviving. This Government’s answer to that is to take another £30 from those who most need it, many of whom suffer from often debilitating disabilities. If only Conservative Members had the same levels of compassion for those living on the breadline as they do for those whose wealth knows no bounds and for whom they strive to gain tax cuts.

Gateshead has rising unemployment and rising underemployment. A lot of my constituents who are lucky enough to be in work are often working many fewer hours than they would like to, with little or no job security. We all have constituents who are living in the most terrible circumstances. My office deals daily with individuals who are suffering at the hands of a Victorian regime of sanctions and bureaucracy, dreadful administration and, I am afraid, Kafkaesque hoops through which they are expected to jump in order to claim their entitlements.

I would like to focus on one individual who really highlights the extent to which the safety net of social security has become a trap. Simon Westlake is a young lad who, because of family issues, moved to Gateshead from London, not very far from this place. He had a job working at a local supermarket, paying his way, renting a flat in Gateshead and contributing to the local community. Unfortunately, he was made redundant in February 2016.

Universal credit has been operating in Gateshead for about 18 months, so Simon reported to the local jobcentre—which has since been closed by the DWP despite an increase in those needing to use its services—to apply for universal credit. In total, Simon made nearly 10 applications, week after week, on the computers in the jobcentre, each time hoping that he would receive enough money to enable him to feed himself.

Seven weeks passed and still nothing, so Simon returned to the jobcentre, where an adviser watched him go through the online application and saw that nothing happened: no error message, no refusal, but more importantly, no claim lodged with the DWP. This lady kindly wrote a supporting letter for Simon, stating what she had witnessed, and lodged his claim over the phone—something that is very rare for the ordinary constituent.

Simon began receiving universal credit in June 2016, nearly four months after his initial application. In the meantime he had been evicted from his flat, threatened with violence by the landlord due to unpaid rent, and pursued by various utility companies and the local authority for unpaid bills. Simon was living in temporary accommodation in Gateshead, and I am afraid to say that, for a period, he was sleeping wrapped in a curtain and only able to feed himself by warming tins of soup with a tealight.

We in this House are often accused of being out of touch and living in a political bubble, but Conservative Members often do not seem interested. There are constituents in the same predicament as Simon in all our constituencies, and they need help urgently.

Simon contacted my office because the DWP had refused to backdate his universal credit to the date in February when he first applied. Despite my personal intervention, the DWP required evidence from Simon that he was in the jobcentre making online claims when he claimed to have done so. The only problem was that that jobcentre had been closed. He did not know where the staff were. He could not prove to the DWP, and the DWP could not explain to him how he was meant to prove, that he had been there in a now closed jobcentre. This would be an absolute scandal in itself, but Simon is not alone.

My question is this: how can Conservative Members vote for further cuts to a system that is already leaving our constituents living in absolute poverty, utterly destitute?
Welfare recipients and would-be recipients in this country are already shouldering a very great burden—much greater than many of them can handle. They are citizens but now dismissed as claimants representing a financial cost to a Government who regard them as numbers. The media continue, in a mythological way, to purport that they are all fraudulent claimants, while we leave people who have had a tough break in life, or are suffering from terrible illness, in crisis. This is not right. These further cuts are nothing more than a penalty for becoming ill or losing one’s job.

We live in 2016. We are paid well to serve our constituents. I do not know how Conservative Members can put their constituents through the torment of further cuts in the name of unnecessary levels of austerity. I am sure that all Opposition Members can relate to Simon. For the sake of his story alone, these cuts must be opposed.

12.38 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for introducing this debate and for assembling here a large number of right hon. and hon. Members.

My father became disabled when I was two weeks old, when he was 34. He worked for the rest of his working life until he was 65. It was only after he died that I found that at one point he had had to consider emigrating to Australia in order to get work, but thanks to the foresightedness of a church in Highbury in Islington—he was a vicar—he was able to work in the United Kingdom. Throughout my childhood, as we were growing up, we saw the gradual improvement of the situation for disabled people in this country. I pay tribute to Governments of all colours over the past 50 years for that, because it has been incredibly important. I saw, for instance, the significant improvement that Motability made to his life and his ability to do his work—he benefited from the scheme from its introduction. That is why I believe that the motion should be supported and that the cuts to the work-related component in both ESA and universal credit should be paused and reconsidered.

The Government’s argument, which I understand, is that they wish everybody in the work-related activity group to return to work as soon as possible, and they intend to put in money to support and assist them in that process. Three assumptions underline that argument. The first is that the cost of living for those on ESA is pretty much the same as that for those on jobseeker’s allowance; in other words, it covers basic living costs. The second assumption is that any additional costs relating to sickness or disability can be covered by the personal independence payment. The third is that people will not receive ESA for very long, because they will get back into work.

On the face of it, one can assume that those assumptions are well meaning, but I would challenge all three of them. On the cost of living, those in the WRAG tend to have mental health conditions, cancer or musculoskeletal conditions, and they are often housebound for long periods. That means that they face an additional cost for heating, because they are not able to go out searching for work all the time. Macmillan says that 28% of cancer sufferers say that they cannot keep their homes adequately warm. They also face an additional cost for food: some of the diets involved are expensive and there is no particular help available. There is also the cost of transport, as people go frequently to hospital and doctors’ appointments.

The argument has been put to me that those costs could be covered by PIP, but fewer than half of those in the WRAG are eligible for and claim PIP. In any case, PIP covers mobility and care costs; it does not cover heating or dietary costs.

The final assumption, which is understandable, is that those in the WRAG will be able to return to work relatively soon, but that is not borne out by the facts. People tend to be in the WRAG for an average of two years, while the figure for JSA is six months. JSA is set at a level that assumes that people will be on it for only a few months, and it is very difficult to see how people can continue at that level without in the end getting into considerable debt. It seems to me that the assumptions, understandably made by the Government, do not hold up.

Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman will recall the commitment that was made to increase support for disabled people to get into work as a quid pro quo for the benefit cut. Does he agree, however, that it appears that the Government now propose to spend less on employment support for disabled people than has been spent on the failed Work programme? Surely they should be spending more, not less.

Jeremy Lefroy: I am not clear on the figures, but what I do know is that the Government are committed to providing support to people to get into work. That is absolutely vital, but I do not think it is a substitute for the additional financial help that has been given until now.

I welcome the Green Paper and the Government’s work on it. I welcome the work that my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) did on it, and the work of my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, who is in her place, and everyone else at the Department for Work and Pensions. The excellent paper covers joint supporting, the promotion of mental and physical health, and occupational health support. I want all those things to be put in place, because I know that they will be of great benefit to many of my constituents. The Green Paper does not, however, cover the question of costs, and that is why I support the motion.

I want to make some constructive proposals for the Government to consider. I want them to consider modifying or postponing the changes while the proposals are consulted on and put into practice. Let us see them work: let us see people get into work more quickly before we actually remove the additional support. Let us also consider maintaining an element of support above JSA, specifically to cover the particular costs that people face, especially if they have been on the standard rate of ESA, as they will have been for a short period. It should not be indefinite and indeﬁnite. A discretionary fund has been used in other areas, so let us consider introducing one that is substantial enough to cover those additional costs for people in the WRAG.
I know that the Minister is listening. She has shown that in her responses to me both privately and publicly I urge her to continue to listen, particularly to the points made by Members in this debate.

12.45 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): As there is a real chance of Members from all parties reaching agreement today, I will resist the temptation to talk about what I would usually talk about, which is the political ideology behind cuts to the welfare system. Instead, I will concentrate on the unfair implementation of the cuts and the counterproductiveness of removing £29 a week from people in the work-related activity group of employment and support allowance.

Let us remember that many people who are in receipt of ESA are currently unable to work because of poor health—“unable” being the operative word. Although it can be extremely difficult for jobseekers to find jobs, it is more than just difficult—it is often impossible—for those in the WRAG to do so; otherwise, they would not be in the WRAG. They therefore have fewer opportunities to improve their financial situation than someone who is able to actively seek employment. They do not have that potential light at the end of the tunnel. At the very least, their tunnel is a lot longer, because, as has been said, those on ESA tend to be on it for longer than those on JSA. For those on JSA, 60% are off it within six months, whereas the average figure for those on ESA is two to two and half years.

The sum of £73 a week is a shockingly small amount of money for anyone to have to live on. I am sure that we can all agree on that. It is a pittance, but having to live on a pittance for about six months is an entirely different proposition from having to survive on it for about two and a half years. People need the additional £29 a week simply because they have almost no prospect of any increase in their income and there is not an awful lot they can do about it.

The situation is not just unfair; it is also counterproductive. The Government say—in the spirit of consensual politics, I am willing to take them at their word—that the reason they are taking the money away is that people will be more likely to move from the WRAG into employment more quickly. The charity Scope argues that taking the money away will, in fact, take them further from the workplace, and I completely agree.

Being poor is a very time-consuming way of existing. It is a constant juggling act and a battle to stay afloat, and it takes up a lot of emotional and physical energy. For someone in the WRAG who has a disability, whether it is physical or psychological, to have to use up what little energy they have left trying not to go under financially when they are living, long term, on just £73 a week leaves them with very little energy to get well and to get the support they need to get back into the job market. Neither is it difficult to imagine the impact on the self-esteem of the dramatically increasing number—at the moment it stands at 49%—of people on ESA because of mental health problems.

To believe that keeping people on the very lowest income, rather than giving them the additional £29 a week, will help get them off the sick and into work is to believe that people are making themselves ill or swinging the lead in order to access that extra £29 a week. Do we have such little faith in people that we honestly believe that great swathes of those currently in the WRAG would not give anything to be well, to be working and to be able to play a full part in society, and to not be looked down on by others, as is often the case?

That is not what I see, and I represent one of the most deprived constituencies in the UK. I see incredible people in Milton and Ruchazie and in Blackhill and Royston—right across Glasgow North East—who, even when they have next to nothing themselves, keep giving to and sharing with others in their communities, because they are good people in an area with very high levels of health-related unemployment.

Davy in Possilpark has a disability. He walks with a stick, sometimes struggles to breathe and is in the WRAG. But when he is up to it, he spends his time voluntarily helping very many other people in his community. He could not possibly have a job right now, as he is just not well enough often enough, but he can sit down with others, for example, in the local men’s support group that he is a member of, to just listen and advise. He does that as often as he can. Davy told me that despite having that extra £29 a week he feels like a failure, because he still cannot afford to buy his granddaughter a decent Christmas present. That man is no failure, but does anybody here seriously believe that Davy likes feeling like a failure and that he would not give anything to replace his life with the one he once had, when he had his health and his job, and he was earning enough money to buy that wee girl a present that would have made her eyes light up? Does anybody honestly believe that his precious granddaughter is not motivation enough to get well and back into work?

My concern is that although every Member in here may well be thinking that they can empathise with Davy, some may also be thinking, “It is not the Davys from Possilpark of the world we’re trying to sort out here, it’s the others.” I am anything but naive, and I can tell Members that Davy may be an exceptional man, and he is, but he is no exception to the rule. Those “others”, like Davy, would also rather be working, and an extra £29 a week will not stop them doing it, when they are able to. Removing that £29 a week will, however, make getting well and getting into the workforce much, much harder, and I appeal to the Government to please think again.

12.51 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, although I have a feeling of déjà vu, as I was talking about this subject only yesterday—no wonder “Groundhog Day” is one of my favourite films. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for his proactive work in this area. When I was a Minister, I enjoyed engaging with him on a number of occasions. He always brought forward real experience and practical suggestions to challenge the Government and hold them to account in this important area. It is also good to see so many Members in the Chamber, on both sides of the House, to engage in this debate—it is a credit to them. That is important, because the Department has excellent Ministers who genuinely do listen, engage, act and influence the direction of policy.
I wish briefly to talk about the background to the current position. Yesterday I talked a lot about universal credit and less about the ESA WRAG, but today I will flip that around. The Government have introduced the national living wage, which has helped 2.75 million of our lowest earners, and we hope that it will rise to more than £9 an hour by 2020. We have increased the personal allowance from £6,495 to £11,000, taking the lowest 3.2 million earners out of paying any income tax. This country has the strongest economic growth of any developed economy, which is delivering record employment, with yesterday’s figures showing another 461,000 people entering work. We have also seen 590,000 more disabled people in work in the past three years—an increase of about 4%—although there is still much further to go.

Stephen Timms: I mentioned this yesterday, but let me remind the hon. Gentleman of the press release issued in my name by the Department for Work and Pensions on 29 June last year, which stated: “The Government...aims to halve the gap between the disabled employment rate and the overall employment rate by 2020.” Is he dismayed, as I am, that that commitment—he made the promise in good faith, I am sure—to a 2020 employment rate and the overall employment rate by 2020.”

Stephen Timms: “The Government...aims to halve the gap between the disabled employment rate and the overall employment rate by 2020.” Is he dismayed, as I am, that that commitment—he made the promise in good faith, I am sure—to a 2020 deadline has been abandoned by his successor?

Justin Tomlinson: I predicted that that intervention was coming, and it is an important point. The pledge was incredibly popular with stakeholders and focused officials’ minds. When I was a Minister, a lot of my work involved lobbying other Departments, so it was helpful when I was able to namecheck the then Prime Minister, as this was his personal pledge. I do not actually recall that press release, as my understanding was that we had not set the date because that was going to be determined in the Green Paper. Personally, I wanted to see significant progress year on year.

One problem with just adopting the approach in the pledge is that the number of disabled people in work could remain static yet in a recession the overall number of people in work could fall, meaning that the gap would close without any more disabled people benefiting. I wanted to set a target such as having 1 million more people in work by a certain date, which would mean that we would know that 1 million more disabled people had benefited. We were due to consult on that as part of the Green Paper process when I was in my ministerial role.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Gentleman. A single target can be a crude measure, so would it not have been sensible to have had two targets: to halve the disability employment gap by 2020, as the Department appeared to be committed to doing last year; and a numerical target? Does he think the new ministerial team might consider that suggestion?

Justin Tomlinson: I think that is twice as good as the current plans—it is a brilliant suggestion. All these targets focus minds, and this one made a difference in terms of pushing. That was a lot of what we had to do. We did not necessarily have all the levers ourselves, so having that target to focus minds makes a significant difference.
income. The process goes from there, so if they do more hours, the income increases. This system removes the 16-hour cliff edge that was preventing people from benefiting.

Today’s debate is predominantly about ESA WRAG. Before I comment about that, I pay tribute, as I did yesterday, to the fantastic work of the staff in jobcentres, support groups such as the Shaw Trust and Plus, and the many local charities and national charities that provide support. They do a huge amount of brilliant work and often go unrecognised. ESA has had so many reviews and changes, yet still only 1% of people come off the benefit every month. That cannot be described as doing anything other than failing the people who are on it. A number of speakers highlighted the fact that people are typically on ESA for two years, whereas someone on JSA would expect to get into work much sooner. Bizarrely, people on JSA, who are closer to the jobs market, would get 710 minutes of professional support, whereas those on ESA, who are recognised as further away from the jobs market, would get only 105 minutes of that support. Some of the changes that are being introduced will equalise the position. It is crucial that we identify what people can do, not what they cannot do.

We are all different, and we all have challenges in our lives. Some people have more challenges than others, but most have an opportunity with the right support. The Green Paper is welcome, because it highlights the significance of that “can do” approach. We have to offer personalised and tailored support to give everybody an opportunity. Crucially, the major charities, including Scope, Leonard Cheshire Disability, the Royal National Institute of Blind People, the National Autistic Society and Mencap, as well as many other charities, right down to the smaller ones, will be contributing to the development and delivery of this policy. They will make a big difference.

Heidi Allen: I agree that those charities are very welcoming of the new Green Paper, but does my hon. Friend agree that they are still consistent in saying with one voice that the cuts to the ESA WRAG are wrong, and that they are not replaced in the Green Paper?

Justin Tomlinson: When I was a Minister, I was challenged on a whole host of issues, and that is what the charities are there to do. I feel that the extra support makes this approach worthwhile because only 1% of people are coming off that benefit. When people on ESA are surveyed, and when we talk to them in our constituencies, we find that the overwhelming majority are desperate to be given an opportunity to work.

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Expressive workplace agreements

Justin Tomlinson: I am running out of time, so I will try to wrap up. I have only two minutes left.

The Green Paper includes proposals for more personalised and tailored support, as well as quicker assessments. That is particularly important because 50% of people on ESA have a mental health condition, but typically wait nine months for an assessment. The Green Paper will address that by making sure that people are assessed quickly and given support before they navigate often difficult personal challenges when they take the step back into work.

There will be a place on the work and health programme or Work Choice for those who wish to take it—it is a voluntary opportunity. There will be additional places on the very popular specialist employment support programme. There will be job clubs run by peers—people with disabilities who have gone through the system and overcome their fear at the thought of going back into the process. That is often a big fear for people who have been out of work for a long time. There will be 200 new community partners; again, this is about utilising disability expertise. There will be increased access to work for young people with mental health conditions. There are further opportunities through the Disability Confident campaign.

My personal favourite, which I continue to champion, is the small employer offer. Time and time again, employers say to us, “We have skills gaps and we are struggling to find people to fill these roles,” but they have never thought to take on somebody with a disability because they lack the confidence to do so and do not realise that a huge amount of support is provided to help people to come into the workplace. Businesses that take that step benefit, more often than not, and I say that as a former employer who employed disabled people and benefited from doing so. I hope that the current small employer pilot will be expanded and will become a nationwide offer. It is making a significant difference.

The Chancellor was right to increase significantly the funding for Access to Work. On the fit for work scheme, we need to ensure that we provide advice at the beginning of a potential problem for people in work, not just at four weeks, because it is so much easier to keep people in work with suitable support than it is to get them back into work after they have dropped out. We have a fantastic ministerial team who are engaging with charities, with all their experience and knowledge, and the Green Paper represents a real opportunity.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson). I pay tribute to him for his work and the commitment that he showed when he was the Minister for Disabled People. I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) and thank him for introducing the debate. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee and its Chair for making time for this debate.

I join colleagues in expressing our deep concern about these cuts, which are based on several misconceptions and the effect of which will be cruel and perverse. Everybody wants disabled people and those with long-term health problems who can work to do so, and to have the support to do so. Everyone agrees that those people face additional barriers and may need that additional help.

As we have heard, the Government have published a Green Paper that makes a number of welcome proposals for improving that support for disabled people. I welcome in particular the replacement of the disastrous Work programme with personalised, tailor-made support for disabled people. I welcome the introduction of specialist work coaches, who will support the disability employment advisers in jobcentres, but I regret the fact that the number of disability employment advisers was reduced
under the coalition Government. I welcome, too, the introduction of the health and work conversations, although it is a pity that they had to come in several years after the coalition Government prematurely scrapped Labour’s work-focused health-related assessments.

All those additional measures of support are proposed in the Green Paper, but it is none the less surely perverse to cut benefits for disabled people before the support is in place. There is no evidence at all that cutting financial support makes people more likely to move into work. Indeed, investigation by our colleagues in the House of Lords, Lord Low and the Baronesses Meacher and Grey-Thompson, has shown that the opposite is the case. They point out that it becomes more difficult when financial resources are reduced for disabled people to afford training and to undertake volunteering opportunities or work experience that could help them to move towards work. The Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research in 2011 confirmed that cutting benefit for those who are unable to work because of illness does not result in more people moving towards work because it does not address the barriers they face—their health, employer attitudes, availability of suitable jobs, lack of reasonable adjustments or skills gaps—which the Government’s Green Paper acknowledges and seeks to address.

Ministers have said, particularly during proceedings last year on the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, that an additional £30 a week of benefit disincentivises disabled people from working. There is no evidence at all for that. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts pointed out, removing the £30 of additional support creates perverse incentives. If someone leaves the ESA to try to find work and they find that it does not work for them, after April 2017, when they reapply for benefit, they will be treated as a new claimant. They will not be able to retain the protection of the additional £30, which existing claimants will retain. Other people are likely to move from the ESA WRAG into the support group, where they will not be expected to look for work at all.

The proposals fail to recognise the nature and purpose of ESA for those in the WRAG. It is an income replacement benefit, in recognition of the fact that those in the WRAG have undergone a work capability assessment that has found that they are currently not fit for work. Employers, in many cases, would not have them in the workplace. Those employers would say that it was not safe to do so. In such circumstances, by definition, an individual cannot derive income from earnings, hence the need for the income replacement benefit. As we have heard several times this afternoon, because of the longer journey to return to work that people with disabilities and health conditions experience, there is a need for additional financial support and a higher rate of benefit.

I would like to say little bit about the support in universal credit for those with limited capability for work. Those people are set to lose out even if they are in work. At the moment, the limited capability for work element and the additional support through the disabled person’s work allowance in universal credit are roughly comparable to the support in tax credits for disabled people working 16 hours a week. If those in work on universal credit lose additional support, they will be substantially worse off than those on tax credits. That is surely a perverse outcome of these cuts that Ministers will want to address.

All such perverse outcomes might have been avoided and the policy improved if an equalities impact assessment had been properly carried out at the time of parliamentary proceedings on the legislation. As we have heard, the Equality and Human Rights Commission offered help with such an assessment and set out a methodology for carrying it out. Regrettably, that suggestion was rejected by the then Government.

Heidi Allen: Did the EHRC not offer to do that assessment for free? I seem to remember that it did, such was its wish to contribute.

Kate Green: I do not know whether the EHRC offered to do the assessment at no cost, but it certainly set out a substantial and detailed methodology by which the assessment could be carried out. Further, when the Government produced their own rather thin analysis, the EHRC was very clear that it was unsupported by evidence and that it was insufficient.

We now have the Green Paper, which has some welcome proposals and a welcome ambition to halve the disability employment gap, although as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) pointed out, we do not know when that goal is to be reached. I hope that the Minister will consider the suggestion, which I think the hon. Member for North Swindon supports, that we should consider more than one measure of success in assessing disability employment.

I must tell the Minister that, for all the good in the Green Paper, her proposals will be seriously undermined if she proceeds with the current cut before the proposals have had a chance to take effect. There is no justification for making sick and disabled people poorer. It will not help them to recover, and it will not help them to find work. Disability charities, Opposition MPs and, indeed, MPs from the Minister’s own party have all expressed their deep disquiet about the proposals. It is not too late to think again, to call a pause on this cut and to ensure that disabled people receive the financial support to enable them both to maintain a decent standard and quality of living and, where they can, to have the wherewithal to look for work, prepare for work and take the steps on the journey back to work that so many of them are desperate to make.

1.10 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): As all speakers have done so far today, I thank the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for bringing this debate to the House. I am glad that Members on both sides of the House are contributing to this debate, which is such an important one.

When I look back at my first year as an MP, I cannot think of a vote that has been so regretted by my colleagues on the Government Benches. I remember the pressure we all felt at the end of February, when the ESA WRAG element of welfare reform was being batted between this House and the Lords. I remember the feeling of desperation when this House sent it back. I abstained in the vote as a plea to the Government to rethink their decision, knowing the Lords would have
one more opportunity to convince the Government, too. The Lords stuck to its guns and sent it back one more time, and I remember the relief when it did.

As a new MP, I was still trying to understand how the relationship between the two Houses worked, but I was exhilarated that the House of Lords was willing us on and watching and nudging us like a parent, hoping we would finally do the right thing. However, that sense of optimism was short-lived, as we failed in this House on the Bill’s final return. So few of us on the Government side voted with the Lords on its amendment, because many believed a White Paper was imminent and would describe what alternative support would be made available, and there was a promise of some £100 million. However, the White Paper never came and the money never came, and I know that some of my colleagues have regretted their vote ever since.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some very important points. Does she agree that Members who supported, as I did, the Government changes to the ESA in March did so on the absolute understanding that there would, in parallel, be appropriate support for people getting into work? Although the Green Paper is laudable, it will not be implemented in time, and therefore the ESA changes have to be delayed.

Heidi Allen: Absolutely. I could not have put it more succinctly myself. It was because of that promise and guarantee that Members opted to support the Government, but, unfortunately, that has not yet been fulfilled.

Most heartbreakingly of all, the Lords was not asking for much. It was not so naive as not to accept that the ESA system needed reform, as it so clearly does. The announcement from our new Secretary of State that the whole work capability assessment process will be reviewed is very welcome. I sense this is a precious opportunity, and our disability charities, which have been invited to do so, are poised and eager to contribute to the review. I know that we will do better. I am confident that my Government will do better. The Green Paper is the first step in this process, and charities have welcomed it. With organisations such as the Conservative Disability Group, for which I am the parliamentary link, the expertise exists to help us. I am so encouraged by the opportunities that lie ahead, and I sense transformation is possible.

However, my discomfort—this was expressed by the Lords when we last debated this issue—is about having agreed the proposals for new support before we took away the extra £30 per week for those in the ESA WRAG, individuals recovering from significant illness who are slowly transitioning to work. The Government’s argument was that the WRAG support was not doing its job, with individuals sometimes on it for up to two years. The Government concluded there was some perverse financial incentive for people to stay in that group. I say now, as I said at the time, that the fact that people are stuck in the group says more about the failure of DWP processes than about claimants’ active choices. People in that group do not have an easy time. They must demonstrate an appetite to transition towards work, and they can be sanctioned if they do not do so. I still maintain that anyone who has beaten a significant illness is desperate to get back to normal and to get their life back.

The Lords back in February and March, many of us in this House then and many of us today are just asking for a pause. What harm could it possibly do to the Government’s plans or reputation if we were to pause these cuts until an alternative support plan was agreed? Moreover, I passionately believe that it is the sensible and moral thing to do. Would we still be having this debate, would it still be the first thing on the lips of every health and disability charity and would MPs still talk of their regret if we had made the right decision last time around?

I have a guiding principle in life: we should always listen to the loudest voice in our head. We may choose to ignore it, or try and drown it out with distractions and alternative arguments, but we know it is there. In fact, we can sometimes see it when we look in the mirror. I think that we all know what that voice is saying: let us just pause these cuts. The £30—I repeat, £30—represents 29% of the weekly income of some 500,000 people, which is big money for relatively few people. Let us just pause. The risk of damage is high, and the financial cost of pausing is low.

What kind of Government do we want to be? If we want to be a unity Government, rallying and rejoining the nation after the splits caused by Brexit, how will we explain such a vision to two cancer sufferers—I picture them sitting side by side in hospital to have chemotherapy—who are receiving different levels of welfare support, because one was a claimant pre-April 2017 and one became a claimant just afterwards? If we are saying that we will continue to make the payment to those already on it, that must mean we acknowledge that the benefit has some value.

The Green Paper talks about the flexible support fund, which is promising, but it is only £15 million for 2017-18 and 2018-19. The Green Paper suggests that it could be used to buy mentoring or additional support, so could some of it be used to give direct financial support to claimants as well? If ESA WRAG is not the answer, perhaps a boosted support fund, consistently applied by well-trained jobcentre work coaches to provide additional financial support where needed, could be an acceptable alternative. I am open to such a suggestion, and I suspect my colleagues the Opposition Benches would be, too.

If we get the work allowance rates in universal credit right, we could support those transitioning back to work in that way, rather than their facing a cliff edge of having the £30 withdrawn the moment they enter work. That scenario would most definitely keep people away from the workplace, as they would be worried about losing money if they suffered a temporary, but debilitating, health relapse. As I keep saying, the work allowances in universal credit hold the key: because we can set them individually for every type of claimant, universal credit could offer the ultimate flexibility for the disabled and those recovering from poor health. It would offer them reactive, flexible and unwavering support on their entire journey in and out of work. However, for this group of vulnerable claimants, the work allowances need to be higher.

Whether it is a bigger flexible support fund or work allowances in universal credit set at the right level specifically to help those with disabilities or long-term health conditions, let us talk about these options and
see whether they hold the answer. We are so close now. With the Green Paper, a new Secretary of State, a new Prime Minister and a new Government, we have a priceless opportunity to build a system that supports and realises the aspirations of people with disabilities and health conditions. That is clearly this Government’s proud and right mission, so let us not waste it by retrospectively fitting policies to savings targets that were agreed in a completely different era.

1.18 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Like other hon. Members, I commend the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for introducing the debate in the terms he did, and I commend other hon. Members for the way in which they have addressed the issues. Hon. Members have rightly reflected on what the impact will be on a range of their constituents. They have reflected on the questions they have received from a number of policy groups that campaign on behalf of people with disabilities and people with variable conditions. These changes will have a huge and grave impact on those people.

Whenever the Welfare Reform and Work Bill was discussed on its way through the House, several of us, on both sides of the House, specifically opposed clauses 13 and 14 in the original Bill—we are addressing those clauses, particularly clause 13, today—and I pay tribute to those Conservative Back Benchers who expressed concerns and misgivings at the time; some even voted accordingly.

We need to remember that what drove all that was the welfare cap. It was a bit of a flagship for the Government in the last Parliament, but ended up becoming the search engine for more and more cuts. That was recognised even by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). He was almost grinning like a horse chewing thistles when the measures were first brought forward—there could not be enough of them—but then even he began to see that the way in which the welfare cap had become a search engine for the Treasury to find more and more cuts was doing harm and injury to his conception of universal credit, not least in terms of the very measures addressed in the motion of the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts.

Today is our opportunity, ahead of the autumn statement next week, to lay down a marker and say that, given all the developments and circumstances, perhaps we should pause and think whether we have to follow through with this cut. The Government rightly stopped on the tax credits changes, and hon. Members on both sides of the House were rightly seized of the problems connected to those changes. What we are debating today is the longer-term effect—the sting in the tail of those proposals. These longer-term measures are the after-effects that result from that same mindset.

We have a new range of Ministers in different Departments, including the Treasury. They have seen fit to say that they are not bound by the constraints of previous pronouncements, nor even by the terms of previous legislation passed by the same Government. I ask them to find some time and space on these issues.

I hope that at no point will Ministers use the specious argument that they have committed to these changes, have framed them and are bound by them. In particular, I do not ever want to hear Ministers say that one reason why they have to stay on this course is that, unfortunately, there was a legislative consent motion in the Northern Ireland Assembly specifically endorsing the clauses of the Bill that brought the changes in. That legislative consent motion was passed in the Assembly at the hands of Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist party as a way of handing direct rule powers back to Westminster—supposedly temporarily—on welfare reform.

It dealt not just with the Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Act 2015, but referred to the clauses of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill as originally tabled in Westminster. This is our chance to make it clear to the Government that they are not bound by those clauses as originally tabled or passed, but can and should find a new way. I hope that the Government will do that.

I have heard the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work at different events in Parliament speak directly to activist groups and patient groups, and people with disabilities. She has spoken with some heart and sincerity about her hopes for what will come from the Green Paper. Many people have engaged positively with that, as we have heard from Members on both sides of this House. No one is decrying the potential of the Green Paper. But it will mean nothing if we do not put a brake on the cuts that are to come in next year. We cannot pretend that the tyre is only flat at the bottom and say that people will be taking a hit now but good things will come again eventually.

People cannot understand why they have to bear the burden of the cuts now. The Chancellor is now saying that he will not promise to deliver on expenditure and deficit levels on the same terms as his predecessor, and people are hearing understandable questions about quantitative easing. If that is the climate now, and given the scale of quantitative easing that has taken place, people cannot understand why the punitive squeezing has to be of those who will bear the brunt of these cuts—the people for whom other hon. Members have spoken so well and so strongly today.

I hope that the Minister listens to the strength of opinion across the House. I hope she listens to her colleagues, here in the Chamber and in the corridors outside and in other meetings. They are saying that we can find a better way on this and should alter course. We are better than this, we can do better than this and the people we represent need better than this.

1.24 pm

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. I have signed the motion, which represents a cross-party concern and call to the Government. I very much commend the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) not only for securing the debate but for his constructive tone. Some restraint was shown by the Scottish National party in avoiding what the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who is no longer in place, sadly lapsed into, namely seeking to politicise an issue about which there is cross-party concern. When we deal with welfare there is a sad tendency to get into a narrative—one that I wholly reject—about Conservatives not caring for the vulnerable with their austerity cuts. On the right, we then get the narrative that this is all about the workshy. I reject both narratives, which, sadly, can end up weaponising welfare.
Today’s debate is constructive. Reference has been made to bravery on the Conservative side. Frankly, it is not particularly brave to support this motion. But this is not a binary issue. I support the bravery shown by my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) when a Minister, and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) as well. It takes a lot of bravery to reform disability welfare, which had been unreformed for too long. There is bravery on the ministerial Bench as well—it would have been easier not to go down this route. But there was nothing brave about a status quo that left only 1% of the group affected able to get into work.

The people who are really brave are those trying to make ends meet. As we know, people who are disabled have disproportionately higher costs than others. They are trying to travel, or to deal with energy costs. They are trying to do what they all want to do—to get better and get into work. Through no fault of their own, some of them are not able to do so. They are brave. They are the people we care about, and we need to do more for them.

Politics at the moment is a topsy-turvy world. Some may say that it is topsy-turvy for me to be involved in a motion that is predominantly supported by SNP Members; nevertheless, the motion is cross-party. It is a topsy-turvy motion, to the extent that it was drafted before the Green Paper was published. In essence, the issue is topsy-turvy, as has been mentioned, because it would have made so much more sense to have a White Paper before the decision was made on this cut, so that we could see the direction of travel and see what the parallel track of financial and practical support for these claimants would be.

Still, here we are. Some might say that I am being somewhat topsy-turvy in my position on this issue. I voted for the cuts in February. I stand by that vote, and maintain that we can look to a better reformed system. But as I said at the time—and many hon. Friends held the same position:

“I recognise that the WRAG is not fit for purpose, as only 1% are getting into work, but it does have a purpose. It has a purpose for the most vulnerable individuals, for whom the financial element of £30 really matters...As we move towards 2017, with the flow of new applicants, we must do all we can to reassure everyone that we are in the business of reforming the flow of new applicants, we must do all we can to reassure the most vulnerable individuals, for whom the financial element of £30 really matters...As we move towards 2017, with the flow of new applicants, we must do all we can to reassure everyone that we are in the business of reforming the flow of new applicants, we must do all we can to reassure...”

Today’s motion is about making sure we deliver on that. A considerable number of hon. Friends gave conditional support because we want to ensure that we deliver for those claimants.

I recognise that there has been good progress. The latest employment stats, as has been mentioned, show that 590,000 disabled people are in work. That is much better than three years ago, with an increase of some 4%. However, that still constitutes a scandal of five in 10 disabled people in employment compared with eight in 10 non-disabled people. We must do so much more. Recent announcements from Ministers have been encouraging, not least that yesterday on homeless people and people with mental health illness facing sanctions.

The Secretary of State said:

“We want our jobseekers to focus on getting into work and enjoying the dignity and security of a good job.”

Those fine words also need to be applied properly to WRAG claimants. We need to realise the vision in the Green Paper of a new era of joint working between the welfare and health systems. By April, that long-term vision must be a reality for this group of people. It is important and encouraging to provide coaches, the Access to Work and Fit for Work schemes, and personalised integrated support. The Disability Confident scheme is also important, as is removing prejudice where some look to difference and otherness rather than positive diversity. All of that comes together, but we need to do something about the £30. Perhaps one way to deal with it is to look at the flexible support fund as a way of bridging the gap.

We must ensure that, as we move into 2017, financial and practical support is available. The 2013 incarnation of the support fund managed only to assist people with getting job interviews. It must be about much more than that. I want to hear from the Minister that this will be a much more integrated package, which incorporates the vision in the Green Paper. Let us grasp that vision and ensure it becomes a reality. Let us make sure there is local discretion on disability that pulls together practical health and welfare needs, not just a one-size-fits-all approach. The words in the Green Paper need to become a reality for the new WRAG claimants.

I appreciate that the Green Paper has far wider aims, aspirations and objectives. Those of us on the Conservative Benches—we have a good track record, which we can be proud of; we spend more than Labour did when it was in office and will continue to do so, despite the cuts for this group of people—must accept that there is a credibility and confidence gap on how we support the most vulnerable and disabled. We must not lose on this, but recognise that the great approach in the Green Paper can be realised by showing real practical support, particularly as we get to April. The new WRAG claimants will still need that £30 support for travel, heating and so on.

I believe that, as we approach April, the way in which we show our support and care for the vulnerable and disabled is a litmus test for the Green Paper. I look forward to hearing from the Minister today. I will be working with Ministers on how we can ensure practical, integrated support to meet that test and to deliver for this group of people.

1.32 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): We are discussing whether the state can afford to give less than 1% of its citizens, who have been assessed as unfit to work through illness or disability, £30 a week to help them to get through their lives. In one sense, it is a remarkably small amount of money, yet for the people involved it is really quite major. In some cases, it makes a difference of up to a third of the money they subsist on over the course of a week.

I want to deal first with the question introduced by the architects of the policy. It was put about that somehow the existence of more money on employment and support allowance would create a disincentive for the people in that category to seek employment, compared with those on jobseeker’s allowance. It was thought that this extra payment would somehow create a disincentive to their search for work. That argument is possible only if we assume that the needs of people claiming ESA are no different from and no greater than those who claim JSA. I hope that by now the Government are persuaded
by the testimony, given by many Members from across the House about individual constituents in this situation, that that is not the case. People on ESA have greater needs and that is why the additional payment is justified.

We know that many people who claim ESA are isolated and vulnerable. Many are temporarily housebound. They spend much more time at home than their able-bodied peers, which means that their household bills are greater. We know that many people have a condition that may suddenly mean they have to get a taxi or may face some extra expense that other people do not face. We also know that some people are using this money to buy medical supplies not available on the NHS for their condition. The extra payment is there to assist people, to help them to cope with the conditions they suffer from while they try to get back into employment. The House really has to recognise that.

It is particularly iniquitous to have some people continue to claim £109 a week, while others in an identical situation who make a fresh claim will be paid less. How, as a matter of public policy, can we justify that? The Government suggest that this will affect only new claimants and that those already on the benefit need not be too concerned. In fact, the people already claiming the benefit are extremely concerned, because the nature of the benefit is such that we are talking about recurrent claims. People need the benefit for a period of time, after which they may have a period of employment before having to rely on the benefit again. Many such people suffer from mental illnesses, such as anxiety and depression. In that condition, I cannot think of anything worse than knowing that, were they to take a job offer that does not work out, when they ask the state for help again they will be offered £30 less than the amount they currently receive. That situation will exacerbate the mental illnesses that many people face.

I was impressed yesterday when the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), said that there is not a simple dichotomy of being either fit for work and not receiving benefit, or being unfit for work and receiving benefit. There are lots of shades of grey and nuances. If people are unable to work at all and are in need of permanent support, they are transferred to a support group. The WRAG claimants are trying to get back into the job market. The support they receive is to enable them to get back into employment. Far from incentivising people, I fear that if this cut goes ahead it will drive many people into deeper despair and greater isolation, and make it less likely that they will be able to enter the jobs market. For that reason, I ask the Government to think again.

The Minister is listening intently and I appreciate that. I ask the Government to consider the character of this debate: the language being used and how the arguments are being presented. It is the job of the Government to govern and make decisions, and it is the job of the Opposition to attack those decisions. Such is the rough and tumble of politics. However, I ask the Government to note that in this instance that is not the nature of the debate. Members from across the House have come together to make a heartfelt plea for reconsideration of this particular policy. I am hopeful that we will get some movement. I do not accuse the Department for Work and Pensions of malicious intent towards disabled people. Tomorrow, I will be speaking at a DWP conference in Edinburgh at the Hibernian stadium, which will bring 100 local employers together to try to encourage them to take on people with disabilities and to explain the precise support the Government can give to them as employers. That is a good thing and I welcome the Green Paper, on which we can have a debate and consultation.

What sense does it make to pursue this cut now, introduce it in April and reduce the benefit for potentially 600,000 people, while considering how to improve the situation for the very same group of people? Surely the most sensible thing to do is to press the pause button and to put off any final decision on the level of support that claimants in this particular category receive until after April next year. There would then be the opportunity to look at the other means of support available, consider the consequences of the discussion on the Green Paper and then take a balanced decision. It seems to me that we actually jeopardise and hinder some of the potential improvements by making this cut now.

Somebody once said that when you’re in a hole, stop digging. I appeal to the Government to consider doing exactly that. I also appeal to them again to understand the nature and the tenor of the debate. People from across the House are coming together and trying to build a golden bridge over which the Government can retreat. I urge them to cross that bridge. I promise that if that happens, they will not find people on this side of the House condemning them for making a U-turn. Rather, we will salute them for doing the right thing.

1.40 pm

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on securing this important debate, and I welcome its tone, not least because when this change was first proposed, there was such heat and rhetoric that I had to field very many calls from distressed constituents. One in particular stays with me to this day: a father concerned that he was about the lose the benefits associated with supporting his eight-year-old daughter. It is hugely important, therefore, when we speak about such changes, that we be mindful of the people who might be affected by it, so as not to cause undue distress.

This important debate is an opportunity for us to challenge the Government and raise concerns and for the Minister to offer reassurances, particularly on the position of existing claimants and those on reassessment and on the grace period extended to those who move into work. For them, it should not be game over; rather, their support should continue, or they might face too early a challenge. I hope to hear the Minister reassure people in receipt of that benefit.

I welcome the comments made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) about abandoning the ideology that has sadly underpinned this debate. It is not driven by ideology. As we have heard today, there are many Members on both sides of the House who have compassion and want the best for everyone in our country, whatever their position, background or—crucially—disability. As a Member of Parliament with disabled family members, I can say there is nothing more important to me.
Moving into the world of work is a hugely positive step for people, and it brings with it identity, purpose and connection, but when only 1% of claimants are doing so, we must recognise that the system has failed. Whatever the cause, whether it be the assessment or the fact that people should actually be in the support group, one in 100 is simply not good enough.

We need always to remember the bigger aspiration when we are talking about benefits and work. I share the concerns over the changes to ESA. We have heard many speeches from hon. Members expressing those concerns eloquently and movingly, and I would endorse the proposals from my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy).

Work is a hugely positive thing, as has been recognised by Governments of all hues and colours, not least by the previous Labour Government in a DWP report that associated the renewal of work with positive mental health outcomes. I am a member of the all-party group on disability, which has an imminent report containing a host of recommendations not just about reforming support services to help people into work but about the need to reform our attitudes to disability in the workplace.

I welcome the Green Paper, especially for its engagement with disability charities. On the change to the WRAG, I have been contacted by many constituents who share the concerns expressed today, so I am looking forward to some reassurances, and, on the motion, I would endorse the proposals from my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy).

Whatever the cause, whether it be the assessment or the fact that people should actually be in the support group, one in 100 is simply not good enough.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am glad to be following the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell). I agree with her and other Conservative Members that these cuts should at least be paused. On 27 January, Lord Freud said in the other place:

“we are proposing to recycle some of the money currently spent on cash payments...into practical support”.—[Official Report, House of Lords, 27 January 2016; Vol. 768, c. 1316.]

That was the deal offered to us—there would be a shift from cash payments to practical support. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) and others are absolutely right to point out that that practical support will not be in place by next April, so that is a good argument for pausing the cuts.

Not only will the support not be in place next April, but as far as I can see, the Government are not even planning to spend as much on their new programme for supporting ESA claimants into work as they are spending on the Work programme which, as we have heard, has done a hopeless job for people claiming ESA. I thought that the whole point of this benefit cut was to give additional resources to support those people into work, but it appears that the Government are now talking about spending less. The £60 million to £100 million we have heard about is not on top of what is currently being spent; it is instead of what is currently being spent, which seems completely contrary to what we have been assured throughout this process.

In 1998, when I held the Minister’s post, I was responsible for the new deal for disabled people. That was followed by the Pathways to Work programme. On 1 July, the House of Commons Library produced the briefing note “Key Statistics on People with Disabilities in Employment”. It helpfully shows, with a graph, that the disability employment gap fell steadily but substantially from 1998 to 2010. In 2010, the new deal was replaced by the Work programme, and the steady progress on reducing the disability employment gap came to a halt. As the Green Paper candidly acknowledges at paragraph 1.22, there has been no progress in reducing the disability employment gap since 2010. The progress we have heard about from some Conservative Members, particularly the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), has not involved any progress at all in reducing the disability employment gap, which reflects the fact that the Work programme has been so disappointing for this particular group.

I think that the Conservative party recognised that it had a problem, so its manifesto for 2015 to 2020 announced a bold target of halving the disability employment gap. Achieving that by 2020 would be ambitious, because progress would have more than caught up with the rate that was steadily delivered between 1998 and 2010. Ministers said that they would achieve that bold ambition by committing the proceeds of the benefit cut that we are debating today. They told us that the details would be set out in a White Paper.

As the former Secretary of State ruefully observed yesterday, there has still been no White Paper. When launching the Green Paper, the current Secretary of State made this astonishing claim:

“The original commitment in the manifesto did not have an end date”—[Official Report, 31 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 678.]
If one reads a commitment or a promise in a manifesto for 2015 to 2020, one is entitled to believe that what it says will be achieved will actually be achieved by 2020. The commitment was more explicit than that, because during one of the televised election debates, David Cameron—some of us still remember him—said:

“The gap between the disabled unemployment rate and the unemployment rate for the whole country is still too big. I want to see that cut in half over the next five years.”

He was explicit about that. The press release issued by the hon. Member for North Swindon—he told us that he could not remember it—was also clear that this was going to be done by 2020. That was what everyone in the disability organisations understood.

A month or so ago, I attended the launch, which was hosted by the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), of the National Autistic Society document “The autism employment gap”. Let me read what it says:

“The UK Government has made a very welcome pledge to halve the disability employment gap by the end of this Parliament, meaning they have to shift the disability employment rate from 47% to 64%.”

Just last week, the all-party group on multiple sclerosis, which is chaired by the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), published the report “Employment that works”, which referred to “a 2015 general election manifesto commitment by the Conservative Party to halve the disability employment gap by 2020.”

However, when I asked the new Secretary of State about the timing of the commitment, he replied to me on 31 October, when he launched the Green Paper, that it was “premature” to set a date for achieving this goal. At least the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work in her winding-up speech in yesterday’s debate did not claim that there never was a 2020 target when there clearly was.

To resume progress on reducing the disability employment gap—that reduction was delivered consistently under the new deal from 1998 to 2010—the Government need to resource the process properly, as they promised to do earlier this year. The point of making this cut in ESA was supposed to be that the proceeds would be used for that purpose. The Government simply need to keep the promise that they made to disabled people.

When a clear promise has been made to disabled people, is it really too much to ask that it is delivered? The problem with the Green Paper is not that the ideas are bad, as I understand the U-turn of abandoning the work programme, but while the Government promise that is only back up to the number there were in 2013—it is no more than that. A clear promise was made in the Conservative party manifesto. It was understood right across the disability organisations, so I ask the Minister to tell us that she is determined to keep it.

1.54 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in this debate, but regret—I think that we would all agree about this—that it is so necessary. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for securing the debate.

As we have just heard, the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, vowed to halve the disability employment gap. At the end of 2015, the employment rate among those living with a disability stood at 46.7% compared with 80.3% for people not living with a disability. According to the Work and Pensions Committee in March 2016, when it launched its inquiry into the previous Prime Minister’s commitment, halving that gap would require getting an additional 1.2 million disabled people into the workplace. However, plans to reduce the employment and support allowance work-related activity component and the corresponding limited capability for work component in universal credit in April 2017 appear to fly in the face of that worthy target set by the previous Prime Minister.

Justin Tomlinson: Does the hon. Lady welcome the fact that in the past three years alone, an extra 590,000 disabled people have gone into work? The employment rate for disabled people is now 48%, which is up 4% from when we first came to power?

Patricia Gibson: I welcome all progress in this area, but that does not detract from the commitment made by the previous Prime Minister, which I believe everyone would have supported. Progress is always to be welcomed, but we have not gone far enough and we should still work towards that commitment.

In practical terms, £30 each week will be cut from those with long-term health conditions or disabilities, and as we have repeatedly heard today, this will happen before the work and health programme Green Paper can be considered or implemented. The fact is that reducing sick and disabled people’s financial support to jobseekers’ levels is counter-productive since those in the ESA WRAG will have very low incomes for a long time, because disabled people are much more likely to be out of work for longer. It is extremely important that the Government proceed by using an evidence-based approach, instead of rushing into cuts that will have the opposite outcome from what they and everyone else want.

The Government say that they want to help disabled people into work, but under the limited capability for work element of universal credit, disabled people in work and those looking for work will be negatively affected. Those in work but on low pay will be particularly hard hit. How on earth can that be consistent with the aim of halving the disability employment gap? The truth is that helping disabled people into work means supporting them, and doing so effectively. The proposed measures will push them further and further away from the workplace. Scope claims that a loss of financial support for disabled people will have a detrimental impact on their health and wellbeing, pushing them further away from the workplace. It will also strip away necessary support from those already in work, making it harder for them to retain their place in the world of work.

Some 492,180 disabled people across the UK are reliant—I repeat the word “reliant”, because that is so important—on ESA WRAG. According to the third sector, these people will struggle to live independently and will be pushed further and further into isolation, poverty, hardship and debt. Research by Scope discovered that 49% of disabled people use credit cards or loans to pay for everyday essential items such as clothes or food.

Some 492,180 disabled people across the UK are reliant—
We should spare a thought today for people who are living with conditions such as Parkinson’s. We know that those with fluctuating conditions are not well served when they are placed in the WRAG, because the work capability assessment does not and cannot accurately capture the reality of living with such a condition. That means that ESA claimants with Parkinson’s will be placed in the impossible and demoralising position of being told they are fit for work or should be getting back to work. They are often placed in the WRAG rather than the more appropriate support group.

Heidi Allen: Does the hon. Lady therefore welcome, as I do, the fact that the Government will take a completely fresh look at the whole way in which the work capability assessments are carried out, so that we can put people into the right support group—or not, as the case may be?

Patricia Gibson: If any part of the social security system needs a fresh look, that would be my first choice, although there is an embarrassment of riches to choose from. At present, people are not well served by work capability assessments.

We have heard protestations today and in the past that no one who is currently receiving ESA and no one with the most severe disabilities will be affected by the forthcoming changes, but they have been categorically refuted by organisations such as the Scottish Association for Mental Health, which has pointed out that those who are currently receiving ESA may well be affected by the changes if they have been claiming the benefit and move into work before they are well enough. They may also be affected if they need to seek support again. People are likely to be deterred from trying out new jobs if the possible outcome is reduced benefit after a short period of employment.

SAMH’s report also points out that 98% of its service users said that their mental health had suffered as a result of welfare reforms. People are already very frightened and worried. Ironically—I want Ministers to reflect on this, because we are trying to build consensus across the House today—the Government’s policies are literally making those who are coping with the daily challenges of a disability ill or, at best, less well. How can that make those in the group that is targeted by these measures more work-ready? In fact, such measures will prolong the sick and disabled should be above budget savings. If it is not, what does that say about the kind of society that we are trying to create? What does it say about Government priorities?

I know that there is concern about this issue on both sides of the House. I urge the Minister to note what has been said by Action on Hearing Loss, Capability Scotland, Disability Agenda Scotland, Guide Dogs, the Motor Neurone Disease Association, Parkinson’s UK and a range of members of the Disability Benefits Consortium, and to do the right thing. I urge the Government to use next week’s autumn statement to pause these cuts until appropriate alternative measures to implement the commitment to halve the disability gap have been fully considered, and to do all that they can to secure support for current and future claimants so that sick and disabled people are supported adequately when they are able to work, and also when they are unable to do so.

I urge the Minister to respond positively today, and to remove the shadow that hangs over the lives and futures of too many people throughout the United Kingdom as they fear the future and what the Government appear to be seeking to do. I urge her to do the right thing, and to respond to the debate with compassion and understanding.

2.2 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on initiating the debate. He has a certain credibility, as he has already raised this issue in the Chamber on several occasions. I welcome the cross-party nature of both the motion and the speeches that we have heard so far. We want to see a Government who care: a Government who protect society, but also protect those who are disabled and vulnerable.

I shall make my speech in a Northern Ireland context. As was mentioned earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan), my colleagues in the Social Democratic and Labour party and I voted against the Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2015 and the Bill that became the Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Act 2015 in the House of Commons less than a year ago. Those measures were dealt with in the House because the ruling parties in the Northern Ireland Executive, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist party, voted for a legislative consent motion that locked Northern Ireland into the “welfare clauses of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill as initially introduced at Westminster”. That is directly relevant to today’s debate.

The clauses in question covered the insidious £29.05 a week cut in the ESA WRAG component and the corresponding cut in universal credit. Under the previous Chancellor and the previous Work and Pensions Secretary, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), the Government justified the cut by claiming that it would encourage claimants into work by removing financial disincentives.

I have two issues with that. First, there was the thinly veiled suggestion that members of the ESA WRAG needed financial strain to push them into employment. I know many people in that category, some of whom are constituents and some of whom are related to me. The vast majority are actively seeking work and desperate for the independence and fulfilment that a meaningful job can offer. In my previous role as a Northern Ireland Minister dealing with these matters some seven years ago, I came into contact with people in that position. I knew that they desired work because it would give them status, identity and a purpose in life. The barrier that prevents such people from securing employment has been created by the lack of special adjustments and support in the workplace and by discrimination on the part of some employers, not by the absence of a work ethic.

Secondly, not one shred of evidence has been produced, by the Government or by others, to suggest that £29.05 a week in addition to the basic amount acts as a disincentive. Will the Minister please tell us whether she has any evidence to present to the House, or whether she is endorsing the former Chancellor and his predecessor at the suggestion of the Department for Work and Pensions?
Moreover, in a wider context, we should remember that the original taper in universal credit has been gradually eroded, which has reduced the financial gap between benefits and earnings from employment. Universal credit was intended to prevent claimants’ income from dropping sharply as they moved into work, but the cliff is gradually re-emerging as more and more cuts are packaged into it.

The proposed cuts in social security offices in Northern Ireland will lead to their closure, and in my constituency and that of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that will remove access from the most vulnerable people, who are periodically unemployed because of their disability. Running in parallel with these proposed cuts is a lack of accessibility to immediate help.

We should remember that the freeze in benefits is itself the biggest cut in the welfare bill. It may not attract the same criticism as blunter cuts, but it has a very real impact on claimants’ living standards. Although the additional amount that the support group receives—currently £36.20 a week—is not subject to a freeze, the basic amount of ESA is. People in the work-related activity group are not just losing nearly £30 a week; they are losing even more from their basic amount, and members of the support group will also suffer a reduction in their overall amount in real terms. This is a slow and creeping means of reducing living standards and piling financial strain on all our constituents with complex health conditions and disabilities who will apply for ESA.

As we approach the week of the autumn statement, I urge the Chancellor—who is not in the Chamber today—to rethink these potential cuts and to reflect on the cross-party consensus in this House, but it has not always been. In a previous debate, the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), proposed these changes with the aim of ending what he called “the perverse incentives” that “otherwise discourage claimants from taking steps back to work”. But this is a different time, a different era, a different Government. The extra £30 a week for ESA recipients is not a luxury above and beyond jobseeker’s allowance; it was intended—and should remain—for the additional costs associated with their condition.

Only last week a UN inquiry found that there had been “grave and systematic violations” of disabled people’s rights under the Government’s welfare reforms. On page 6, the report recommends that social protection systems should address the costs associated with disability. I implore Ministers to read it and act.

Ministers have stood at the Dispatch Box to say that they are forced to make “difficult decisions”, but it is not they who bear the brunt of those difficult decisions. It is the Davys mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin); genuine, ambitious, decent folk trapped by illness or disability. But the unfortunate truth is that the Davys of this world are not the exception. Every Member has a Davy and constituents who will be affected.

We must ask ourselves why the Government choose to cut £30 a week from ESA, choose to close Remploy, choose to abolish the independent living fund, choose to replace disability living allowance with a far more restrictive PIP assessment criteria and choose to remove Motability from 90,000 disabled people. None of those decisions demonstrates the laudable ambition to cut the disability employment gap in half.

I want this Government to champion social mobility, not contribute to social stagnation and isolation. I want the Government to offer people with disabilities a helping hand, not to kick away their ladder. Today, they have a
chance to do that. My constituency, Glasgow East, has a higher than average level of disability, born or acquired. Most people I speak to tell me, if they are able, they want to work. They want support into work. They want to use their considerable talents to contribute to society. They do not want to be objects of pity or to have to constantly fight for dignity.

According to a survey conducted and released last year by the Disability Benefits Consortium, almost one third of people currently on ESA say they cannot afford to eat on the ESA they receive. I know that there are honourable and decent Members on the Government Benches, and I know that it is not Government policy to starve those people into work, so today they can ensure that that is not the unintended consequence of these cuts. If there was ever an opportunity to ditch this punitive aspect of welfare reform, it is now. We have a new Government, a new Prime Minister and a new Secretary of State: this is the time to assert who we are as a society and who they are as a Government. If the Prime Minister wants truly to live up to the spirit and the letter of her words spoken on the steps of Downing Street, when she pledged to build a country that works for all and promised to fight against burning injustice, the Government would scrap their cuts to ESA today. Otherwise, it is a case of “Meet the new boss, same as the old boss,” and, for that, she will not be forgiven.

2.15 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to speak in this timely debate about a very serious and concerning matter, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on securing the debate.

The welfare state has been the jewel in the crown of British politics for over 70 years. The concept was brought to life by a number of Liberal reforms during the first two decades of the 20th century and has been improved upon and matured by successive Labour Governments, starting with Clement Attlee’s Administration following the 1945 general election. The central principle that led to those Acts of Parliament was the delivery of social security—a safety net of the state, there to catch people in trauma in their lives, whether that be illness, accident or unemployment. This right to social security was then enshrined in article 22 of the universal declaration of human rights in 1948. The notion of social security and welfare is not one that the Labour party wishes to discard; it is instead a core part of our philosophy since 1945. This Conservative Government seem determined to do everything they can to undermine this social contract and undo 70 years of work. Under the guise of austerity, the Tories have taken through the biggest cuts to welfare for 80 years, and since 2010 we have seen an assault on benefits for disabled people, working people and single parents, among others.

The proposed cuts to ESA and universal credit are yet another act to deliberately hurt the working class. The Resolution Foundation has undertaken research that suggests that cuts to universal credit will leave 2.5 million working families, on average, £2,100 worse off. It also estimates that by 2021 the poorest 50% of households will be £375 worse off on average. How can such cuts stand up to the scrutiny of an impact assessment or distributional analysis? They simply cannot, and I urge the Government to honour their word and introduce an adequate distributional analysis of their economic approach.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies identifies that the effect of the changes to tax and welfare proposed in the 2015 autumn statement would mean losses 25 times greater for those in the bottom decile than those in the top decile. It also claims that almost 500,000 children will be plunged into absolute poverty by 2020 as a direct result of planned tax and benefit reforms. The Office for Budget Responsibility has confirmed that keeping cuts to the work allowance of universal credit means a £9.6 billion reduction in support for working families over the next five years. That is not quite the “country that works for everyone” that the Prime Minister aspires to.

We have already seen the Government backtrack on their cuts to PIP, and we are still to find out how they propose to fill the £4.8 billion black hole of committed spending that it left. The opposition to these cuts is not limited to the Opposition Benches, and we have seen a number of the Government’s own Members voice their concerns, the most important of which was the resignation of the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith)—whose idea universal credit was—because he felt the cuts were going too far. He has most recently called on the Chancellor to cancel the planned tax cuts and to reverse cuts to universal credit.

The concept of an employment and support allowance was based on assessing the difference between those with the hope of recovery and those with a chronic illness. For those people with the aim of becoming well again and returning to work, an amount has been paid on top of what they would have received if they had been on jobseeker’s allowance. This additional amount supports them to undertake work-related activity as a means of transition back to the workplace. There are currently 492,180 disabled people nationally in the employment and support allowance work-related activity group. Should the cuts be implemented, those people will be £30 a week worse off, and equivalent cuts to universal credit will come on top of the £24 billion of support that has already been taken away from disabled people by this Government.

Universal credit was originally designed to ensure work that pays, but cuts to the work allowance will completely undermine that. While I can commend the aim of making work pay, I doubt the ability of universal credit to deliver that. The concept has been flawed from the start, and the Government have been forced to extend its roll-out seven times since March 2013. Cutting the work allowance of universal credit and abolishing the ESA work-related activity benefit will clearly be counterproductive. It is likely to increase the number of long-term unemployed people and penalise sick or disabled people who are trying their best to return to work.

Parkinson’s UK says that,

“the Work Related Activity Group is not comprised of people who are fit and healthy to work. It is made up of people who the Government has found to be currently unable to work due to
illness or disability. It is illogical and medically impossible to incentivise a group of people to recover their health by reducing the amount they have to live on”.

I fully support the notion of full employment, but we must recognise that some people need support and time to return to the workplace following illness or disability. Others will not work at all.

In a modern, progressive, compassionate society—which the United Kingdom claims to be—is it not okay to recognise that some people are unfortunately not in a position to work? Instead, we have a Tory Government with a perverse view that our country is made up of scroungers and shirkers who deliberately avoid work, and that the only way to encourage them back to work is to take away the little support they receive to help them on their road to recovery. I have never met anyone who deliberately chooses not to work and not to reap the benefits that work brings. It is for these reasons that I urge the Government to reconsider their irresponsible and pernicious strategy to make cuts to ESA and universal credit, and carefully to consider the impact this will have on sick and disabled people, whose efforts to deal with the trials of life and return to work should be applauded, not ridiculed.

2.23 pm

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): I join other hon. Members in commending my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) not only for securing the debate but for mobilising such a cross-party coalition. I must also commend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), for making notes and being attentive during the debate. There are many Ministers that we could all name who do not do that. I know that she will not give much ground at the end of today’s debate, but I hope that she will take away the feeling of the House on this matter and acknowledge the cross-party view that we should delay the implementation of the cuts to the work-related activity component of the employment and support allowance, at least until we have seen the outcome of the Green Paper.

Interestingly, the underlying reason for a delay has been given to us by the Government themselves. They have implicitly admitted that there is something wrong with the disability payments system for those seeking to get into work. They are looking at the matter again, and we know that the Green Paper consultation period will finish in February. There will then be discussions, and the Government will come back with something after that. All this could take a year or perhaps slightly longer, and we might not see any resolution before the autumn statement of 2017 or possibly in the Budget of 2018. So why change the system now? Why give the civil service more difficulties by changing it now and having to change it again in a year or 18 months’ time? The Government have given us the rationale for a delay.

Mr Burrowes: The hon. Gentleman has talked about timing. I want to be more optimistic and give the Government an opportunity here. They are already responding to questions about an integrated approach in the Green Paper. We heard announcements yesterday relating to mental health and to homeless jobseekers facing sanctions. I hope that we can look forward to more announcements before April that will mean that we do not need to pause. Let us remain hopeful that we do not have to wait until April for the vision of the Green Paper to come to fruition.

George Kerevan: I am happy to accept that optimistic approach. The hon. Gentleman will possibly have more influence on the Government than I will, and the sooner that happens, the better. In the spirit of this debate, I am trying to be as reasonable as possible in giving the Minister information to take back to the Government.

The most frightening statistic that I have read in recent months relates to the rise in the number of people with disabilities in the adult workforce. The figure is something like 400,000 since 2013, so this is not a diminishing issue; it is a social problem that is rising. I suspect that an awful lot, if not the majority, of those citizens with disabilities are suffering from mental health issues. That is precisely the group that comes in and out of employment. It is the strategic group for which we have to craft a benefits system that will help them through the process and give them the support and encouragement they need to get back into work permanently. This is not just another component of the welfare system; it is a key component for dealing with a growing problem, so again we have to ask the Government to look at the issue and not just to make short-term changes. They need to get the Green Paper through and find a permanent solution.

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point. He is right to highlight the fact that 50% of the people who go through ESA will have a mental health condition. We should recognise the fact that society is getting better at recognising those with disabilities, which is why we are seeing an increase in the numbers. We also have an ageing population, and 81% of disabilities are related to age.

George Kerevan: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman, who made an impassioned and elegant speech earlier. Indeed, I am happy to commend the former Prime Minister, who made an impassioned effort to direct the Government to deal with mental health issues. In the light of that, let us not rush into tinkering with the ESA work-related activity component. Let us leave aside these short-term changes until we get a permanent solution on which we can all agree.

The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who is no longer in his place, spoke earlier in the debate. Like me, he represents a constituency in which the full-service roll-out of universal credit has begun. It began in my constituency in March 2016. One of the problems that would emerge if we were to proceed with the ESA work-related activity component cuts, along with ending the eligibility of new claimants under the universal credit regime after April 2017, is that that would create a two-tier system.

Leaving aside the philosophical issues about universal credit, I just want to point out to the Minister that one of the problems is that the full-service roll-out is not working well. This has become the dominant issue in my postbag, with which my constituency office has to deal. With the best will in the world, Jobcentre Plus staff are trying to tackle the problems with the full-service roll-out, but we have had computer problems including constant software bugs and changes. The inability to adjust to the new system has meant that the citizens
advice bureaux and the libraries, which are run by the local authority, have been deluged with requests for support by people who are trying to readjust to the universal credit system. Given that the roll-out is not going smoothly, any suggestion that we can suddenly reduce ESA WRAG to the JSA level in April and that it will go through smoothly is wrong. I want to put it on the record that those of us—this has nothing to do with party or opposition to the Government—who are dealing with the full service roll-out know that it is not going well. We should not be changing the way the system works until we know that it is working in a positive way.

There is no one in this House who would not want to see more people with disabilities get back into the workplace, but there is a specific local problem. All the statistics show that we are actually as near to full employment as we are ever going to get. The hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) was rather scathing about experts and statistics, but they are all that we have to work with. The latest figures from the November Bank of England inflation report suggest that the jobs market will remain tight over the next three years, so the Government must bear that in mind when considering the prospect of getting large numbers of people with disabilities back into the labour market. If we are to get more people back into work, we will have to work with employers and look much more closely at their response.

If there is any lurking suspicion in Government—I am not saying that there is—that reducing ESA WRAG will force more people back into the labour market, I can tell them that that will not work. If that was ever the approach—I am not saying that it was—not only would it be callous, but it would be ineffective. We have to work with employers to put systems in place to enable and prepare them to take more people with disabilities into the labour market. That is a longer-term problem, which will be not be resolved in April by cutting ESA WRAG.

My final plea to the Minister—she has listened attentively and I thank her for that—is to go back to the Treasury and the DWP and rethink the change. It is only a week until the autumn statement, and those of us with any knowledge about how the Treasury works will know that the midnight oil will be burned this weekend as the final changes are made to whatever will be announced next week. There is still time to rethink these cuts.

2.32 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for securing this extremely important debate. I want to declare an interest as I worked in learning disability services prior to my election. I urge MPs across the House to do the same. This month, I am hosting my constituency’s small business event to bring inspirational Paralympians to Westminster and we championed their achievements.

Since being elected, I have looked deeply into the effects of the Department for Work and Pensions’ assessments, particularly those of people with mental health issues and disabilities. I am sure that many will agree that they are deeply unsuitable. The assessment is inadequate and fails to take a much needed holistic, tailored or specialist approach. We must ensure that we harness people’s potential and assess them fairly. I am sad to say that I have met many disabled constituents who have been unfairly treated by the welfare system. Many have been left with depression in addition to their disabilities. Their problems have been compounded. They experience a sense of hopelessness in the face of changes, often feeling that they have little voice. We must give them that voice in this House.

People whose Motability cars were taken away from outside their front doors have been left without independence and been plunged into dependence. Cuts to disabled people’s benefits are simply unacceptable. If they were morally or socially acceptable, we would not be having this debate. It is unsurprising that so many in this House, from both sides of the Chamber, feel passionately that we should not be taking much needed money away from the most vulnerable in our society. What is surprising is that the UK Government intend to push forward with the changes, which will have a genuinely detrimental effect on people’s lives. I ask the Government to think again.

Make no mistake, a reduction of £1,500 a year in benefits would be absolutely catastrophic for many and will undoubtedly exacerbate poverty among the disabled. It is unacceptable. The Government’s assertion that the work-related activity component acts as a disincentive for people to look for work can only be described as a sweeping statement. There is no evidence whatsoever to back up that claim. Does the Minister genuinely believe that disabled people are more likely to get a job if their benefits are cut? Employers’ attitudes, a lack of understanding, a lack of training and access to job opportunities, a lack of equal opportunities—these are the real barriers to employment for the disabled. Statistics show that disabled people are twice as likely to be unemployed, and that is not linked to supports, which are vital to help people to find employment, make adaptations and remain in employment. The costs for disabled people are much higher and we must acknowledge that.

I was pleased to hold a Disability Confident event in my constituency a few months ago. I was able to speak directly to employers to help them to overcome preconceptions and to provide them with information about the support that they can access to employ people with disabilities. I urge MPs across the House to do the same. This month, I am hosting my constituency’s small business event and have developed a specific award for inclusive employers. I want to ensure that I support small businesses that provide jobs, and inclusive jobs in particular.

The APPG for disability, which I have the privilege of chairing, will publish a report in the coming weeks on practical measures showing how Government, business, industry and other organisations can help disabled people into work and halve the employment gap. I specifically ask the Minister to commit to meet our cross-party group and to consider the report, which now has the support of seven parties. With the Minister, I recently spoke at a parliamentary event that brought inspirational Paralympians to Westminster and we championed their achievements. We should build on that.

Let us look at support. Let us look at abilities, not disabilities, and at people’s potential and aspirations. Let us look at opportunities for disabled people to start their own business and to overcome hurdles. Let us not lose their skills and value to our economy. Let us turn this debate on its head. We should not be short-sighted and do harm; we should pause these cuts. Let us ensure that the UK is the most compassionate and a role model in disability support and employment so that others across the world can look up to us in our endeavours.
2.38 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for setting the scene so well. Right hon. and hon. Members across the Chamber have made marvellous contributions. I have the pleasure of speaking on behalf of the DUP and am happy to have the same attitude as others on the right way forward.

ESA is a complex, complicated benefit with many different aspects. Like many other MPs, I have a full-time member of staff dedicated to working with people to help to calculate their benefits and fill out the confusing, complicated forms. She works some 37.5 hours a week—sometime more in her own time—and always has a waiting list of people to see her. That is how it is in my office, and I suspect it is the same in others. On my constituency days, I also take on the benefits problems, while the admin staff in my office handle the day-to-day queries. A lot of our time is spent trying to help people, which is why today’s debate is so important to my constituents and to me. I watch the struggles that people go through and worry how these vulnerable and ill people can go through more.

Christina Rees: Further to the point about employing full-time caseworkers to deal with the issues that the hon. Gentleman has just mentioned, the caseworker I employ is passionate about helping my constituents in Neath, but the toll on him is great, and he is under strain. We are passionate about what we do, but the workers in our offices are passionate about what they do, too, and we must give credit to them.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is right. Our staff are compassionate on behalf of our constituents—in many cases, they themselves are our constituents—and they understand the issues very well. When it comes to explaining ourselves, let us make sure that that point is highlighted.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): This does not only affect our staff. Cuts to legal aid and to the universal credit equivalent from the support group. The changes were introduced to “remove the financial incentives that could otherwise discourage claimants from taking steps back to work.”

As of February 2016, there were some 2.4 million ESA claimants in Great Britain. Of these, 1.5 million were in the support group; some 19% were in the work-related activity group; some 13% were in the assessment phase, awaiting their work capability assessment—how frustrating it must be to wait for that to happen, given the time that it takes—and 3% were in the unknown phase, yet to be allocated to a group. Again, that illustrates the lack of process and the difficulties with time. Many people are in this group. Although the changes apply to new applicants, there will certainly be people that are affected. I understand that the DWP impact assessment says: “The notional loss to each family is expected to be around £28 a week, which represents around a 10 per cent notional change in net income, presented in 2019/20 prices. Someone moving into work could, by working around 4–5 hours a week at National Living Wage, recoup the notional loss of the Work-Related Activity component or the Limited Capability for Work element.”

Let us focus on what that means. The Government expect those disabled people to find four to five hours’ work elsewhere to fill the gap. For a start, the hours might not be there. What if their disability means that they are not able to do it? With respect, it is just incredible that the Government believe that that could happen.

Let us be serious here: the whole point of ESA is that it is for people who are unwell. There seems to be a presumption by the DWP that working the five hours a week to fill the gap is not an issue, when in fact the 200,000 or so people who are in the WRAG for mental and behavioural issues may not find it such an easy option. Earlier, a Member referred to those with mental health issues. In Northern Ireland, we have many, many people who have depression and other mental health issues, and who suffer greatly every day. Our 30-year conflict has contributed to those problems.

It is fair to say that whenever a Government do something good, we want to congratulate them. The DWP has stopped the renewals of ESA for those who are long-term sick. I am very pleased about that. Many people with brain injuries or who have children with educational and emotional difficulties have come to my office. The court has appointed people to deal with their money, and yet, until now, those people have had to renew their ESA claim every two years. I wrote to my own Department in Northern Ireland about that matter, and I was very pleased to get a response from the Government through the Department and to hear that they are now doing away with that requirement. It is only right that those for whom the court has made appointees should not have to renew their ESA every two years. It is just silly to ask for that.

As an employer, would I hire someone who may be prevented from being reliable because of their documented illness—someone I could not allow to work with customers owing to such issues? Although I would have sympathy, could I run my office like that? The answer is that I could not, and I doubt that the Government could either, so who will employ these people who are being told, “Just work another five hours to make it up.”
Let me be clear: we are not talking about jobseekers, but about people who have a recorded and supported illness. The rationale, while perhaps understandable in other areas, is vapid and for the majority of this group. There is a reason they are not simply on JSA, and the Government must recognise that.

The hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) referred to the closure of offices, and we are concerned about that as well. We are fighting that together. The campaign is supported by all the parties at every level—council level, MLA level and MP level. Retaining those offices is important. We also should remember the support from the Disability Benefits Consortium. Mencap in Northern Ireland has asked me to express its concerns as well. I am given to understand that there will be “new funding for additional support to help claimants return to work”.

That has been clarified as £60 million in 2017-18, rising to £100 million in 2020-21. In addition, the Government have announced an extra £15 million per year in 2017-18 and 2018-19 for the Jobcentre Plus Flexible Support Fund to be set aside specifically for those with limited capability for work. Some £43 million has also been allocated to trial ways of providing specialist support for people with common mental health conditions between 2017-18 and 2019-20. I wish to make this plea to the Minister. When we have those staff in place, please, please can we make sure that they have the training, the ability and the quality to respond, because very often, with great respect, they do not have those skills. As the elected representative of my staff, it is frustrating to have to work only one hour if they could find an employer who would allow someone to work as well. I am sure that my staff would love to say, “Do your 37.5 hours whenever you feel like it.” However, “new funding for additional support to help claimants return to work”.

My concern is that the seriousness of the illness is not taken into account. It almost feels as though Government are saying, “Yes, yes, I know you’re feeling a trifle under the weather, but come on, old chap, stiffen that upper lip and move on.” That is not possible for those suffering from musculoskeletal problems—there are almost 100,000 in this group. There is no stiff upper lip for them. There are those who cannot know when they will be well enough to work, but they are told to make up the five hours whenever they can. I am sure that my staff would love me to say, “Do your 37.5 hours whenever you feel like it. You can work from 2 am to 7 am if you like.” However, that would not help me to deal with my constituents, my customers or those who need help. There are few places of employment like that, so why can the Government not outline where those five hours at a time can be taken into account? We could go so far as to say that people would have to work only one hour if they could find an employer willing to pay £29 an hour. “Don’t be absurd,” the Government would say, but that would be as easy to find as an employer who would allow someone to work five hours a week whenever they choose, according to their illness.

Instead of cutting benefits, we should focus on improving support for disabled people who need help and on getting them back into work. I know that the Government have made some concessions, and the unemployment figures this week showed that more people who are disabled are in work. That is good news and a move in the right direction. Let us continue in that way.

The Government need to understand the difference between being ill and being unable to find work. In the past month I have had in my office a former ward sister, a former construction worker, a business owner and a social worker, all of whom are now on ESA. I know those people well. They do not want to be on ESA. They are not choosing not to work out of laziness. They were earning £500 a week and are now getting £75, so the Government’s inference in this regard is insulting. More importantly, it is based on a false premise that cannot be allowed to stand. I therefore feel that I have to stand with the proposer of the motion and those who have supported it and say that we are against these Government proposals. I know that the Minister is an understanding lady and I look to her to respond compassionately to the issues that we have raised. I hope her response to today’s debate will be positive and constructive. Let us help our people as we should.

2.49 pm

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): This debate could not be more timely, given that we are a week away from the autumn statement. It speaks volumes that the motion has been supported by Members from nine parties represented in this House. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on his persistence in pursuing this issue and on marshalling such broad cross-party support.

As we have heard, Members on both sides of the House know that it is just not right to cut employment and support allowance for sick and disabled people in the work-related activity group by almost £30 a week. It is just not right to cut the corresponding limited capability for work component for those on universal credit. It is especially not right to press ahead with these punitive cuts, which are due to come into effect for new claimants from next April, when the Government have acknowledged that their efforts to address disability employment have failed to date, and their system of employment support for sick and disabled people of working age has been wholly inadequate.

Earlier this month, the Government finally brought forward their long-awaited Green Paper on the disability employment gap, which I have welcomed and we all hope will initiate comprehensive improvements. We have heard a very different tone from Ministers in recent weeks. There have been serious attempts by senior Ministers to distance themselves from their predecessors, not least with the Prime Minister’s early commitment to a “country that works for everyone”.

They will be judged by their actions, not their words, and that is precisely why we need to hit the pause button on these cuts to ESA and universal credit that will cause hardship and distress to thousands of people who are not fit for work. The exchanges between the hon. Members for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) captured this point succinctly when they said that we need to pause to allow the support infrastructure to catch up.

Ministers know that we in the SNP have been deeply critical of the Government’s willingness to allow the most disadvantaged sick and disabled people to bear the brunt of austerity cuts. We will continue to hold them to account for the adverse consequences of their actions—those consequences are already writ large among sick and disabled people in all our communities and constituencies—but I and my colleagues have also tried to be constructive by offering ideas, solutions and better ways forward. We will continue to do that, because it is in everyone’s interest that we get this right.
We should not forget that when these cuts were first announced, the then Chancellor argued that they were intended to remove “perverse incentives” in the system. That point has been made by several hon. Members today. I hope that the new incumbents in the DWP and the Treasury now recognise that taking away necessary financial support from sick and disabled people who have been assessed as unfit for work does not make them get better any more quickly. Quite the reverse: there is a growing body of evidence that poverty exacerbates illness, hinders recovery, and makes it harder for people with long-term conditions to secure and sustain employment.

As we have heard, what is actually perverse is to reduce the resources available for sick and disabled people that enable them to work. I hope the Government will ditch the prejudices and stereotypes that have fed the poor policy decisions of the past, and will listen not only to disabled people and those who represent them, but to MPs on their own Benches who have expressed severe disquiet about the consequences of these cuts.

I am reluctant to break the consensual tone of this debate, but I must respond to the question that the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) pointed out that the Scottish Government have devolved all working-age benefits. Obviously, we spoke to amendments to the Scotland Bill that would have devolved all working-age benefits. We need to take a responsible approach for out of money earmarked for our responsibilities in devolved areas. We need to take a long, hard look to his own conscience and perhaps his own voting record.

It is a wee bit rich for Members to oppose the devolution of those powers yet to demand that the Scottish Government plug the gap. The Scottish Government have already committed an extra £20 million for disability employment support, but they cannot be expected to plug every hole in the bucket of poor Westminster policy making. The hon. Gentleman should take a long, hard look to his own conscience and perhaps his own voting record.

Kate Green: As the hon. Lady will remember, my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) pointed out that the Scottish Government were able to provide additional support in relation to the bedroom tax, so it has such a power regarding reserved benefits. His question was: would they use that power in relation to this cut?

Dr Whiteford: I thank the hon. Lady for her point. However, the key point is that, for the most part, JSA is a short-term benefit. Most claimants come off it in a matter of weeks or months, so it is not designed to support people over long periods. By contrast, ESA is for people with serious health problems and disabilities. It is designed to cover some of the additional costs associated with serious illness and disability, and it recognises the reality that many claimants are likely to be in receipt of the benefit for a longer period—in over half of cases, for more than two years.

In my part of the world, one of the most obvious additional costs is heating for people who are likely to be at home all day, who might not be able to move about so much and who need to keep warm. People on low incomes already spend a huge proportion of their money on essentials such as energy and food. We know from the debt charities referred to earlier that a large proportion of people on ESA are already in debt, running a domestic budget deficit and living from hand to mouth. They have already experienced substantial real-terms cuts to their incomes due to austerity.

Getting by on a low income for a long time is hard. It entrenches poverty among sick and disabled people, who end up using all their savings and eroding their assets over time. Illness and disability also take a heavy financial toll on wider family members, who often find their own earning potential limited because they are providing unpaid care, and who try to support loved ones out of their own limited financial resources.

The Government are quite right to say that the disability employment gap is unacceptable, but they need to recognise that those disabled people who are in work are more likely to be in low-paid jobs and are at higher risk of in-work poverty. They also often move in and out of work more frequently than those who do not have health problems.

Less has been said in the debate about the parts of the motion relating to universal credit. The disabled worker element of working tax credit, which is due to disappear under the shift to universal credit, is the very component that actually makes work pay for many disabled workers. The loss of the limited capability for work element for everyone except those in the support group means that many working disabled people will be around £1,500 a year worse off. That will make it harder for disabled people to sustain employment, and it actively undermines efforts to support sick and disabled people into work.

The Government have pointed out in the past that these cuts will apply only to new claimants, but the reality is that people with serious fluctuating conditions often move in and out of work. That is particularly true of people with persistent and serious mental health problems.
conditions, who make up such a large proportion of the ESA case load. The fluctuations of these and other conditions that change over time are often compounded by fluctuations in the labour market and by the trend towards more temporary, fixed-term employment and zero-hours contracts.

The cuts we are debating actually create significant disincentives for those with fluctuating conditions to move into work, because if they do, they become sick again, and if they try to get back into work too early in their recovery and they relapse, they know they will be back on ESA at a significantly reduced rate. That is punitive and counterproductive.

That is at the heart of why we are calling on the Government to hit the brake on these cuts until they have had time to get their act together on the Green Paper and to come forward with more comprehensive and effective support measures for sick and disabled adults of working age. That has been a consistent refrain from Members this afternoon, who have shared moving testimonies from their constituencies.

Cuts to the already low incomes of sick and disabled people who are not fit for work or who are in precarious, low-paid employment are completely unjustifiable. They will damage the health and wellbeing of ordinary people whose lives are already hard enough because of serious health problems. These cuts will push people into deeper poverty and further away from sustainable employment.

The distress and anger of sick and disabled people can be seen and heard in communities across these islands, and those concerns are articulated clearly in the open letters published today. These people are citizens with rights, citizens with needs and people with a contribution to make. It is time that the Government started listening, and I urge them today to do the right thing.

2.59 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on calling this timely debate. The fact that he has such a degree of support from across the House cannot be overestimated. The speeches we have heard show the House at its absolute best. We are concerned about the plight facing so many of our constituents and the impact that this additional cut in support will have on them.

Although my party wants the ESA WRAG cuts to be scrapped completely, we will support this motion calling for a postponement until the Government have been able to analyse the consultation from their Green Paper. The same points have been made a number of times: I think that only one speaker generally supported what the Government are doing, while everyone else set out the reasons why their proposals should not go ahead. The key element is that we have only just had the closing date of the Green Paper consultation. I hope that the Minister accepts these points; she will have support from across the House if she does.

Let me re-emphasise some of the points that I made in yesterday’s debate. Half the 13 million people living in poverty are disabled or live with a disabled person. The number of disabled people now living in poverty is 5 million—one in three disabled people. The situation is getting worse after a decade when the problem was in decline. According to research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the figures that are officially published are an underestimate. Labour Members are concerned that the Government do not seem to recognise the link between disability and poverty. We know from extensive research that disabled people are twice as likely to live in poverty as non-disabled people. Eighty per cent. of that poverty results from the condition or disability that they experience. We have heard moving accounts from Members on both sides of the House, including the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who gave a very eloquent description.

This is happening in the context of what disabled people are already going through; it is not just about social security cuts. The Welfare Reform Act 2012 cut £28 billion from 3.7 million disabled people, and that does not even include the cuts in social care and other health-related public services, such as the number of specialist nurses who might be available for people with a learning disability. I will not say that it is the tip of the iceberg, but it is not the whole story. Yesterday I mentioned research showing that families with a disabled adult or child have been made five times worse off than non-disabled people.

Among a number of measures in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 that the Minister debated extensively with me last year, this is one of the worst. We have already heard about the cut of £1,500 a year affecting nearly half a million disabled people.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): This morning I received an email from a constituent who has lost his ESA and has been put on the assessment rate. He suffers from lymphedema, an extremely painful condition that makes him almost unable to walk. He asked what advice I could give him, because the rate that he is now on means that he has to choose on a weekly basis between turning on the heat and eating. What advice should I give him?

Debbie Abrahams: I have a constituent with exactly the same condition, and we are going through exactly the same process with the personal independence payment as well as ESA. It is important that my hon. Friend will be representing her constituent. Sixty per cent. of people are successful in the appeals process, which shows how flawed the system is, does it not?

These are people who have been found not fit for work. There is absolutely no evidence that the cut will incentivise people. In fact, the Government’s own research, which was published earlier this year, and the Low Pay report say that it is less likely to help disabled people back into work.

Macmillan Cancer Support has forwarded me details about a woman called Lynn, who said “When I was ill, I had to give up work for a year. I couldn’t work—the chemotherapy knocked me for six and I just wanted to sleep all day. It was horrendous. I couldn’t pay my mortgage, my council tax. I thought I was going to lose my house. Then I got Employment Support Allowance. If they cut the ESA that would just be absolutely horrendous. I would hate to have had that done to me. Without it, we would have been homeless.”

Members across the House will have similar examples. I again remind the Minister that the Government’s own data, which were published last year, show how vulnerable people in the group are. They are twice as likely to die as the population as a whole. That proves that incapacity benefit and ESA are good population
employment and support allowance

Debbie Abrahams

health indicators. We hear awful language about shirkers and scroungers, but these are sick people who deserve care and support, not humiliation.

I mentioned the work, health and disability Green Paper at the beginning of my contribution. It is out for consultation, and while it seems to include some good measures, I have a number of concerns about it. I am also concerned about the reduction in employment support from £700 million to £130 million. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) said, how on earth will we reduce the disability employment gap with such reductions? The Access to Work programme is inadequate: it serves only 35,000 of the 1.4 million disabled people who are fit and able to work. It is nonsense.

I know that we are pressed for time, but I want to touch on the limited capability to work component of universal credit. It has been suggested that it applies only to new claimants, but everybody will transfer to UC at some stage, so it will affect absolutely everyone.

I also want to reflect on growing evidence of the effects that the current round of cuts are already having on sick and disabled people. They include isolation, loss of independence, reliance on food banks, homelessness, exacerbation of existing conditions and a direct link to mental health issues. They have also been associated with the deaths of claimants. It is absolutely unacceptable for policies of the state to be doing such harm, so we support the motion and call for ESA cuts to be paused. There is a lot of support for that.

In conclusion, there is an evidence base of the effects that the cuts are having on sick and disabled people. Over the same period that the Government have cut support for them, they have given generous support to high earners and big business. Last year, the average worker’s pay of £27,645 increased by 2%, while pay for top executives on £5 million increased by 50%. The trend is getting worse and the inequalities are already being felt. We cannot underestimate the effect of those inequalities. They are not inevitable; this is about political choices. The cuts must not go ahead and we would welcome the Government moving on the issue.

3.9 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) and the Backbench Business Committee on securing this debate, and all Members on the tone in which it has been conducted. Even the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) has managed to restrain herself today, and we are grateful for that. On these important issues, the House is often at its best when it takes this tone, and on this issue, for all the reasons outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), it is important that we have done so.

Good policy cannot be created in a vacuum; we must think about how something will be delivered, how it will work in practice and how it will affect those concerned. As the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) said, the welfare state is a safety net, but if it works well, it should also be focused on helping someone’s future ambitions as well as their basic needs. Proof that we have listened and understood will be in our actions, and a person’s experience of the system and the support they receive is the only thing that will ensure confidence in that system. So we must deliver and we must deliver well.

We must understand the personal impact of a policy on a person, often someone in a complex situation, under considerable strain and challenge. I refer to the budgeting challenge for those who have suddenly had to stop work or who have lost employment because of their condition or ill health, or who are facing increased costs—or both; the challenge of preparing for employment, while focusing on recovery; the challenge as those new constraints restrict a person’s choices and flexibility just at a time when such flexibility becomes an imperative; the challenges faced by people who, as well as having their own issues to deal with, often have other responsibilities and priorities—carers, parents or people who are both. Even where recovery or the all-clear is achieved, these people will still have concerns about their illness reoccurring, their ongoing relationship with their employer and the possibility of having to go through it all again.

We must ensure a person’s liquidity is in place, so that they can afford the additional costs brought by looking for work, or by being poorly or disabled: higher energy bills; mobile and internet access costs; the cost of getting insurance; the cost of a special diet, in some cases; the extra travel costs that come with unpredictable itineraries; clothing and beddng costs; and the cost of specialised equipment—to name just some of those costs. Someone with a neurological condition will spend almost £200 a week on costs related to their disability. Someone with a physical impairment will spend nearly £300 a week.

When that security and liquidity goes, often so, too, does a person’s dignity and wellbeing. They may face the embarrassment of having to pay for a train fare with a pot of 2p coins because that is all the cash they have left; the stress of having no mobile phone credit; the strain of extra planning and budgeting; the knock-on effects of all that to an already stressful situation; and the pressure of not wanting their kids to be disadvantaged or to miss out on what others are doing or what they used to do—or of not wanting that for their grandkids, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North East mentioned.

Although I can answer the question from the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) about benefit levels having a significantly negative association in terms of employment by waving a report by Barr et al. at her, I will not be relying on those arguments in my speech. I say that because of the obvious point—it was made by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson)—that someone is more likely to get into work, make a success of it and recover from ill health if they are able to devote themselves to that. If a person has other worries or concerns, their energy and focus on those objectives will be diluted. Many who find themselves in receipt of universal credit or ESA will already have complex situations to deal with, and the delivery of our services should not add to that.

Yesterday, I outlined in detail how we will deal with those issues, but let me briefly recap. We will use funds to alleviate costs directly related to work, through the flexible support fund. May I just correct my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) as the figure is not £15 million—it is an extra £15 million that we have put in because of these changes, and this is currently standing at £83 million? In addition, we will
have national and local schemes, such as the Jobcentre Plus travelcard, but I am also negotiating deals with third parties to help with expenditure not directly related to employment: broadband costs, phone charges, energy costs and insurance.

We are extending our hardship fund, as per the announcement yesterday, to new groups. That will be new money from the Treasury over the next four years with immediate effect. For thoroughness, I will mention personal independence payments, which will help to cover costs for 53% of the people we are concerned about today.

**Stephen Timms**: Will the Minister give way?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I am going to make some progress. We offer personal budgeting support for those who are transferring to universal credit. That could include money advice, with a mix of online, telephone and face-to-face support. I am also looking at extending that service and considering what further support I could give.

For the sake of the record, I remind the House that the changes to WRAG due in April next year will not affect those who are already in receipt of ESA and universal credit or the equivalent. Further safeguards mean that they will not lose the extra payment even if they are reassessed after April and placed in the WRAG. I hope that that will reassure the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), whom I cannot see here, and the two constituents that he mentioned yesterday, Dean and Lauren.

**Kate Green**: Will the Minister give way?

**Penny Mordaunt**: Bear with me. In response to the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell), we aim to protect existing claimants who temporarily leave the benefit—for example, to try out work—and who then return. We will introduce draft regulations in due course to set out the detail. Nor will the change affect anyone whose ability to work is significantly limited by their health condition or disability. They will be in the support group or the universal credit equivalent.

On that point, let me recognise the concerns that have been expressed about the binary nature of the work capability assessment and how someone’s fitness to undertake a particular type of work is not an indication of how close to the labour market they might be. We need to take into account several other factors, including their skills, in making that assessment. That is why the Green Paper focuses on the work capability assessment and its reform. I hope that that will be welcomed by all Members, particularly the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who mentioned it.

We have sought to get people to fit the system rather than to be part of a system that recognises the importance of personalised support. Everyone’s circumstances will be different, as will their multiple challenges.

**Stephen Timms**: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way on that point on personalised support. We understand that on employment support, she proposes to provide up to £100 million a year. Will she clarify whether that is in addition to the funding currently being provided through the Work programme, or whether it is a replacement for that?

**Penny Mordaunt**: The amount of money and how we spend it will be directed by, and based on, the needs of people who currently need the support. The situation was very different a few years ago, and it will not be like that. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Labour’s success in this territory, but I gently point out to him that the disability employment gap closed under Labour because unemployment rose. I gently say to him that a consensus on tone has been set this afternoon, and that is important.

I am going to do something unusual and make some asks of this House, although it is usually the other way around. If the Green Paper is to deliver all that it must, we must all play our part, whatever our political hue and on whichever side of the House we sit. All the organisations and experts in our constituencies need to be involved, too, including the patient and peer support groups that we are not currently engaged with, and all the organisations that the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) alluded to in the case of his constituent Simon, who faced a domino effect. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) for alluding to the fact that we have a massive opportunity in the Green Paper, not only in terms of what we do for employers and healthcare, but for our own processes in the DWP.

We have designed the consultation process to facilitate discussion at a very local level, with facilitators’ packs and other support, and I ask all MPs to help to facilitate local meetings, bringing together organisations from across their constituencies. That way, we will get a good result from the Green Paper not just in the policies that will come out of it, but in starting local conversations about how it will work. On 5 December, we will hold an event in Parliament, where there will be a pack for every Member and every constituency to facilitate such dialogue.

**Mr Burrowes**: I am grateful to the Minister for her constructive response to the debate. All the people and organisations to which she has referred would no doubt want to hear whether the hardship fund, the flexible support fund and the third-party deals she has mentioned will fully compensate for the loss of the WRAG payments for new claimants? Will she give us such a reassurance?

**Penny Mordaunt**: Yes. Let me give my hon. Friend that reassurance. My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) not only thanked DWP staff again, but helpfully outlined the detail of the support mentioned in the Green Paper, which we will bring in before there are new claimants from April. I am grateful to him for going doing that. All that support will be in place before the new claims come in.

I have heard the word “pause” a lot this afternoon. I do not think we should pause that support. We need to progress it, and it will come on stream in April.

**Dr Mathias**: Will the Minister give way?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I am sorry, but I do not have any time left.
We must also progress the work of the Green Paper and pick up the pace, because we need to deliver on those issues. Having said that we do not wish to pause the support, I fully understand that we also need to ensure that the support for a person's costs and liquidity— their ability to meet their cost of living—is in place. That is not just the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do if we want those people to be able to concentrate on either getting well or preparing for employment. As well as meeting those needs, we must ensure at the same time that we are taking care of their needs for the future. I have no intention of pausing our proposed support, which will come into effect in April, and I assure the House that the work we are doing—we have made announcements, and we have reiterated them again today—will meet that need. I hope that every Member will help us not only to do both those things, but to deliver on our ambitions in the Green Paper. I hope to see everyone at the event in the House on 5 December.

Finally, if the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) has time after this debate, my officials are waiting to deal with her constituent's case.

3.23 pm

Neil Gray: I thank everyone who has taken part in this debate. There have been some wonderful speeches on both sides of the House calling on the Government to press pause on these cuts. The vast majority of the more than 20 Back-Bench speakers have supported the premise of the motion. I do not want to single out any Member, but all the contributions have come together to send a very clear message to the Government about what the House thinks on these matters.

I hope that the debate has given the Government cause to think again, including about how to pause the cuts at least until a new and appropriate form of disability employment support can be considered and put in place. The debate has been about building a constructive case for the Government to consider: it has been cross-party, well-tempered and, above all, an appeal. In that spirit, I wrote to the Chancellor last week offering to meet him ahead of the autumn statement to discuss how to stop the cuts happening before a replacement is considered. I reiterate that message and that offer, which is genuinely made, to Work and Pensions Ministers.

This issue is too important and the need for action too urgent for us to retreat into party trenches. The Government must work on the same basis as that on which this debate has been conducted to deliver for and meet the needs of people such as John Clarke.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 127, Noes 0.

Division No. 84] [3.25 pm

AYES

Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Buck, Ms Karen
Burrows, Mr David
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cherry, Joanna
Chwyd, rh Ann
Cooper, Rosie
Coyle, Neil
Creagh, Mary
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Debonoaire, Thangam
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Ferrier, Margaret
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gibson, Patricia
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Gwynne, Andrew
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hillier, Meg
Hollick, Kate
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Mr Kevan
Kerevan, George
Kinahan, Danny
Lavery, Ian

NOES

Brown, Alun
Brown, Lyn
Buck, Ms Karen
Burrows, Mr David
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cherry, Joanna
Chwyd, rh Ann
Cooper, Rosie
Coyle, Neil
Creagh, Mary
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Debonoaire, Thangam
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Ferrier, Margaret
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gibson, Patricia
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Gwynne, Andrew
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hillier, Meg
Hollick, Kate
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Mr Kevan
Kerevan, George
Kinahan, Danny
Lavery, Ian

LAW, Chris
Lefroy, Jeremy
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Maskell, Rachael
Mathias, Dr Tania
McCarthy, Kay
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McGarry, Natalie
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahon, Jim
Meale, Sir Alan
Means, Ian
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Morden, Jessica
Mullin, Roger
Newlands, Gavin
O'Hara, Brendan
Omm, Melanie
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Rayner, Angela
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rotheram, Steve
Salmond, rh Alex
Shannon, Jim
Sherriff, Paula
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Starmer, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Tami, Mark
Thewlis, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Timms, rh Stephen
Turley, Anna
Twigg, Stephen
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David

Tellers for the Ayes: Mike Weir and Neil Gray

Tellers for the Noes: Ian Blackford

Ms Margaret Ritchie and

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved. That this House notes the Government's plans to reduce the Employment and Support Allowance work-related activity component and the corresponding limited capability for work component in universal credit in April 2017; further notes that this measure will cut the weekly amount received by recipients with long-term
health conditions or disabilities by £30 and that these cuts are due to take place before the promised Work and Health programme Green Paper can be considered or implemented; and therefore calls on the Government to use the upcoming Autumn Statement to postpone the cuts to Employment and Support Allowance work-related activity component and the corresponding limited capability for work component in universal credit until appropriate alternative measures to progress the commitment to halve the disability employment gap have been considered, in order to secure support for current and future claimants so that sick and disabled people are supported adequately when they are unable to work.

3.37 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered International Men’s Day.

Before I start, may I thank the Backbench Business Committee for finding time for this debate, and particularly for finding a date as close as possible to International Men’s Day, which actually falls on Saturday? This was the closest sitting day on which the debate could have been held, so I am very grateful to the Committee.

A few people have said that they cannot be here today. In particular, I said I would pass on the apologies of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), the Chair of the Women and Equalities Select Committee, who wanted to be here, but could not be for reasons beyond her control. I also thank the House of Commons Library, which has put together a fantastic brief for this debate. I urge all right hon. and hon. Members to read it, as it is illuminating on the subject of men’s issues. I also want to plug Incommunities, the social housing provider in my constituency, which has been celebrating International Men’s Day and last week held a “dads and lads” day at its premises. It was very successful. Finally, I want to thank the many people who have been in touch with me to tell me their story or to put forward their perspective on their life and problems. I am grateful to them for taking the time to do so.

The aims of International Men’s Day are admirable. Its objectives are: to promote male role models; to celebrate the contribution that men make; to focus on men’s health and wellbeing; to highlight discrimination against men and the inequalities that men and boys face; to improve gender relations and promote gender equality; and to create a safer world for everyone.

The UK theme for the day is “making a difference for men and boys”. That covers issues such as the high male suicide rate; the challenges faced by boys and men at all stages of education, including attainment; men’s health, particularly shorter life expectancy and workplace deaths; the challenges faced by the most marginalised men and boys in society—homeless men, boys in care and the higher rate of male deaths in custody, for example; male victims of violence, including sexual violence; the challenges faced by men as parents, particularly new fathers and separated fathers; and male victims and survivors of sexual abuse, rape, sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, forced marriage, honour-based crime, stalking and slavery.

I want to put on record the support I received from the Prime Minister, who wrote to me last month to say:

“I recognise the important issues that this event seeks to highlight, including men’s health, male suicide rates and the underperformance of boys in school. These are serious matters that must be addressed in a considered way. As I said on the steps of Downing Street on my first day as Prime Minister, one of the challenges we must confront is that white working-class boys are less likely than anyone else in Britain to go to university. I know that you held a debate in Westminster Hall last year on international men’s day, and I note that you are hoping to hold a debate in the Commons Chamber this year. Of course, this is not a matter for me as Prime Minister to decide, but I will watch with interest to see if your request is granted.”

Let me provide a bit of background. As I said in last year’s Westminster Hall debate, I wanted the men’s day to be the start of us dealing with some of the forgotten men’s issues—and there are plenty of them, far too
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Friend on securing the debate, and on the powerful speech he is making. The House has been shocked by the figures that he has just revealed. Is he confident that the Department of Health realises that this is a serious public health issue, which urgently needs to be addressed by general practitioners and hospitals up and down the land? That must be one of the main reasons why men are losing their life: it must be one of the main causes of avoidable deaths in this country. That such a large number of people should lose their life in an avoidable way is tragic, regardless of whether they are men or women.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Debates such as this are important because they highlight the problems and urge that more be done, and I also commend the Select Committee for looking into this issue.

I appreciate that the Committee’s inquiry is ongoing, but I had a look at some of the evidence that it has received so far. I was struck by, for instance, evidence from the British Transport police relating to the suicides with which they deal. They dealt with 388 fatalities in, I believe, the last year, of which 305 were suspected suicides; 81% were men and 19% were women, but this is not just a gender issue. According to the evidence, 57% of those people had a known mental health history, 22% had been reported missing, 11% had previous convictions—one person had a “suicidal” marker on the police national computer—4% were current in-patients in mental health units, and 2% were absent without leave from mental health units. Wider issues therefore need to be considered, but they are all tragic cases. It is clear that many of the people concerned had a known mental health history, but it is also clear that many did not, and we must not forget those people.

I do not want to pre-empt the Select Committee’s inquiry, but one point made in CALM’s submission is very pertinent to the debate. It said:

“Despite the evidence that the risk of suicide is disproportionate to men as a whole when compared to women, research is often gender neutral or narrowed beyond gender (e.g. by sexual orientation or age). As a result, there is no specific research carried out on men and societal and environmental factors. Broader, gender specific research could reveal hidden causes of suicide that have not yet been explored. For instance, there could be great benefit in researching the impact of testosterone reducing drugs on the rates of suicide in men, however the current lens of research funding and its gender neutral approach does not provide a platform for such research.”

I hope that the Government will take that on board. A message should go out from the House today. If anyone is feeling suicidal, we should say, “Please speak to someone. Don’t suffer alone, as too many men often do.”

I want people to be in no doubt that there are male victims of domestic violence and abuse, despite what people may think and despite the stereotypes that surround the issue. The notion that in every case of domestic violence or abuse the perpetrator is a big burly wife-beater is just that: a notion. According to a report from the Office for National Statistics, “Focus on Violent Crime and Sexual Offences”, which relates to the year ending March 2015 and was released in February of this year, “The Crime Survey England and Wales estimates that 8.2% of women and 4.0% of men reported experiencing any type of domestic abuse in the last year (that is, partner/ ex-partner abuse...
(non-sexual), family abuse (non-sexual) and sexual assault or stalking carried out by a current or former partner or other family member). This is equivalent to an estimated 1.3 million female victims and 600,000 male victims."

It also confirmed that, specifically for partner abuse, 6.5% of women and 2.8% of men reported having experienced any type of partner abuse in the last year, equivalent to an estimated 1.1 million female victims and half a million male victims. The pattern is consistent at all levels of domestic violence. In other words, for every three victims of domestic abuse, two will be female and one will be male.

Stephen Pound: I did not want to interrupt the hon. Gentleman's flow because I appreciate that what he is saying is very important, but at the beginning of this section of his peroration he rightly said that any person, male or female, who may feel suicidal, lost or alone should seek help. The Samaritans are available every day of the week, 24 hours a day, and their phone number, 116 123, is one that we should all be familiar with. The Samaritans are there for people in precisely these circumstances, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for intruding on his flow.

Philip Davies: I do not need to forgive the hon. Gentleman; I welcome his intervention and am grateful for that public service announcement.

According to the ManKind Initiative, 20 organisations offer refuge or safe-house provision for male victims of domestic violence in the UK. There are a total of 82 spaces in the country, of which 24 are dedicated to male domestic violence victims only. For female victims, there are nearly 400 specialist domestic violence organisations providing refuge accommodation for women in the UK, with about 4,000 spaces for over 7,000 women, who suspect there are not sufficient spaces for female victims of domestic violence, but if there are 4,000 spaces for female victims of domestic violence, it follows that the 24 dedicated spaces for male victims of domestic violence clearly are not enough, when men make up a third of cases of people who suffer domestic violence.

What about the Government’s recent policy announcement to spend another £20 million on providing spaces, not for domestic violence victims generally, but specifically for female victims of domestic violence? The Government must not forget male victims of domestic violence either, and must provide suitable funding for them too, because they are getting forgotten about.

It is worth pointing out that according to the ManKind Initiative, male victims are over twice as likely as women—29% compared with 12% for women—not to tell anyone about the partner abuse they are suffering. Only 10% of male victims will tell the police compared with 26% of women, only 23% will tell a person in an official position compared with 43% of women, and only 11% will tell a health professional compared with 23% of women.

Mr Hollobone: My hon. Friend is making a very good point and I am sure the House will recognise that domestic violence against men is probably far more underreported than domestic violence against women, although of course all domestic violence is abhorrent. Another problem for men who have been abused is that all too often they are denied the right to see their children once the relationship breaks up, because the system is still biased—sometimes for understandable reasons, sometimes not—in favour of the woman, and this compounds the problem for vulnerable men who have been victims.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is right, and we must not forget fathers in the whole issue of bringing up children. As he says, in some cases it is perfectly right that the father, because of their behaviour, is denied access to the children, but in many cases it is not, and this is a massive problem for many people and is clearly one of the causes of the high suicide rate among men. It is not something that can be swept under the carpet. We must make sure that, where appropriate, fathers are given every assistance to have access to the children.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman will no doubt correct me if I am wrong, but I believe the criteria for deciding who has residence and contact in relation to children is the same in England as in Scotland, and it revolves around the best interests of the child, rather than the parents’ interests.

Philip Davies: I do not have time to have a philosophical debate—[Hon. Members: “It’s a legal debate.”] Well, it is a question of what is considered to be in the best interests of the child, and my point is that children having access to their fathers is in their best interests more often than the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) indicated that the courts sometimes think. Children want access to their fathers, and in many cases they need such access. The whole point of being in this place is that when we think the law is wrong, we can do something about it.

Joanna Cherry: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of any empirical research that shows that the legal system in Scotland or England is biased against fathers? I am not aware of any.

Philip Davies: The hon. and learned Lady is trying to pretend that there is not an issue. I urge her to read the Library briefing, which she clearly has not done. Perhaps she will do us the courtesy of reading it before she—

Joanna Cherry rose—

Philip Davies: I am not giving way to the hon. and learned Lady again. If she does not think that there is an issue—[Interruption.] Does the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) want to participate in the debate?

Joanna Cherry: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): This had better be a point of order.

Joanna Cherry: Is it in order for the hon. Gentleman to suggest that I have not read that briefing? When I asked him whether he was aware of any empirical research to back up an assertion he was making, he instead threw that back on to me and suggested that I had done something wrong. Is that in order?
Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, as the hon. and learned Lady knows. The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) has not allowed her to intervene, but she has successfully put her view on record none the less.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I did allow the hon. and learned Lady to intervene twice, but it was a shame that in both those interventions, she had nothing to say about looking after the interests of fathers or about the rights of men. Instead, she tried to make this into some kind of gender-bashing exercise, which did her no credit whatever. If she does not think that fathers have problems getting access to their children, sometimes unfairly, all I can suggest is that she gets out more—[Interruption.] Perhaps she might get out more in her own constituency.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I shall be keen to bring up some issues from my constituency precisely because I have met people at my surgery who find it easier to approach a female MP who will perhaps give them a more empathetic hearing, and who have not felt able to talk to anyone else about the access to their children that they feel is being denied to them.

Philip Davies rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I must point out to the hon. Gentleman that he has now been on his feet for 20 minutes, which is the amount of time allowed for opening speeches. I am going to have to put an informal time limit on Back-Bench speeches in order to get everyone in, so I should be grateful if he would come to the end of his remarks.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have been trying to take interventions, but I will obviously abide by your ruling. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) for her intervention.

I shall now canter through a few other issues that I said I would touch on and therefore must. On homelessness, according to St Mungo’s, 85% of rough sleepers are men. That is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed. With regard to injustice for fathers, Erin Pizzey, the founder of the first women’s refuge in the UK, has said:

“There are a lot of reasons why fathers are not with their children, not least that women won’t let them.”

When the Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Edward Timpson), was introducing legislation in 2014, he said—[Interruption.] The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West wanted some evidence, but she cannot even be bothered to listen to it now. The Minister said:

“We recognise that the court should already take account of the importance of a child’s relationship with both parents, but there is currently no legislative statement to that effect. We want to reinforce by way of statute the expectation that both parents should be involved in a child’s life, unless the child is at risk of harm or it is not in the child’s best interests.”—[Official Report, Children and Families Public Bill Committee, 14 March 2013, c. 289.]

The hon. and learned Lady wanted some evidence; there it is.

One of the aims of International Men’s Day is to improve gender relations, which I absolutely support. As I have said before, I want to be very clear that I do not believe there is an issue between men and women. I would actually rather we did not have to be here having this debate, and that we did not have separate international women’s and men’s days. The problem has been stirred up by politically correct people who want to make it a war on gender. In so many ways, considering men and women separately as though they lived in complete isolation is absolutely ridiculous. Neither group is isolated. Both sexes have mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, uncles and aunts, grandmothers and grandfathers, sons and daughters, husbands and wives, and boyfriends and girlfriends. Every woman has related male parties and therefore a vested interest in men’s issues. That is an unavoidable fact. Some issues affect men alone or more than women and vice versa, but both men and women have an interest in such issues and in working together without politically correct gender splits. If we were able to do that in this House, that would be much better.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I have just done a quick calculation and if everybody, including the Front-Bench speakers, takes about eight minutes, we will get everybody in. If anybody speaks for much longer than that, we will have to start cutting the limit, but if we stick to eight minutes, that should be fine.

4.1 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): I certainly will not take eight minutes, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on securing this debate on International Men’s Day. I recognise some of the important issues that the day seeks to highlight, particularly in relation to men’s mental health and wellbeing and tackling male suicide, which is the event’s chosen theme for 2016.

In truth, there is scarcely a more pertinent theme than “Stop Male Suicide”. The stark statistics highlight worrying trends and a growing crisis. It is worth taking a few moments to examine the shocking nature of just two of the headline statistics: suicide is the largest cause of death of men under 45; and the suicide rate for men is three times higher than that for women. Why is suicide becoming a highly gendered occurrence? The answer, in part, relates to how men are brought up to act and the roles, traits and behaviours that society expects them to and then enforces. In times of difficulty or crisis, they should “man up”. They are told, “Boys don’t cry, do they?”

By adulthood those underlying societal expectations are so ingrained that for a man to show any sign of perceived weakness is viewed as a social taboo. Men’s reluctance to seek help and support when distressed adds to their vulnerability, with many instead preferring simply to bury their head in the sand or turn to drink or drugs despite the damaging effects on employment, personal finances, and relationships, and the social isolation, low self-esteem and homelessness, all of which are known to be common triggers associated with suicide. The inescapable truth is that if we are ever to tackle the high male suicide rate, we need to encourage men to start to talk about how they feel.
In Coventry, that encouragement and those conversations are being initiated by a new mental health awareness and suicide prevention campaign called “It Takes Balls to Talk”. The campaign is the brainchild of Alex Cotton, a mental health nurse and one of my constituents, and was launched last month. It is a public information programme targeted at male-dominated sporting venues across Coventry and Warwickshire and uses sporting themes to raise awareness of mental health support services. It seeks to reduce male suicide by encouraging men to talk about their feelings, and it aims to help men to understand that it is important not to keep their feelings to themselves, and to direct them to help and support, when they need it, in order to promote positive mental health.

“It Takes Balls to Talk” recognises how societal expectations have shaped men’s behaviour in how they deal with or, more accurately, fail to deal with their emotions, feelings and wellbeing. It plays a vital role in breaking down the barriers that prevent men from positively engaging with mental health services in the local area. This is of paramount importance as research shows that up to 85% of men who take their own life have not been reached by current public health messages and have never been known to mental health services. That statistic alone shows the importance that targeted initiatives such as “It Takes Balls to Talk” could make in changing the country’s appallingly high male suicide rates. After all, is that not what we are all striving for? We all want to see an end to a national tragedy that can be counted in the thousands of lives that are lost each year through suicide. We all have a shared responsibility to act, tackle this issue head on and ensure that no more fathers, sons, brothers or friends are stolen from us needlessly.

Then we have the little issue of the human papilloma virus. Girls are vaccinated against it—this is to stop cervical cancer. It is unlikely that men will get cervical cancer, but they do get penile cancer. From my point of view as a dentist, roughly 40% of head and neck cancers are caused by the virus. More men get head and neck cancer than women, so why are we not vaccinating boys as well as girls? It is long overdue. The Australians do it; and if the Australians are doing it, we have just got to do it. These trends are particularly apparent in working-class men living in developed countries who have struggled to adapt to a hugely changed world and to the increasing changes to the job market in the past 50 years. The ever increasing power of technology and the ability to import more from abroad has seen a steep decline in the need for traditional muscle-based work in the United Kingdom.

By sharp contrast, women are becoming a majority in key areas such as healthcare and education. They are helped by their superior skills, which they gain because they respond better to education. As education has become more important, boys have fallen behind girls in school. The latest shock is in the theatre. The role of King Lear has been played by many male greats such as John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier and Donald Sinden, whom I knew so well, and many other superior male actors. Now that male role has been taken by our former colleague, or comrade, Glenda Jackson. Christopher Biggins’ Widow Twankey does not quite match that!

The way that males are becoming the weaker sex is seriously worrying. It is even happening in the Antipodes. In 25 years’ time, there is a possibility that the New Zealand women’s rugby team will beat the All Blacks—actually, realistically, that is probably a haka too far.

The article in The Economist that I mentioned says:

“Men who lose jobs in manufacturing often never work again. And men without work find it hard to attract a permanent mate. The result, for low-skilled men, is a poisonous combination of no job, no family and no prospects.”

The political consensus has been that economics is to blame for this situation. The argument goes that shrinking job opportunities for men are entrenching poverty and destroying families. In America, pay for men with only a high school certificate fell by 21% in real terms between 1979 and 2013; for women with similar qualifications, it rose—only by 3%, but it rose. Around a fifth of working-age American men with only a high school diploma have no job.

Part of the solution lies in a change in cultural attitudes, as the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) mentioned. Over the past generation, middle-class men have learned that they need to help with childcare, and they have changed their behaviour, but, sadly, it appears from the Economist article and others that working-class men need to catch up. Women have learned that they can be doctors, dentists, surgeons, opticians, engineers and physicists without losing their femininity. Men need to understand that traditional manual jobs are not coming back, but that they can be nurses, hairdressers, waiters or—this is vital—primary school teachers. I visited a primary school today which has a totally female staff except for one male teacher. The headmistress spoke about the vital importance of a male role model in the school, which is missing from many other schools.
The most important focus must be reform of the education system, which is essentially still based in a pre-digital era where most male jobs were, as I said, muscle-based. We as politicians need to recognise that boys’ underachievement is a serious problem, and we need to sort it out now. Some sensible policies that are good for everybody are particularly good for boys. Early childhood education provides boys with more structure and a better chance of developing verbal and social skills. Countries with successful vocational systems, such as Germany, have done a better job than we have here in the UK. We need to reinvent vocational education for an age when trainees are more likely to get jobs in hospitals, IT or teaching than in factories.

The growing equality of the sexes is one of the biggest achievements of the post-war era: people have greater opportunities than ever before to achieve their ambitions, regardless of their gender. We have to accept that many men fail to cope in this world. When it comes to health, men really are the weaker sex. They are more likely to get cancer than women and are also more likely to die from it. They are more likely to suffer from heart disease, stroke and obesity. When it comes to happiness, women again appear to have the upper hand, to judge from the suicide rates. Experts know that men are particularly bad at seeking medical help, even when they need it. Men are still dying younger. In England and Wales, 42% of men die before their 75th birthday. The corresponding figure is 26% for women. I think about this every time I struggle to open a door for a lady.

It is very easy and tempting to blame men for the current position and to be fatalistic about it, but that is not the way forward. To put an absolute number on it, almost 100,000 men—enough to fill all the British Army’s full-time posts—are dying prematurely each year, compared with 66,000 women. Much of this is self-inflicted. As a group, men out-drink and out-smoke women. Men are also more likely to end their life by suicide. Interestingly, the rates of suicide attempts do not differ between men and women; men are just better at it.

It is generally accepted that men are very bad at seeking help. Men visit the GP less because the health system is not working for them. It is not male-friendly. Could it be that aspects of our society have turned so far towards women that they are now against men?

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Despite the obvious sense of many of the contributions, I feel slightly uncomfortable with the subject of this debate. Although I recognise differentials in terms of suicide, the number of primary school teachers and perhaps even fathers’ residence rights, it is not women who caused misogyny, it is not women who caused the pay gap, and it is certainly not women who deprived women of the vote. Should we not be working towards equality, or am I just a man who cannot cry, or a feminist? I am not quite sure.

Sir Paul Beresford: I think I will probably be one of the last men—certainly in my area and my family—to be called a misogynist. We are failing men; that is the point.

We have the Women and Equalities Committee, and I am sorry the Chairwoman is not here, but perhaps, under the equalities section of its remit, it could look into the issue of where we are failing men.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I extend my appreciation to the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) and others for securing this Backbench Business debate.

Quite often when we discuss gender issues, the focus seems to be on women. While that might be for good reason, it is vital that gender-based issues affecting men, or matters that may be more prevalent among men, are not overlooked. Today’s debate is important as it sends a strong signal to men everywhere that those issues are taken seriously in this place.

Though society has made great steps forward to break down deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes, we still have far to go. Sadly, it is still considered a societal norm to tell someone to “man up” if they are perceived as showing any weakness. Idiomatic terms such as that, or telling someone to “be a man about it” are a reflection of the roles many people—whether consciously or subconsciously—expect men to play.

In much the same way that misogynist values are challenged, perhaps we need to be a little more open-minded about what we view as misandrist. It is no wonder that we see negative consequences such as mental health problems and a high male suicide rate, which stem heavily from such gender-based attitudes.

Men’s health is worse than women’s everywhere in the world. Men have a higher incidence of heart disease, stroke, diabetes and obesity. In every country in the world, except China, where it is equal, the male suicide rate is much higher than the female rate. On average, male suicides outstrip female ones by a shocking ratio of three to one. In some countries, the ratio is even higher. In Russia, for instance, where constructs of masculinity are perhaps more akin to those in the UK several decades ago, male suicides outweigh women’s by six to one.

In the UK, suicide also disproportionately affects men. Some 76% of suicides are men, and suicide is the biggest killer of men under 45. It really is something we ought to discuss with greater frequency. It is not acceptable that, on average, 12 men kill themselves in the UK each day. Much more needs to be done in all corners of the UK.

In Scotland, the male-to-female suicide ratio is the lowest in the UK, yet that is nothing to celebrate, as it is still alarmingly high. Men in Scotland are roughly three times more likely to kill themselves than women. There is no simple fix for this problem; it is multifaceted, with many influencing factors.

This high suicide rate is more than a symptom; it should be an alarm bell warning us of what is truly an epidemic, and we really need to get a handle on the
other issues that drive the ratio up. The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) mentioned the services of the Samaritans, and the hon. Member for Shipley welcomed his intervention as a public service announcement. There is also an organisation called Breathing Space, which can be contacted in Scotland on 0800 83 85 87.

We know that boys and men also face significant challenges at all stages of education, including in terms of attainment. Further to the health challenges I have mentioned, men also have a significantly shorter life expectancy.

There is still a stigma attached to male victims of violence, particularly domestic and sexual violence. Forced or arranged marriages—this is sometimes seen as a women’s issue—also impact on the men. Fathers who have separated from partners sometimes face significant parental issues, and certainly do not always have it easy. There is also a general, negative portrayal of men and boys.

While women have seemingly borne the brunt of our traditionally male-dominated society, it is important to recognise the ways in which this has hurt men too. Striving towards proper gender equality is not a case of taking power away from men and giving it to women, but rather addressing an imbalance and enhancing the roles that those of all genders and none have in society. This is not just academic; societies that are more equal tend to be happier and healthier. Gender equality is just one piece of the puzzle that needs to be tackled, along with, for example, other prejudice-based inequalities and income inequality. The road to equality takes many steps.

In 2014, the Scottish Government found that 81% of rough sleepers were men. Clearly, this is one issue that should be, and in Scotland has been, acknowledged. In 2012, the Scottish Government passed groundbreaking legislation that requires local authorities to provide every unintentionally homeless person with somewhere to live. The success of this legislation has gone some way towards addressing a major problem that disproportionally affects men. There remains much more to do, however. Each measure undertaken forms part of a wider picture and goes towards helping to address men’s issues.

I do not profess to have all the answers to this very complicated issue, but I do know that we need to work to acknowledge the issues affecting men and redouble our efforts to eliminate the stigma surrounding them. That is the starting point. For real and meaningful equality to be achieved, we must all be involved in this process of change.

4.21 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on securing the debate, which has highlighted some of the important issues that men face. I believe in equality. I spoke in the International Women’s Day debate—in fact, I had the pleasure of leading it—so I am being completely equal by turning up for this one today.

It is currently Movember, when brave men are selflessly growing their moustaches to raise awareness of men’s issues. I absolutely salute those people. I have noticed a limited number of those moustaches in the Chamber this year. I hope that this Saturday will make a real difference in raising issues that affect our men, such as male suicide, homelessness and health problems. I am in the Chamber because I was mentored and supported by a man into this role and this job. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), mentors are absolutely vital, particularly in primary school.

I am the chair of the all-party women in Parliament group. Last year, over 70 young women from across the country came to take part in a series of events to look at the opportunities for women in having a voice in this place and how that can make a difference. I absolutely believe that we can do the same thing in this debate today. I am glad to have heard all the contributions from Members on both sides of the Chamber.

Why do we need this debate? I am sure that when we came into work this morning we all saw homeless young men on the streets. If they were young women, perhaps with young children, would they go quite so unnoticed? We are all surrounded by men as fathers, grandfathers, brothers, husbands and dads, and we should be concerned about men’s health issues. As we have heard, the suicide rate of men in this country is three times higher than that of women. Sadly, I think we will all know a family friend or a member of our friendship group who has been affected by male suicide. I know one family, in particular, who have lost a son and a husband. That cannot be ignored. Life expectancy for men is too low at 79.

Sadly, obesity and other health-related issues among men are being ignored. One way of dealing with that is by raising such issues in the workplace. Are we offering people a chance to discuss at work issues that they may find more difficult to raise at home? How can we best support men and get them to talk more effectively? Perhaps the workplace is somewhere they feel unsafe, and they do not want to make a fuss or be seen as unmanly. Perhaps they do not want to speak about their feelings about things that are worrying them at home or, indeed, at work.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I think that the armed forces are slightly ahead of society, because everyone who comes back from operational tours is debriefed, and checked for post-traumatic stress disorder and other worrying signs. That is great and we ought to extend that model to people who are at risk in society in general.

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning that. He is absolutely right. Work can have a huge bearing on family life. Stress from work comes home and some people have no outlet to deal with it. We are not supporting families and society as a whole.

The Samaritans hotline, which has been mentioned, is 116 123, and it provides an invaluable service 24 hours a day. The number now appears on train tickets. We have all had journeys home delayed because someone has been involved in a serious incident and has not made it home to their family that evening. Suicide is the biggest cause of death in men under the age of 50, so I am pleased that the Government have invested £1.5 million in supporting men and women who are at risk of suicide and self-harm.

However, as we have heard, we can do more, including by making the workplace safer. I recently visited a construction site in my constituency and saw posters about keeping sites safe and making sure that people
feel safe when they go to work. If someone does not feel safe in the setting that they go to every day, and they feel under pressure because they have to support their family, they can end up in a very difficult and lonely place.

Margaret Ferrier: In my past life, I worked for a construction company. On health and safety, we always asked, “Would you like to be the person who phones somebody’s wife or husband to tell them that something has happened at work and they’re not going to return home?” Does the hon. Lady agree that it is important that we look at that area?

Mims Davies: Absolutely. Unsafe practices are a burden, particularly if there is no outlet to address them. The issue of health and safety at work can put pressure on men.

On loneliness, men and women, including the elderly, can feel a sense of isolation. I recently visited the Eastleigh Men’s Shed, a project set up in 2014 to bring men together to chat and engage in activities such as carpentry and bike repairing. The projects are brilliant. They make miniature Big Ben clocks, so Members can order some. They are available across Eastleigh, but there are also outlets in Andover, Romsey, Portsmouth, Havant and Bognor Regis. I thank Andi and the team for bringing together men who are perhaps lonely, or have caring responsibilities for loved ones and need support. There are some excellent organisations that help people to feel less isolated.

From our case work, we MPs get to highlight those issues that have been raised with us by men and women. We need a culture shift so that people feel that they can come and talk. Men need to be able to feel comfortable on the school run and at sports days and parents evenings. We must also salute men who are carers. I am often visited at my surgery by people who are worried about their wives or their disabled or autistic children, or those who are struggling to manage with a partner who has dementia or a long-term and chronic illness.

Where appropriate, we need to support our men, including by keeping families and children connected after marital or relationship breakdown. This is a watershed moment. I welcome the debate and the fact that such important issues have been raised in the Chamber. I vow, as a woman, to voice my support in this place regarding issues that affect both genders and all our communities.

4.28 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Equality, of course, benefits everyone, so I welcome today’s debate and congratulate the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on bringing it to the House. I am grateful for the work carried out by many people in my constituency and across the country to address the serious issues of inequality faced by men in many areas of their lives.

Men, of course, are a minority of our population. They live shorter lives, experience high levels of homelessness and suicide, and are less likely to seek help for issues relating to mental health and substance abuse. It is important that we seriously address those issues. For example, it is important to recognise the ways in which patriarchy hurts men. Toxic masculinity hurts men as well as women.

I am grateful for the work carried out by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who is in his place and who spoke to The Huffington Post earlier this month for its #BoysDoCry campaign, examining the way many men find it hard even to talk about crying and the pressures on men not to seem vulnerable.

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. Will she also join me in welcoming the fact that it recognises that body image anxiety is an issue not just for women but for men?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his timely intervention, especially given today’s release of information about that issue. I support that campaign wholeheartedly. Like the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), I was in the Chamber for International Women’s Day, just as I am for International Men’s Day today—although arguably 365 days of the year are international men’s days.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) touched in great detail and with much effect on the issues of suicide, educational attainment and homelessness, as have many other Members from across the Chamber. I seek simply to support all that has been said about that.

In every community in the country, volunteers and organisations are doing a fantastic and valuable job in addressing the issues that affect men. I am talking about organisations such as the Wee County Men’s Shed in my constituency. Men’s sheds have already been mentioned this afternoon. I know that there are plans to establish a similar group in Kinross. I have also had the pleasure of supporting the Man Up group in Hawkhill in Alloa, which is made up of local men who meet in a supportive, welcoming and encouraging environment to discuss issues that are important to them.

For equality to be achieved, we all have to be involved in the process of change—women and men alike. Although it is important to address the problems that men face, we must not attack work done to address institutional bias against women. We are in a situation where society has left us with institutional sexism—it is a matter of fact. There are more male Members of this House right now than there have ever been women Members. We cannot make a better, more equal world by saying that there are no ways in which our institutions hurt men, as that of course is not true, but what hurts men and women alike more than all the issues International Men’s Day exists to fight is the insistence that there is no sexism in society and that work to promote equality is an attack by one gender on another. That is why we need to look at the findings of the Good Parliament report, which addresses the ways that this House can become more inclusive for all.
The Scottish National party Government in Scotland have, since 2014, had a gender-balanced Cabinet and we have taken steps to increase representation, but this is not sexism; this is working on balance, because women face glass ceilings every day of their lives. Let us just say it how it is: there are some things we face equally as men and women in society, but so often women face additional challenges—misogyny, sexism and threats of sexual violence—and there is no level playing field. Men are very well represented in this Chamber, and I am very proud of the SNP’s women’s representation, which increased from one to 20 in last year’s elections; we are 36% women but 100% feminists on these Benches.

As women parliamentarians, we often face “mansplaining”—a term I have spoken of before. It was in evidence again in the exchange between the hon. Member for Shipley and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) when it was suggested that she had not read her brief. Any hon. Member will know that my hon. and learned Friend is perhaps the most briefed person who sits in this Chamber and she should be respected for being so. The volume and variety of farmyard-type noises tends to increase when women are on their feet in this Chamber, as do references to appearances and whether or not we have borne children—these things appear so often in the media.

I welcome the debate today and the thoughtful contributions that have been made so far. Addressing inequality wherever it lies, benefits us all, and we must not be hypocritical in that regard. If we believe in equality, it must be equality for everybody. So I do take issue with the hon. Member for Shipley, who voted consistently against equal gay rights and against laws to promote equality and human rights. I note that today he has watered down his comments from last year somewhat. He said today, “I want to be very clear that I do not believe there is actually an issue between men and women and that people try to be politically correct.” Last year, he said:

“I do not believe there is actually an issue between men and women. Often, problems are stirred up by those who might be described as militant feminists and the politically correct males who sometimes pander to them.”

He added:

“One of the most depressing things to happen recently was the introduction of the Select Committee on Women and Equalities.”—[Official Report, 19 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 242WH.]

What a disservice to this Parliament. As if that was not enough, on Second Reading of the Equality and Diversity (Reform) Bill in 2011, he said:

“It is a massive step towards inequality for men, and the poor souls just let the women walk all over them. They do not appear to care what will happen to them.”—[Official Report, 21 October 2011; Vol. 533, c. 1195.]

At the international conference on men’s issues in 2016, he talked about “equality but only when it suits”. In that respect, I say to him, “Right back at you.”

This is an important debate. Respecting rights and equality for all has to be at the top of all that we do in this Chamber. [Interruption.] I am happy to take an intervention, because people are muttering from a sedentary position.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): The hon. Lady has stood up and made some interesting points. Does she not accept that every time there is some positive discrimination in favour of a woman, by implication a man is being discriminated against, and it may well be a working-class boy or someone from a working-class background who suffers as a result of positive discrimination in favour of women?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Although I accept some of the points about discrimination against working-class men, I have to say that coming from those on the Tory Benches, the comment absolutely beggars belief. Those of us who actually believe in equality prefer to use the term “positive action”. The reason why we need positive action is that there is not equality in our society. We are 52% women, but we cannot even be properly represented in this Chamber. I would welcome any efforts that he might wish to make, working with me and with others from the Conservative party and across the Chamber, to achieve gender equality, because gender equality will mean a better society for all.

Stuart Blair Donaldson: My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. Does she agree with me—I say this as the youngest male in this place—that men of quality do not fear equality for others?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I welcome another excellent intervention from the youngest male Member of Parliament. Let the youngest male Member of Parliament be an example to us all, to show us that we can indeed fill these Benches with men like my hon. Friend who believe in equality and accept the fact that we do not have a level playing field.

I welcome the fact that many important issues have been discussed in today’s debate, but let us not allow that to overshadow or overtake the very real and accepted work that has to be done in this Chamber and across society to achieve equality for all—equality without hypocrisy—because equality is better for society and for everybody.

4.38 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the SNP spokeswoman in this important debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), a fellow Yorkshire MP, on securing this debate in the main Chamber this year. As we have heard, International Men’s Day falls on 19 November, which is Saturday, and one of the themes this year is the high suicide rate among men. The Opposition welcome the opportunity to discuss seriously that issue and all other matters relating to the health and wellbeing of men and boys. We also recognise the opportunity that International Men’s Day presents to examine the societal pressures facing young men, particularly around body image and traditional ideas about masculinity, which can add a burden of expectation to young men and limit the psychological and physical horizons of both men and women.

I will first address the theme of International Men’s Day this year—namely, the high suicide rate among men—and then I will move on to address International Men’s Day in general. Simply put, the rate of suicide among men in this country is far too high. The rate of
male suicide is more than three times the rate of female suicide. There are 16.8 male deaths per 100,000, compared with 5.2 female deaths per 100,000. Although it is true that suicide is the most common cause of death in men under the age of 45, the Office for National Statistics found that the highest rate of suicide actually occurs in men between the ages of 45 and 59, at 23.9 deaths per 100,000 according to 2014 figures. This is clearly a complex issue that can affect men of any age.

I am conscious that I may cover similar ground to last year’s debate in Westminster Hall, when male suicide was specified in the motion. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) for her words as the then shadow Minister for mental health. In particular, she emphasised that “suicide is not inevitable.” By paying due attention to the societal and medical factors that can contribute to the increased risk of suicide and by ensuring that proper care is available when such factors arise, we can do much better. Unfortunately, we often fall short. Although we have made great inroads into understanding the various facets of the wider problem—the difficulties young men face with body image, the negative effects of unemployment on mental health, the greater propensity of men to abuse alcohol and drugs and the scale of the suicide epidemic in our prisons—we all too often fail to respond to such situations adequately in the areas of education, work and criminal justice.

Additionally, as my hon. Friend also mentioned in last year’s debate, we now understand that men tend to use more lethal methods in attempting suicide, so early and effective intervention in mental health is crucial. Sadly, the help that people need is often simply not there at the time they need it. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) recently spoke very movingly in the House about the tragedy of losing his nephew to suicide after being told that he would have to wait for up to six months to access a talking therapy. It is a pain recognised by all too many families across this country.

We have found that accident and emergency departments continue to face unprecedented pressures, and we hear that many are now also facing closure. That is felt very acutely in my constituency. A&E is often the place where people find themselves when seeking treatment for a mental health crisis. Waiting times in excess of four hours, longer journeys to the nearest A&E department and a reported lack of mental health nurses all serve to present further barriers to people finding the help they need during a mental health crisis, with sadly predictable consequences.

I welcome the excellent speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher), who referred to the “It Takes Balls to Talk” initiative in Coventry. I was fortunate to visit it recently with the Health Committee to hear about some of the fantastic work it is doing. It is true that such factors affect anybody suffering from difficulties with mental health, but the fact that the suicide rate is so much higher among men makes it all the more pressing for men’s health that these issues are tackled—and tackled soon.

I now turn to the issue of International Men’s Day in general. Labour Members welcome the day as an opportunity to highlight and have a serious discussion about the issues facing the wellbeing of men and boys. There are many challenges, such as the continuing battle against health conditions, such as testicular and prostate cancer, where it is recognised that there remains a reticence among some men about visiting a doctor to catch problems early. It is very timely that we should hold this debate in November—or Movember. There are also challenges about the educational attainment of boys in schools and the lack of men teaching, particularly in primary schools, as well as about the recognition of domestic violence towards men, as several hon. Members have said.

We also want to highlight the societal pressures involving body image, gender roles, and sex and relationships. Labour is committed to compulsory, age-appropriate sex and relationships education to promote gender equality, mutual respect and healthy relationships from an early age. This is also about ensuring that young men and women are educated in an atmosphere of mutual respect that broadens their horizons and does not pigeonhole them from the start of life. Although this would be of benefit to both young men and women, it should be noted that such pigeonholing is one of the many gender disparities that still predominantly affect women.

The fact that there are currently more male MPs in the House in this Parliament than the number of female MPs who have ever been elected illustrates that there is still such a long way to go. With regard to respect and healthy relationships, the fact that an average of two women in this country are killed each week by a violent partner or former partner illustrates once again that there is still much further to go.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady agree that we are doing men a disservice if we do not address our shortcomings during this debate, given that men still perpetrate about 80% of all domestic violence cases? As we approach the international day for the elimination of violence against women, will she join me in calling on all male MPs to take the White Ribbon pledge

“never to commit, condone, or remain silent about men’s violence against women in all its forms?”

**Paula Sherriff:** I am happy to join the hon. Gentleman in that pledge. The White Ribbon campaign does some absolutely wonderful work, including in many schools. I am proud to support that initiative.

The continued existence of the gender pay gap, which we recognised in this place only last week, stands as a shameful testament to the inequalities still faced by women, as does the horrendous abuse I received on Twitter and by email for even daring to mention it. The Library tells us that a gender pay gap exists across all sectors of full-time work, some 46 years after the Equal Pay Act 1970.

These are not just issues for women. Organisations such as the White Ribbon campaign and the United Nations HeForShe campaign have capably demonstrated how men not only can but often actively want to play their part in fighting for the safety and equality of women. Indeed, the founder of the latter, Elizabeth Nyamayaro, has said that the campaign started from the mistaken premise that men might not be interested in gender equality, only to later find that the question was merely
one of extent. Those positive programmes demonstrate that feminism and equality are not matters of interest to women only.

Although I have congratulated the hon. Member for Shipley on securing the debate, I do not think it would be unreasonable to suggest that he has made something of a career for himself in vociferously standing against feminism. He has gained notoriety in that regard, including by speaking this summer at an event organised by the Justice for Men and Boys party, which garnered media attention. I find that regrettable, as that organisation is sadly—I shall put this charitably—on the less constructive side of the argument.

The most cursory look at that organisation’s website brings a whole new meaning to the word “patronising”. It celebrates articles such as “13 reasons women lie about being raped”, and currently harbours awards including “Lying Feminist of the Month”, “Whiny Feminist of the Month”, “Gormless Feminist of the Month” and “Toxic Feminist of the Month”. As several of my hon. Friends appear to have been added to those lists for simply standing at this Dispatch Box doing what I am doing today, I dare say that I may well be at risk of ending up on one of them myself. Suffice it to say that I am not afraid. The nature of the organisation’s discourse is little better than that of the Twitter trolls who constantly confront female Members just for daring to speak up. I find the hon. Gentleman’s association with that organisation most regrettable.

I mention that not to detract from the issues raised today, but to highlight the fact that this event does not exist in a vacuum. Thanks to such rhetoric, there is a charged and poisonous atmosphere surrounding these issues, and I fear that many people will see International Men’s Day not as standing alongside International Women’s Day but as standing in opposition to it. We must send a message from this House that that is a false dichotomy.

Many hon. Members have said this before me, but it is important to emphasise that equality is not a zero-sum game. The rise of feminism does not mean that men have been in some way denigrated or disenchanted. I hope that we all recognise that work remains to be done for both men and women, but that an improvement in the lot of one does not inherently detract from the rights of the other. In short, we should have no truck with those who would use this event to further divide us. I cannot say it better than the International Men’s Day website itself, which lists as two of its objectives: “To improve gender relations and promote gender equality... To create a safer, better world; where people can be safe and grow to reach their full potential.”

In those objectives, it has our full support.

4.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on securing this crucial and important debate. I know that he, and all the other Members who have taken part and spoken so excellently share the same conviction: that no one, whether male or female, should suffer unfair or unequal treatment because of their gender.

Such treatment can have devastating consequences for the lives of both men and women. Like other parents of sons up and down the country, I am aware of the challenges that boys face as they negotiate the road to manhood. We are at a moment in time when increasing numbers of people—men and women—are questioning a system of laws, norms and beliefs that have systematically disadvantaged women over centuries. We but sometimes forget that confining women within social norms also acts to confine men. Every restriction placed on the lives of women has had a consequence for the lives of men. Where women are told they are weak, men are told that they have to be strong and that there is something very wrong with them if they experience fear, vulnerability or emotion. Where men are told that they are naturally suited to childcare, then men are implicitly told that they are not. Where women are encouraged to be the homemakers, then the pressure falls on men to be the breadwinners.

The fact that men suffer from sexism is not a sign that the fight for equality has gone too far, but that it has not gone far enough. Gender equality is not, as the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) said, a zero-sum game where the gains of one sex can only be achieved at the expense of the other. Equality is good for all and for society as a whole. That does mean that people do sometimes have to give up privileges that have not been earned, but they have much, much more to gain from the creation of a fairer society for all.

I am not Minister for Women and Equalities because I am partisan to women, but because the key task in achieving gender equality is to establish a level playing field for women. That does not mean that we neglect the interests of men. I hope all here will agree that the introduction of shared parental leave was a huge step forward in supporting men to become more involved and fulfilled fathers. Our pioneering programme on homophobic bullying in schools benefits not just children who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, but all boys who have been insulted or assaulted because they were considered not sporty or manly enough.

Our innovative work programme on body image recognises that boys too can feel overwhelmed by cultural messages about how they are supposed to look and behave. I am as concerned as anyone when men’s eating disorders are referred to as “manorexia”, as that does not describe the severity and seriousness of the issue. Our new teen relationship abuse campaign, Disrespect NoBody, reaches out to all young people, deliberately moving away from images and text that imply that men are always the perpetrators of relationship abuse and women always the victims. We know that that simply is not the case.

I want to say a bit more about violence. I am hugely proud of the Government’s national strategy on violence against women and girls. We have made great strides, but there is a long way to go, particularly in tackling sexual harassment in public spaces and online misogyny. As my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley rightly pointed out, violence features in boys’ lives, too. As my son moves through his teenage years, I am acutely aware of how vulnerable young men are to assault on the streets and in pubs and clubs. I can only guess at how much fear and anxiety this causes boys and men. I say “guess”, because we very rarely hear men talking about those feelings. Why? Because of social norms that suggest that men should be powerful and invulnerable.
There is the expectation that men should not show how much violence hurts or scares them. They keep it bottled up. Even worse, they express it through depression, drinking or aggression. Maybe it makes it harder for them to stand up to other men who may be harassing women or belittling other men, and say, “This is not okay.” As my hon. Friend pointed out, many of the dreadful things that are happening to women are happening to men, too. Just because statistically there are much lower numbers does not mean they are any less important or should not be talked about. It does not mean that victims’ lives are any less valued.

**Bob Stewart:** I have sat here for most of the debate—I missed just the first two minutes—but I have not heard anyone talk about the strength that men and women get from being in a family, whether unmarried or married. Living with other people is a huge benefit. I just wanted to put it on record that family matters.

**Caroline Dinenage:** Of course, family does matter. What also matters is that victims can be male or female. In some instances, men are the hidden victims. Earlier this year, during International Women’s Day, the whole House listened in stunned and horrified silence as one of the hon. Members listed the names of every single woman who had been killed at the hands of a violent partner or ex-partner. There were 81 of them—every single life lost an absolute tragedy. In the same year, 19 men suffered that same fate. No one read their names out. That is not okay.

The UK has made a £36 million commitment towards efforts to end child marriage, early marriage and forced marriage overseas. As the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) pointed out, while the majority of those affected by child marriage are girls, UNICEF estimates that 18% of those married under the age of 18 are boys. That is not okay.

Crime surveys for England and Wales estimate that there were 610,000 male victims of domestic violence last year. I say “estimate” because, like many women, men are often reluctant to come forward and report crimes of this nature. And that is not okay. We continue to support front-line organisations working with male victims. The Home Office has extended £120,000 until April 2017 for the men’s advice line, which provides support and advice to male victims of domestic violence; while £90,000 has been provided to Galop to run a domestic abuse helpline for gay, bi and trans people affected by domestic violence and abuse. In 2016-17, the Ministry of Justice allocated £452,000 to 12 organisations in England and Wales to provide face-to-face services for male victims of rape and sexual violence.

Every time a little boy is told to zip up his man suit and be brave in circumstances where a girl would be cuddled or comforted, we are contributing to an ideal that a real man is fearless and emotionless. Most men treat this version of masculinity, which they see in characters in the media such as James Bond and those played by Steven Seagal, who are self-contained, aggressive, disconnected and always walking alone, with intelligence and resilience, but there are risks, particularly for the vulnerable and isolated, and these messages can be particularly toxic for men suffering from mental health issues.

We have heard a lot today about male suicide. Our national suicide prevention strategy highlights men as a high-risk group for what is perhaps the ultimate expression of despair, disconnection and aggression turned inwards. I am very encouraged by the work that the Department of Health has done with the National Suicide Prevention Alliance to identify innovative projects and to target mental wellbeing and suicide prevention support at men—projects such as the Men’s Sheds movement, which my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) has mentioned. I was there at the start of the Gosport Men’s Shed, which is now one of the biggest in the country. One gentleman there told me that it had literally saved his life.

In addition, the Department recently announced further financial support of more than £12.5 million over the next five years for the Time to Change programme, which seeks to bring attitudinal change towards people with mental health issues. Bottling up emotions and not being able to talk freely about feelings has implications not only for mental health but for physical health. Other Members have spoken about organisations such as the Movember Foundation and all the amazing men—and women—who attempted to raise awareness in November, in order to raise issues such as prostate cancer that affect men and where early diagnosis and treatment can save lives.

I was going to speak about boys’ attainment in schools and justice in the family and criminal courts, but, in the interests of time, I will not. I will conclude by saying that my officials and the Government Equalities Office are there to tackle inequality wherever we find it, and we are actively exploring some of the issues touched upon today, in dialogue with groups such as White Ribbon, the Great Men initiative, HeForShe and Respect. These organisations do an enormous amount of good work, and I am confident that together we will make good progress in engaging even more men with gender equality.

And what of International Men’s Day? Of course it is a good thing. Anything that gets people to stop and think about equality and the inequalities we have spoken about today is important, and I will certainly consider all the points raised. Equality benefits everyone, and I hope that we can continue to share a constructive dialogue on how we can achieve a fairer, more just and kinder world for all.

4.58 pm

**Philip Davies:** I thank everyone who has participated in this debate. We have heard some fantastic speeches. The hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) made a fantastic speech. I was very interested and pleased to hear about the excellent work of It Takes Balls to Talk. My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) made a typically fantastic speech, even though he had to admit that Australia was ahead of us in some ways. I am sure it was a painful thing for him to have to admit, but we are grateful to him for pointing it out.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) made a terrific speech highlighting the work that Breathing Space does in her area. I am delighted that she has had the opportunity to mention that. Likewise, my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) made a passionate and impressive speech,
and again I am delighted that she was able to highlight Men’s Sheds and Movember, even though I will not be participating in the latter—much to everyone’s relief.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) rather trivialised today’s debate by talking about women instead of men. I am sure the fact that she thinks international men’s day is every day is very little comfort to the 134,554 men who have committed suicide over the last 30 years. I found that regrettable.

Finally, I am pleased that we agreed on one thing—equality. I believe in gender equality, and I very much hope that after this debate, men and women will be treated equally by the courts when they get sentenced.

5 pm
Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

PETITION
Post Office Closure in Tonbridge

5 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The post office in Tonbridge provides an accessible service to people across our community, and closing it would deprive residents of our growing and thriving town of the central services and support that this stand-alone Crown post office provides. That is why more than 1,000 people have signed a petition calling for the decision to be reversed.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to note their objections to the proposed closure by Post Office Ltd of the existing stand-alone post office on Tonbridge High Street and its proposed relocation within another existing local business.

Following is the full text of the petition:
[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom, declares that the proposed closure by Post Office Ltd of the existing stand-alone post office on Tonbridge High Street is unacceptable; and further that the post office should not be relocated within another existing local business.
The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to note their objections to the proposed closure by Post Office Ltd of the existing stand-alone post office on Tonbridge High Street and its proposed relocation within another existing local business.
And the petitioners remain, etc.]
P001979

Maxwellisation Process

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

5.1 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): It is indeed an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Madam Deputy Speaker. One thing I know about your good self is that any interventions or judgments that you make in the course of the debate will be both independent and timeous—matters not unconnected to this debate. I say from the outset that my intention is to raise an important matter for discussion. I do so with humility. I do not pretend that I have all the answers, which may come as a major shock to many of my hon. Friends.

On a number of occasions here, I called for the early publication of the Chilcot report. I was met with sympathy from the Government, but it was clear that one reason for such a long delay in the publication was the Maxwellisation process that Sir John Chilcot chose to follow, when there was no statutory requirement at all for him to do so. It is also very clear that there has been a gradual adoption of the Maxwellisation process in areas of investigation and reporting which fundamentally calls into question whether reports are, in fact, truly independent.

In response to a query from my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) a short time ago, and to put it in layman’s terms, I should say that Maxwellisation is the process of sending extracts of reports to individuals who are criticised in some way, allowing them in many cases an extraordinary length of time to respond. We then are blind as to how far their responses lead report authors to change their judgments. This is not just a process of checking the facts, as competent inquiries will check the facts as they go along. This process allows individuals facing criticism to challenge the interpretation and judgment of report authors. That is a fundamental undermining of the independence of those report authors and it does a disservice to the House.

My own background makes me rather sceptical of, and concerned about, the approach. For well over 30 years, I ran a series of small research companies, and we were often commissioned to undertake investigations into organisations of many sorts, often involving the behaviour of groups that were undertaking activities that were disadvantageous to the organisation or the wider society. It would not be unreasonable to say that all my past clients valued the fact that at the end the day they knew they would be getting my conclusions and my recommendations alone. They might have gone on to criticise and debate those recommendations or amend them, but what they valued most was that somebody was investigating a situation and was willing to draw conclusions independently that could then set an agenda for others to pursue.

In another part of my life, I was sometimes involved in academic research. Much of the greatest academic research that is undertaken in, for example, the social sciences explores the role of human behaviour in citing individual instances, but there is no requirement for academic authors to return to the individuals dealt with in their studies and ask them to comment on their
interpretations. Indeed, that would be considered bad practice, as it would undermine their academic freedom. When it comes to politics, however, over the years we have developed for the House of Commons a process that allows people who are subject to criticism to be the only ones who are given sight of what is going to be said, and the only ones who are allowed to respond to authors.

Why has this issue arisen? Originally, the so-called Salmon letters emerged from an inquiry undertaken by the Royal Commission on Tribunals of Inquiry, which reported in 1966. The letters were intended to warn individuals of criticisms and give them an opportunity to respond, but the procedures set out by Lord Justice Salmon were heavily criticised for being more suited to an adversarial trial than to an inquisitorial process.

Then, some years later, along came that corporate crook Robert Maxwell. Maxwellisation developed from a judgment in a private action brought by him against the Department of Trade and Industry. Maxwell applied for an interim injunction to restrain inspectors from proceeding with their investigation. Mr Justice Forbes declined to grant the injunction, but said that natural justice demanded that draft conclusions that were critical of a person should be submitted to that person to give them an opportunity to respond. Maxwell then took legal action directly against the DTI. Mr Justice Wien found against him, and an appeal ensued.

Lord Denning, Master of the Rolls at the time, was one of the judges who heard the appeal against the second judgment, and he upheld Mr Justice Wien’s conclusions. Despite that, the myth has arisen that Maxwellisation developed as a result of a victory in court by Maxwell, although in fact he continually lost, and that Maxwellisation is a legal requirement, which it is not, although many people think it is. It is simply a kind of convention that has been adopted but has no legal force.

Maxwellisation has been leading to concerns in different areas. I have cited Chilcot, which was not a statutory inquiry but a Privy Counsellor inquiry established by my predecessor as Member of Parliament for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, but, more recently, the Treasury Committee has shown considerable interest in the subject. In April this year, it announced an inquiry into Maxwellisation. Its Chair, the right hon. Member for Kirkcaldy (Mr Tyrie), has been quoted as saying:

“It took seven years for taxpayers—who had to foot the £20.5 billion bail-out of HBOS—to obtain a full explanation of HBOS’s failure. Serious management, governance and regulatory oversight failures all contributed to the bank’s collapse. The seven year wait was prolonged”—seriously prolonged—

“by Maxwellisation. The public will want reassurance that Maxwellisation is fair and proportionate, and does not lead to unacceptable delays...Maxwellisation was never intended to be a means by which interminable argument would develop about every last detail of a regulator’s report. To permit that would undermine confidence in the public review process.”

Indeed, it is perhaps not unreasonable of me to speculate that the lack of action against some rogue bankers was made easier by the absence of robust, independent reports.

One concern for those in favour of the process of Maxwellisation is that without it some individuals might be exposed to defamation action. I am guessing this might be a concern both for some individuals who are cited in reports in a critical way and for the report authors. However, I believe there is a means to bring Maxwellisation to an end without opening the prospect of defamation proceedings, thereby assisting both in having reports published more quickly and having greater confidence in their independence.

My understanding is that the best way to evade the legal difficulties raised by making criticisms of individuals without giving them the right to the process of Maxwellisation is to make the report of any inquiry a so-called return to Parliament. This was the case for the Scott and Hutton inquiries for instance. This ensures that the report enjoys the protection of the Parliamentary Papers Act 1840 and is subject to privilege. It is quite clear to me that there has been utterly inadequate scrutiny of the Maxwellisation process.

It is with great regret that I have to say that over many months I kept asking, very often at Business questions, “Where is the Chilcot report?” Many other Members were asking the same question. I am very sad now that I was unaware that there were ways in which we could have avoided this. I was unaware that Chilcot did not need to invoke a Maxwellisation process; it was simply his personal choice as chair of that inquiry. I think the time is coming when the Government need to think very seriously about whether this House is well served by a process that undermines the independence of reports brought it.

As I move towards a conclusion—I want to allow the Minister sufficient time to respond—I shall quote the journalist Chris Ames, who followed the Chilcot inquiry and wrote extensively on Maxwellisation. He feared that independence was being subverted in another way:

“Although the inquiry began in 2009, and all witnesses have had years to bring evidence to its attention, it appears that Maxwellees have been allowed to read and cite other confidential documents, besides those cited by the inquiry. Have any conditions or limitations been imposed on this exercise?”

We do not know. He continues:

“Without them, there is a clear risk that it could turn into an unlimited fishing expedition by Maxwellees in pursuit of material which would help their defence.”

How much new material they introduced into the process we still do not know.

In a former life—I have had many—I taught in the area of judgment theory. Those who have researched judgments know only too well that if we allow simply a one-sided process for people only to search out the evidence that suits them, we cannot have a balanced view. We cannot have confidence that we have a balanced view if the only people who were asked to submit to the report’s authors were those few who were criticised, but those who would make criticisms did not have the same rights of review; let alone, in the instance of Chilcot, the families who suffered the grievous burden of Iraq having the same rights as those criticised.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that if the primary concern about Maxwellisation is the prospect of defamation, and defamation cannot happen unless the statement is false, would not one solution be that public inquiries get
protection from defamation? Under Maxwellisation, the offended party could simply say, “It wasn’t me, guv” and persuade that there is an action for defamation, and then all those allegations fall. There is a simple solution, is there not?

Roger Mullin: I defer to my hon. Friend, who is a distinguished lawyer trained in both the Scottish and English jurisdictions. I would hesitate to criticise him at all. It strikes me that he is making another intervention on a reasonable point that the Government should consider. I hope that the Minister will respond in the same spirit and let us seek solutions that will allow us to preserve the independence of reporting to this House.

5.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) on securing the debate. When the Government decide that an inquiry is needed to investigate a matter of public concern, they will generally begin by asking whether it should be held under the Inquiries Act 2005 and use the Inquiry Rules 2006. Inquiries can be non-statutory, as was the case for the Iraq inquiry. Inquiries may also be established under specific legislation such as the Financial Services Act 2012. However, they are constituted, inquiries perform an important role of holding public bodies to account, and providing answers to issues and events of concern. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that an inquiry and its eventual report must be, and must be seen to be, independent of the Government.

The principle of Maxwellisation allows those at risk of criticism in an official report to respond before that report is published. The process takes its name from Robert Maxwell, who was criticised in a Department of Trade and Industry report as being “unfit to hold the stewardship of a public company”.

He took that matter to court and in fact lost his case, but the Court of Appeal reaffirmed that the principles of natural justice require prior notice to be given of actual or potential criticism so that an individual can be given a chance to respond. There are also what are known as Salmon principles, which came from Lord Justice Salmon’s 1966 royal commission on tribunals of inquiry. The second principle states:

“Before any person who is involved in an inquiry is called as a witness, he should be informed of any allegations which are made against him and the substance of the evidence in support of them.”

This means that when someone gives evidence, the inquiry chair should notify them in advance if they are at risk of criticism, and of the reasons for it, so that they can address those issues when they give their evidence.

We all want the warning letter process to be handled as quickly as possible, but I do not share the concern that it can affect the independence of an inquiry’s findings and report. The Government believe that the process is fair and transparent and does not prevent the inquiry from producing an independent and robust report. Furthermore, under the 2005 Act, the chair has a duty to have regard to fairness and must be impartial. There is nothing in the Act or rules that requires a chair to change their report in the light of any representations received from an individual. The purpose of the warning is not to seek a person’s consent to what the chair is minded to say about them. I am confident that inquiry chairs take a sensible and robust approach that does not allow for abuse of the process, and I am also confident that they will continue to do so.

The Lords Select Committee on the Inquiries Act 2005 published its findings in March 2014. The report cited evidence on the warning letter process from inquiry chairs such as Sir Robert Francis, QC, the chair of the Mid Staffordshire inquiry. He said:

“Some recipients asked that they be given sight of any revision of the potential criticism before publication of the Inquiry report. I declined to do so; first because the Rules do not provide for such a facility, and second because it would have been impracticable and undesirable.”

It is therefore clear that inquiry chairs are adequately equipped to deal with inappropriate requests and that the process does not mean that there needs to be endless back and forth until the recipient is happy with what will be said.

On 2 November 2016, when giving evidence to the Liaison Committee about the Iraq inquiry, Sir John Chilcot said:

“in the pursuit of fairness, and also in the pursuit of getting the best possible quality of report, the Maxwell process, far from holding up the show, actually improved the eventual outcome. For example, our attention was brought to documents that had not been either disclosed or discovered in the course of our other evidence-taking and that were relevant. Then again, where you get two individuals’ perspectives on the same point, and they are not the same perspective, it is very helpful to know that and to be able to either come to a conclusion about it or, as we did in one case, simply point to the fact there is a clash of evidence which couldn’t be resolved.”

Richard Arkless: While the Minister is making points about the virtues of Maxwellisation in certain circumstances, is he able to say whether Maxwellisation in the case of the Chilcot report meant that the original findings were diluted to what we saw in the final report?
Dr Lee: The Government cannot speculate on the extent to which the report was modified as a result of Maxwellisation. It was a confidential process between the independent inquiry and those individuals subject to the process. However, as I said, Sir John Chilcot said in evidence to the Liaison Committee:

“in the pursuit of fairness, and also in the pursuit of getting the best possible quality of report, the Maxwell process…actually improved the eventual outcome.”

I firmly support the Maxwellisation principle. Those criticised in a report must be made aware of that before they read about it in the newspapers. Criticism could have an impact on their livelihood, or there may be a risk of later legal action. Of course, in many cases, individuals may already be aware of the criticism, although they might not be aware of its extent or seriousness. Equally, the criticism might never have been raised, so it is only right that individuals are given a chance to respond before publication. However, I absolutely agree that the process should be neither over-bureaucratic nor cause delay.

The Government recognise that it can be hugely difficult for families involved in inquiries to understand the various processes. They should feel confident that processes and the inquiry report are transparent and independent of the Government. The current system achieves that, but there is room for improvement. The Lords Select Committee also raised concerns about delays, requests for redrafts and an over-prescriptive process. We have been considering its recommendations about the warning letter process under the 2006 rules. We agree that chairs need more flexibility while ensuring that those who are unaware of criticism, or its extent, have prior notification and a chance to respond. I hope that my remarks provide reassurance that while we are clear that Maxwellisation is a key element in inquiries, it must be a simple process that does not adversely affect their independence or add significantly to their length.

Question put and agreed to.

5.24 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Friday 18 November 2016

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.

Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill

Second Reading

9.34 am

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I speak to the House today not out of personal interest, as much of what I say and propose will not affect my future in this House. I am sure that you, Mr Speaker, and many other Members will know that I have no intention of standing at the next election. [H]

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Pat Glass: I do not think Shakespeare could have put it better. [HON. MEMBERS: “Or Churchill.”] Or Churchill.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a long-standing custom in this Parliament that no Parliament can bind a successor Parliament, so the point made by the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who was of course at the heart of Government, is that we want more MPs and less government?

Pat Glass: I will give way later if the right hon.

Mr Harper rose—

Pat Glass: I will give way later if the right hon. Gentleman will let me continue a little.

What I am proposing is that we keep what is best in our current system, such as the MP-constituency link, which is envied in democracies across the world, while ensuring that we do not lock out 2 million voters who have registered to vote since 2015. Under the current system, they are not counted, and therefore they effectively have no voice in this place. Surely no sensible Government would deliberately discount 2 million voters simply because they do not suit their political fortunes.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): The Bill’s proposition is to increase the number of MPs from 600 to 650. The hon. Lady has twice said that the constituency link is complete nonsense. Just because the coalition voted for and railroaded through some changes a few years ago, there is no need for this Parliament to carry on with that stupid policy.

Pat Glass: Clearly the right hon. Gentleman was not listening very carefully to what I said, because I started by saying that the world is changing and politics is changing. What happened in the previous Parliament is not necessarily right for what is happening now. I also point out that the current Government have created 250 additional peers just down the corridor. Is that what he means by fewer politicians?

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The hon. Lady is starting a most powerful speech on a very important subject. Does she agree that the answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who was of course at the heart of Government, is that we want more MPs and less government?

Pat Glass: I will talk about that later when I address the size of constituencies and the way in which communities are being split by the current proposals.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I want to cut to the chase. Does the hon. Lady agree that the current proposals are a travesty to many constituencies across the entire United Kingdom, and are an attempt to silence Scotland, destabilise Northern Ireland and keep the entire United Kingdom, and are an attempt to silence Scotland, destabilise Northern Ireland and keep an over-bloated House of Lords in business? I welcome her debate.

Pat Glass: I thank the hon. Gentleman. One of the really good things about the Bill is the number of people from right across the country who have contacted me. People from all parts of the United Kingdom are getting in touch with me as they begin to realise that their communities are going to be divided.
Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) has mentioned Scotland and Northern Ireland. The impact of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 will be greatest on Wales, because we will lose a higher percentage—11 seats—of MPs. That is wrong. It also includes three of four island communities, but does not give exemption to the principal island of the United Kingdom, namely the Isle of Anglesey, Ynys Môn.

Pat Glass: I welcome my hon. Friend's very strong point about the island communities.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend has made a very strong point about the difference in the registers and under-registration. Is she aware that that will be magnified in places such as Cardiff, which is among the fastest growing cities in the UK? We are already under-registered and we are going to grow very fast. The reality is that, within a year or two, the proposals will be so out of date and people will be so disfranchised. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a double whammy for places such as Cardiff?

Pat Glass: I do, and that situation is reflected right across the country. Fewer and fewer people are bothering to vote in general and local elections, because they do not see it as relevant to their lives. We live in a time when many of our people see a divide between themselves and the establishment. That means us, by the way—even people like me, and I was born in a council house in a mining community and went to a comprehensive school. They see huge divides between us, the political elite—or the metropolitan elite, as the red tops like to call us—and anyone who seems to have a vested interest in parliamentary democracy, and the people, as the red tops like to call everyone else.

Mrs Sherryl Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Does not the hon. Lady acknowledge that we have periodic boundary reviews to take account of changes in population? Her point about people being missed will be picked up by a future boundary review.

Pat Glass: I do acknowledge that point and I will come on to talk about why it is important that we conduct a review every 10 years rather than every five years. One of the communities from which I have heard most is Cornwall. Lots of people have been in touch with me, saying that they are unhappy that their own MPs are not dealing with the issue.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I may be metropolitan, but I have seldom been described as elite. Does my hon. Friend accept that one of the major problems in our capital city is that whole swathes of central London are now dark, because people do not live in the properties, and that the electoral roll has, therefore, collapsed? We also have constituencies with 19 wards, rather than the usual eight or nine. Does my hon. Friend agree that her Bill exposes far more than the dreadful dichotomy between the other place and this place? In fact, it exposes a dark heart in our democracy.

Pat Glass: Yes, I accept that entirely. One of the really good things about the Bill is that it shines a light on an awful lot of the problems with the current system.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I am amazed that Government Members are talking just about population and not ascribing any importance to geography. Islands have been mentioned. My constituency of Ross, Skye and Lochaber includes seven inhabited islands. Many of them will end up in the new seat of Argyll, Bute and Lochaber, which would have more than 30 inhabited islands. How is a Member of Parliament supposed to represent people from so many island communities? It is a disgrace.

Pat Glass: The proposed system does not take account of people and communities. I hope that we will be able to address that through the Bill.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the 2 million people who are being left out equate to at least 25 MPs? To reduce us by 50 MPs seems nonsensical.

Pat Glass: I looked at those figures last night. Effectively, the proposals will reduce this place not by 50, but by 75 MPs.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I am a lot more sympathetic than some of my colleagues to the hon. Lady's Bill. How can she guarantee that the Boundary Commission will be able to implement its changes by October 2018, in time for the next general election? Is that practical?

Pat Glass: Politics is the art of the possible, is it not? If the Government want this to happen, it will happen. It is important that the Bill is in place by 2018, in time for the 2020 general election.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the exclusion of 2 million voters, whom we know to exist, from the electoral register goes against their interests as well as ours in this House? Does she also agree that those citizens who are late to register are more likely to be transient and poor, and that they are often the most in need of representation?

Pat Glass: The issue of the under-representation of 2 million people goes to the heart of our democracy.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The figure does not include overseas voters. What assessment has the hon. Lady made of them?

Pat Glass: The figure does not include overseas voters. They are not part of the Bill. That issue is for a different debate at a later time.

We have seen anti-establishment politics at its worst in the recent US elections, when Donald Trump courted voters by portraying himself as the anti-establishment candidate and by saying the most outrageous things he could think of, irrespective of the offence he caused. We have also seen it here, with the emergence of far-right
There is a need for special consideration for Northern Ireland and for proper recognition of social, economic and geographical cohesion, which does not exist in the new proposals.

Pat Glass: Absolutely. The Bill will go some way to making that happen.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: The hon. Lady and I share something similar in our constituencies. My constituency stretches from the banks of the Tamar to the banks of the River Fowey. The difference, however, is that because my constituents would not find it possible to travel from one end of the constituency to another by public transport, I go to them, which I consider to be my job as a Member of Parliament.

Pat Glass: The hon. Lady misses the point completely.

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): On size, is the hon. Lady aware that the Boundary Commission for Scotland has proposed the notion that my constituency will be incorporated into a larger constituency called Highland North, covering 13,000 sq km, the same size as Northern Ireland? No one would seriously suggest that Northern Ireland should be covered by one MP, but that is what the proposals for Scotland suggest.

Pat Glass: The hon. Gentleman makes the case clearly. The proposed system not only seeks to reduce the number of MPs, thereby making them more remote from their electorate, and to cut out 2 million registered voters, thereby giving them no vote, but seeks to create constituencies of equal size, irrespective of what that does to communities, and to include a review of the boundaries every five years, which will ensure that practically every constituency will change every five years. We will weaken MP accountability to our constituency and voters, because every five years the voters will be different people. In a sense, that will strengthen MPs’ accountability to their party, on whom they rely to be reselected, and will weaken their accountability to our constituents.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I am listening with great interest to my hon. Friend’s detailed speech. The Boundary Commission proposals for Stoke-on-Trent will have two effects, certainly as far as my constituency is concerned. First, a number of my constituents who live within the city of Stoke-on-Trent will find themselves represented in the county—in the rural area—which will break their existing link with the city. They will still live in and pay rates to the city, but they will find themselves represented by an MP out of the city. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, my constituents and others who live in the city are represented by three MPs, who happen to be Labour but could be anyone in future. That will be downgraded to only two. What message does that send to the people of Stoke-on-Trent?

Pat Glass: That exemplifies how nonsensical the system will be. If we move ahead with the proposals, we run the risk of making MPs more accountable to their party, on whom they depend to be reselected, and less accountable to their constituents, who may well not be their constituents.
eight years from now. I cannot believe that any of us want that. Like many in the House, I pride myself on serving every person in my constituency, whether they voted for me or not, whether they voted or not, and whether they have lived in the constituency for five minutes or five years.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): As a fellow north-easterner and as someone who worked in Sunderland, my hon. Friend knows Sunderland well. Under the proposals, Sunderland will be split between six constituencies—parts of six, from the current three—and my fabulous constituency will be split into three. As a Member who has served three terms and has had two seats already, if I was by some miracle lucky enough to retain a seat next time around, I would have had three constituencies in four terms, which must be a record.

Pat Glass: That exemplifies what I am saying about the proposals: they will break the MP’s link with their constituents.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I hope that my hon. Friend will reconsider standing again for this House, because it deserves Members of her high calibre. Are we not getting to the crux of the debate? Is it not really about geography, the electorate, the size of the House or even the cost of politics; it is a continuation of this Conservative Government’s gerrymandering of the constitution. They have gagged charities, they have neutered trade unions and now they want to gerrymander boundaries for their own reasons.

Pat Glass: Absolutely.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): As we are getting to the nub of why the Bill has been introduced, is it not the case that we have the Bill because so many Opposition Members are frightened of reselection, because of the threat of Momentum taking their seats?

Pat Glass: That unfortunate intervention was not helpful and exemplifies why people out there get so angry about people in here. This is about something bigger than ourselves.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The anger goes beyond political parties. In my constituency, the nonsense of putting two wards from Sheffield South East in with wards from Rother Valley will create a constituency where we cannot drive from one side of it to the other without going through a second constituency. Indeed, one of the roads goes through a third council area and another region. As a result, 2,500 local people have already signed a petition against the proposal, because they see a constituency being created with no community of interest at all involved in that creation.

Pat Glass: That is what we are hearing in the debate today—cities being split, communities being split, and that is not good for our democracy.

We in Britain pride ourselves on being the home of democracy. However, can we really talk about democracy when we have an antiquated system in which the larger House in Parliament is made up of people who are unelected? The unelected House is large and growing, and can be enlarged further at the political will of a retiring Prime Minister.

I have huge respect for the other place, where sensible decisions are often made and where many bring their lifelong experience to bear, but we cannot get away from the fact that it is unelected, significantly bigger than the elected House and subject to patronage. Is that what we mean by democracy in the 21st century? If we are the mother of Parliaments, I respectfully suggest that many of the children of this mother of Parliaments have outgrown us and are now showing how it is done.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): On community connections and synergies, does the hon. Lady accept that in the time from when the drafts of the last boundary review proposals were produced to when the final proposal was made by the Boundary Commission for England, two thirds of the seats were changed in response to the concerns that were raised?

Pat Glass: The initial proposals were never implemented, so the constituencies remained the same.

The Government are even trying to sell us the idea that the proposed boundary changes are an attempt to save the taxpayer money. Granted that removing 50 MPs will save some money; the total amount is questionable but reasonably estimated to be in the region of £12 million. At the same time, the Government have massively increased the unelected House at a cost of £46 million. Whatever the Government say, this is not about saving money for the taxpayer or cutting the cost of politics.

We are in the process of leaving the European Union, so each and every one of us will no longer have access to a Member of the European Parliament. In counties such as mine, local government reform has created more and more unitary authorities. The reforms have removed our district councils and replaced them with, in some cases, very large unitary authorities, which can appear remote from people’s lives. I and my constituents used to have access to a parish council, district councillors, county councillors, an MP and MEPs. Some may say that that was too many representatives, but in the space of nine years, we have in effect lost two layers of representation. I believe that democracy is not served in this country by further reducing our representation.

It is blindingly obvious that the Government are not intent on reducing the cost of democracy. If the purpose of reducing the number of MPs is to save money, why is the number of unelected Lords constantly being increased at a cost that far outweighs the savings from reducing the number of MPs? Actions speak louder than words, and no matter how much the Government spin their actions, their attempt to reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600, while at the same time massively increasing the number and the costs of the House of Lords, should be seen for what it is—a poor attempt at trying to hold on to power for as long as possible at the expense of our democracy.

Andrew Stephenson: I have a great deal of sympathy with the hon. Lady’s points about the House of Lords. I am hugely in favour of House of Lords reform, which was in the Conservative party manifesto. During the last Parliament, I voted for House of Lords reform,
I will not try your patience by going on for the speech of my successor but a few, the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 2011. I very much look forward to taking through the Parliamentary Voting System and coalition Government who, during the last Parliament, showed the will to promote constituencies and perhaps the House of Lords. It is now incredibly easy to register to vote. Started the process, which has been continued by my electoral registration online. I am very proud of having world, the other thing we of course did was to allow people to vote, as well as the further disengagement of large parts of our country from the democratic purpose, the rise of parties far less interested than we are in democracy and the threat that parts of our communities will see the state as illegitimate.

I want us to go forward, strengthening and reviewing our democratic processes as we go. My Bill seeks to retain 650 MPs, which will continue our unique and much admired link between the MP and the constituency. I want to ensure that we engage more and more of the potential electorate, and the first step is to include the 2 million people who have registered to vote since 2015 but are not counted in the current boundary review. Through the Bill, I want to give those 2 million people a voice.

I agree that MPs should broadly represent an equal number of voters, but my Bill seeks to safeguard communities and to avoid some of the stupidities that a 5% margin throws up. I therefore propose that there should be a margin of 10%. I also propose that we should review constituency boundaries every 10 years, not every five years, which will strengthen the accountability of MPs to their constituency, not weaken it.

The democracy we have is precious. It was hard fought for and hard won over many centuries. Arguably, we have done everything wrong along the way—we have had a civil war and civil unrest; we have seen many injustices and abuses; we even cut off the head of a king—but over the centuries we have inched our way towards the democracy we have now. We need to appreciate that our democracy is both precious and fragile, and we cannot allow one party or one Government to endanger what we have for the purposes of narrow party interest, irrespective of which party it is.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) on bringing the Bill before the House and on giving us an opportunity to discuss the issue.

Mr Speaker, you may feel, as I do, a slight sense of déjà vu. I declare an interest as the Minister in the coalition Government who, during the last Parliament, took through the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. I very much look forward to the speech of my successor but a few, the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office. I will start with a bit of the context, but I will not try your patience by going on for too long with my opening remarks. I listened carefully to the arguments of the hon. Member for North West Durham, and I will cover most of them and say why I think she is mistaken or going down the wrong path on several of them.

I had not intended to talk about this, but there was an implication in what the hon. Lady and a few other Members said. Before the Great Reform Act of 1832, parliamentary constituencies were thought of by many people as their own property—indeed, they were their property—and they passed the ownership of their constituency down their line. I mention that because the discussion has so far missed an important point. We obviously feel a great sense of pride in our constituencies and we want to represent them and, most importantly, the people who live in them, but they are not ours. Our constituencies do not belong to us. It is the other way around: the people in our constituencies expect us to represent them. When I listened to some MPs talk about the constituencies they currently represent, it sounded as though they owned them. The minute an independent boundary commission proposes to change their constituency, the better to represent the constituents living there, they seem to take that as a personal affront.

Stephen Doughty: That is very much not the point that I and other hon. Members made. One key issue that I raised is that of under-registration, which has particularly affected students, young people, and black and minority ethnic communities across Cardiff and, indeed, many other constituencies across the country. Is it not unacceptable that such people are not allowed to have an MP who properly represents their numbers in the constituencies in which they live?

Mr Harper: I am glad the hon. Gentleman raises that point, because I do not agree with the premise of his question. Interestingly, during the last Parliament, the coalition Government introduced individual electoral registration. It does two things: it makes sure that people are properly represented; and it improves both the accuracy and the integrity of the electoral register. To pick up the point made by the hon. Member for North West Durham about moving into a more modern world, the other thing we of course did was to allow electoral registration online. I am very proud of having started the process, which has been continued by my successors. It is now incredibly easy to register to vote. People can do it online with their national insurance number, which shows that they are eligible for registration, and it is very quick and very easy. A huge number of people have done so. In fact, I think that I am right in saying that the vast majority of those who now register to vote do so online. We have therefore made registration easier.

What the hon. Gentleman forgot to mention about students is that, just because they may not be registered in the town or city where they attend university, that does not mean they are not registered. Students are often registered in more than one location. When I was a student—tragically for me, that was a very long time ago—I was registered both at my parental home in Swindon and at my university accommodation in Oxford. Obviously, I only voted in one of those places in an election, as is lawful, but I was registered in both of them. If I had been registered in only one of them, that
would not in any way have meant I was disfranchised. The hon. Gentleman needs to think about that before making such remarks.

Ian Paisley: Will the right hon. Gentleman address the really important point that boundary changes should be gradual and evolutionary, reflecting the gradual and evolutionary change on the ground, and ought not to be radical or explosive? The kindest thing that can be said about the current boundary proposals is that, when mapping these new constituencies, the mapper appears to have sneezed and made a complete mess of the electoral map.

Mr Harper: There are a couple of things I will say in response to the hon. Gentleman. I agree with his central point. Of course I accept the point made by the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) that the last Parliament does not bind this one, but the law as currently enacted would reduce the size of the House of Commons. That is the position unless this Parliament chooses to change it by taking forward the Bill.

As I acknowledged at the Dispatch Box, the one-off reduction from 650 to 600 in this boundary change—which would have happened already if it were not for the stitch-up by the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats in the other place that pushed it out for five years—means that there will be a significant amount of change. I will say a little more about this later, but part of the reason why I support boundary changes every five years is that it is better to have more frequent but smaller changes, to take account of changes in electorate, rather than what has happened over time—namely, very infrequent boundary changes that, because there has been significant movement in the electorate, are very significant. More frequent but smaller boundary changes are preferable. That is what the current position will bring into force.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Does my right hon. Friend agree that over the past 20 to 25 years my own constituency has been a prime illustration of what he is saying? The constituency of South East Cornwall used to be known in the other place that pushed it out for five years—means that there will be a significant amount of change. I will say a little more about this later, but part of the reason why I support boundary changes every five years is that it is better to have more frequent but smaller changes, to take account of changes in electorate, rather than what has happened over time—namely, very infrequent boundary changes that, because there has been significant movement in the electorate, are very significant. More frequent but smaller boundary changes are preferable. That is what the current position will bring into force.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Does my right hon. Friend agree that over the past 20 to 25 years my own constituency has been a prime illustration of what he is saying? The constituency of South East Cornwall used to be known as Bodmin; it does not even contain the town of Bodmin now. We see a lot of changes. I do not believe that I should have taken ownership of the town of Bodmin when the rest of south-east Cornwall was expanding.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend illustrates the point that changes in the size of electorates have to be reflected in boundary changes. I was thinking of how to put this into context—

Mr Betts: rose—

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): rose—

Mr Harper: Let me just make this one point, then I will give way to the fabulous array of choices I have in front of me.

It is worth standing back for a moment and asking ourselves why we have boundary changes and why we in this country have chosen, unlike other countries, to have an independent process for them. I was thinking about how one could illustrate that in a memorable way. In the spirit of the cross-party unity that we particularly like to display on Fridays, I thought about who could illustrate this point very well. A few weeks ago at Prime Minister’s questions, the Leader of the Opposition referred to consulting great philosophers. He gave that some thought and the only one he could come up with was Baldrick, who had a cunning plan. That is relevant to this subject because you will remember, Mr Speaker—I will dilate on this only very briefly—an excellent episode of “Blackadder” about rotten boroughs and what used to happen before we had regular boundary changes. It featured an incumbent MP, Sir Talbot Buxomly, who was the Member of Parliament for Dunny-on-the-Wold. He died while visiting the Prince Regent, and Blackadder realised that Buxomly represented a rotten borough. It was a tiny plot of land, with “three rather mangy cows, a dachshund named ‘Colin’, and a small hen in its late forties.”

There was only one voter. Blackadder chose to install Baldrick as the new MP, and bought the property to be the only voter. He amazingly cast all 16,472 of his votes for Baldrick, while also being returning officer and election agent. That was humour, but it illustrated a point: there were parliamentary constituencies very like that before we had boundary changes, rules for the distribution of seats and independent boundary commissions. That is why this subject is very important.

Ian Blackford: Can we come back to reality here? The situation in the highlands of Scotland is that three MPs will represent a land mass of 33,000 sq km—40% of the landmass of Scotland but less than 5% of MPs. How can that possibly offer democracy to the people of the highlands and islands of this country?

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman is getting a little confused—

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Oh!

Mr Harper: Let me finish my point. I have not even started my argument and hon. and learned Lady is intervening. The job of the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) is to represent the people who live in his constituency, as I represent those who live in mine, not to represent the spaces in his constituency. It is the people who matter. It is entirely true that his constituency is not as densely populated as some parts and that he has, I will of course give way.

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Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman is getting a little confused—

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Oh!

Mr Harper: Let me finish my point. I have not even started my argument and hon. and learned Lady is intervening. The job of the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) is to represent the people who live in his constituency, as I represent those who live in mine, not to represent the spaces in his constituency. It is the people who matter. It is entirely true that his constituency is not as densely populated as some parts of the United Kingdom. That is reflected in the existing legislation—we chose to reflect the fact that there are four islands or groups of islands represented in the House, and the House accepted the argument that they needed special arrangements. Two of those are in Scotland. Another is the Isle of Wight, and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) made a very powerful argument that was taken up at the other end of the building.

Joanna Cherry: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Harper: Well, I have not finished my response to the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber. When I have, I will of course give way.

We made that provision because there were powerful arguments from the late Charles Kennedy, who represented Ross, Skye and Lochaber before the hon. Gentleman, about the geographical size of constituencies. We therefore
made provision for a maximum geographical size of constituency in the legislation, so that the boundary commissioners would not have constituencies that were too large. That limit in the legislation deals with the hon. Gentleman’s point.

Joanna Cherry: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that constituencies in the north-west of Scotland such as Ross, Skye and Lochaber have people living in the spaces and that those populations are really quite spread out as a result of something that happened in history called the clearances, whereby many people were cleared off their land—some to the coast, some furth of Scotland—and small pockets were left on the land? To represent his constituents properly, my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) has to cover those spaces, which are very wide and disparate, have sea in between them and quite often suffer, unfortunately, from inclement weather. Has the right hon. Gentleman taken that into account?

Mr Harper: I have. But things have moved on. There are modern communication mechanisms. Members of Parliament for constituencies that are spread out and require Members to travel more than would be required in urban seats can claim more money for that travel through the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority; that is why, unsurprisingly, we see MPs with more rural and far-flung constituencies claiming more money. It is perfectly reasonable for them to do so, and that budget is unlimited, to reflect the fact that those MPs will have greater travel challenges in representing their constituents than MPs in more compact constituencies.

The fact is that we represent the people who live in constituencies. If we followed the hon. Member for North West Durham focused focus on—the central argument, which I do not think the hon. Member for North West Durham taken that into account?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Harper: I will allow the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber to come back, and then make some progress.

Ian Blackford: The issue of democratic representation is crucial. My constituency office is in Dingwall. It is 130 miles away from where I live. On average, seven electors come into that office per day. They all come from the area around Dingwall. How on earth are the people in Ross, Skye and Lochaber to get effective representation when they live too far away from their constituency office? It is not right.

Mr Harper: I come back to the point that we have to focus on—the central argument, which I do not think the hon. Member for North West Durham focused on—is that the votes of our constituents should carry equal weight in this House. If we do not have seats of broadly equal size, some constituents are, in effect, being disfranchised and do not have the same voice in this House.

Wendy Morton: On the democratic deficit, does my right hon. Friend agree that the Bill risks us fighting the next election on the old boundaries, so seats such as mine, which has an electorate of just 60,000, would remain small and the democratic deficit would still not be properly addressed?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend is spot on. If we do not implement in time for the next election the boundary changes currently in train, the next election will be fought on constituency boundaries set according to an electoral register that is 20 years out of date. I will come to the point—on the face of it, it is a perfectly sensible one—that the hon. Member for North West Durham made about the new registrations for the referendum, but if hon. Members think that there is problem with people who have registered in the past year, I would simply point out that nearly 20 years’ worth of electors are currently missing from the registers used for parliamentary constituencies.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Harper: I will make a little more progress, because I think Mr Speaker would want me to do so.

The first big change in the redistribution of seats was the Redistribution of Seats Act 1885. Mr Speaker, you will be pleased to know that I will mention it only tangentially, and for one reason. The Minister who steered the Act through this House was the then President of the Local Government Board, the hon. Member for Chelsea, Sir Charles Dilke. You might not be aware, Mr Speaker, but Sir Charles Dilke had some personal issues—to put it delicately—and then ceased to be the Member for Chelsea. He then had the enormous good fortune to become the Member for the Forest of Dean, my constituency.

Sir Charles was, in some senses, more successful than me. First, in those days, constituencies apparently wrote to prospective Members inviting them to become Members of Parliament without some tough selection battle against others competing for the seat. You might remember, Mr Speaker, from my maiden speech, that Sir Charles Dilke, after getting elected and then re-elected, was fortunate, the third time he sought election, in being elected unopposed. I said in my maiden speech that that was a record worthy of emulation. I am afraid that I completely failed to be elected unopposed at the 2015 general election, but fortunately for me, despite my being opposed, I was indeed elected.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to advise the right hon. Gentleman that I do not have a verbatim recall of his maiden speech. It might greatly sadden him, but it has the advantage of being true. I gently say to him that I agreed to call him early in the debate because I was advised that he was suffering from a heavy cold and sore throat and was keen to speak sooner rather than later. From that, I deduced that he would not wish to exacerbate his malady by speaking at inordinate length. I feel confident both because of that and because at least 14 other Members wish to catch the eye of the Chair that before very long he might approach his peroration.

Mr Harper: That is very thoughtful of you. Mr Speaker, although I am surprised, knowing of your enormous powers of recall, that you do not have a verbatim
account of my maiden speech in your head, but then, sadly, we were not blessed in 2005 with having you in the Chair; otherwise, I am sure that you would remember it.

As I said, I only wanted to spend a short time on the preamble to my speech, although I was probably a little indulgent in taking interventions. I will deal specifically now with the points that the hon. Member for North West Durham made in her speech. First, she talked about gerrymandering, which the Leader of the Opposition has also talked about and which comes from the United States of America. Of course, there is a massive difference between us and the US. In most states of the US, boundaries are not drawn by independent boundary commissions, as they are here; they are drawn by the elected representatives, who are obviously partisan. Here, we are fortunate to have boundary commissions, all four of which, Mr Speaker, you chair in an ex officio capacity, although you do not take part in their deliberations. The four deputy chairs, effectively the operational heads, are judges, so they are, of course, beyond question in their political independence. In the United States, however, gerrymandering is a problem.

Taking your advice, Mr Speaker, I will not go on at length, but, for those who are interested and want to follow this issue at length, I refer to an interesting article in the Washington Post on 15 May 2014. Obviously, in the House we are not allowed to introduce written material or pictures, but the article referred to three districts, and the descriptions of them gave a sense of the interesting boundaries in America. Maryland’s 3rd is called the “Praying Mantis”; Pennsylvania’s 7th is called “Goofy kicking Donald Duck”; and Texas’s 35th is called the “UpsideDown Elephant”. The point is that we do not have gerrymandering in this country; we have independent boundary commissions following clear rules set out by Parliament, and they are specifically not allowed to take into account the partisan or party political effect of their decisions. I wanted to knock that argument on its head straightaway.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman has mentioned the United States, because the kernel of this idea of the Cameron Government came from an organisation called the American Legislative Exchange Council, which has talked about making it harder for voters in the US to register to vote and been at the forefront of things such as re-districting. It does not take a genius to see that a lot of the things that the Cameron Government proposed came right from its playbook.

Mr Harper: As the Minister who took the legislation through the House, I completely reject that suggestion. The proposals brought forward by the previous Government were drawn up by Ministers with support from their officials.

Mr Harper: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman once more, but I am keen to make some progress.

Mr Jones: I am not sure what role the right hon. Gentleman played in drawing up the 2010 Conservative manifesto, but the boundaries legislation, as well as the attacks on trade unions and some of the other right-wing policies that came forward, such as stopping charities lobbying, came right from that playbook. I am sure he was not involved in that; he was just the poor Minister who had to implement it.

Mr Harper: I certainly was not “the poor Minister”. I hugely enjoyed my role as Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform. I got to spend an enormous amount of time in the Chamber, with Mr Speaker frequently in the Chair, although I am not sure he enjoyed listening to the debates as much as I enjoyed speaking in them. I do not, however, recognise the origins that the hon. Gentleman mentions.

The hon. Member for North West Durham made a serious point about the accusations made about people who registered ahead of the EU referendum. A thorough piece of work has been done by a gentleman called Matt Singh, who works for an organisation called Number Cruncher Politics, an independent organisation that has looked at this issue very carefully. For this to be an issue, the 2 million extra voters would have to be unevenly distributed across the UK. If in some areas there had been a much bigger rise in the number of electors than in others, that would of course affect the distribution of the 600 seats set out in the legislation.

Interestingly, Mr Singh, in his very thorough analysis of the 2 million increase, wrote:

“The data does not support the suggestion that using the later version of the register”,

as the hon. Lady proposes doing,

“would materially alter the distribution of seats. Instead it points to a very even distribution of the 2 million newly-registered voters between”

currently held Labour and Conservative seats. If we added all the 2 million, of course we would increase the size of the register, but because the extra voters are evenly distributed across the country, we would not significantly change the distribution of constituencies. So I think that is a bit of a red herring.

As I draw towards the conclusion of my remarks, as you wanted me to, Mr Speaker, let me deal with the Bill.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab) rose—

Mr Harper: I shall first give way to the hon. Gentleman. He and I had a lot of fun when we debated the previous legislation, particularly when we spoke about Wales. I want to give him the opportunity to intervene.

Wayne David: When it comes to missing voters resulting from the European referendum, the right hon. Gentleman’s analysis has been challenged by many people. I want to make that point first. My second point is about gerrymandering. The previous Government passed a piece of legislation and this Government have brought forward the date of individual electoral registration. The result, against the advice of the Electoral Commission, is to exclude 1.8 million people from the electoral register. If that is not gerrymandering, what is?
Mr Harper: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman’s contention. The fact is, of course, that individual electoral registration did two things: it made sure that the registers were more complete; and it made them more accurate. Many of the names that the hon. Gentleman talks about who are no longer on the electoral register were not, of course, real people or people then registered at those addresses. My understanding—the Minister will correct me if I am wrong—is that before anybody was removed from the register, they would have been written to on a large number of occasions, and there would have been visits and canvassing going on at the individual properties. People were removed from the register either because they no longer lived at those addresses or because they had been registered more than once. The register is more accurate. What the hon. Gentleman is really arguing for is having an extra 1.8 million false entries on the electoral registers, which would make the system less fair rather than fairer.

Andrew Stephenson: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Harper: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, let me start to deal with the Bill, as I said I would. I shall deal specifically with the proposals set out by the hon. Member for North West Durham, and I want to make a bit of progress before giving way to my hon. Friend. The first point raised by the hon. Member for North West Durham was about the number of MPs, and I think she completely failed to answer my question, which was to what question was the answer 50 more Members of Parliament. She did not tackle the cost of her proposals. The current law says that the number of MPs will fall from 650 to 600. Increasing that number by 50 would come at an estimated cost—I think she alluded to this in her remarks—of about £10 million to £12 million a year. That means about £60 million across the Parliament. I heard no proposals from the hon. Lady about how that was to be paid for or any reason why the proposal was a good one at all.

Mr Bone: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Harper: No.

Mr Bone: I wonder how my right hon. Friend came up with that figure. If we as Members of Parliament will have more work to do and more areas to cover, we will presumably have more expenses. Could it be that the figure produced by my right hon. Friend is fictitious?

Mr Harper: I do not agree with my hon. Friend. The figure is based on how much MPs claim at the moment and how much we are paid in salary. What my hon. Friend needs to remember is that there is currently a massive disparity between MPs in Welsh constituencies, for example, who have fewer than 50,000 electors, and others. Those Welsh Members are already in a part of the United Kingdom where a huge amount of domestic policy areas are dealt with not by them at all, but by Members of the Welsh Assembly. They get the same level of support as my hon. Friend, yet he has to serve a much larger constituency in terms of electors—and he serves them very diligently indeed. In England, there is not a devolved Administration, so English MPs have to cover the full range of domestic policy areas. I think it would be perfectly possible to deal with the few number of MPs without seeing a significant increase in the expenses budget for each of us. Those MPs who currently have very small constituencies will have to deal with no more constituents than many of us already have to deal with.

Christina Rees rose—

Mr Harper: Let me first deal with the seemingly reasonable points about the House of Lords made by the hon. Member for North West Durham. She made a couple of points. First—big tick here—I was, of course, the Minister responsible in the last Parliament for securing a much smaller, democratically elected and less costly House of Lords. I received a great deal of support, but not from Labour Members. If Labour Members had given their support to the programme motion that we would have brought forward, we would have been able to reform the House of Lords and have a democratically elected Chamber. That did not take place.

Mr Bone: No.

Mr Harper: I know that not all Conservative Members were enormously enthusiastic about it, but the fact is that we were not able to make that proposal.

Mr Bone: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Harper: Go on.

Mr Bone: We cannot allow this myth to carry on. The Second Reading of the House of Lords Reform Bill got the biggest majority of that Parliament. The fact is that the Government did not move the programme motion, so we do not know what would have happened. It should absolutely not have been programmed, as it was a constitutional Bill that should have been gone through line by line. Any parliamentarian such as my great right hon. Friend should have supported that.

Mr Harper: I will answer my hon. Friend’s question, but not at length, as I do not want to try your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend is right that Second Reading was well supported, but we had clear indications that the programme motion would not have been supported by Opposition Members, so the Government—quite rightly, in view of all the other challenges we faced—were not prepared to risk other legislation not getting through Parliament as a result. We were not able to make progress.

What the hon. Member for North West Durham needs to recognise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) said, is that the cost of the House of Lords has reduced since 2010—it has fallen, not increased. Since last year’s general election, there has been a net change in the size of the House of Lords of only 14 peers. What the hon. Lady forgets is that Members of the House of Lords are now able to retire and that a disproportionate number of those retiring are Conservative peers. It is true that there was a significant increase in the 2010 Parliament, but that was, of course, under a coalition Government, and a significant number of the new peers were Liberal Democrats.

Christina Rees: This has never been about costs. The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office confirmed at the last Cabinet Office questions that the overall cost of the Government payroll will remain unchanged, so this is not about costs.
Mr Harper: It is about costs. I can remember standing at the Dispatch Box and setting out how much money we would save by reducing the number of MPs. If the hon. Lady remembers, this was part of reducing the cost of politics more generally. That is why, for example, in the last Parliament, Ministers had a pay freeze and Members in this place had their pay frozen for a significant period of time. It was during those difficult years when the economy and public finances were challenged. Reducing the cost of politics was not the only reason, however, because the primary reason for the boundary changes and for using a more up-to-date register was to have more equal votes and more equal-sized constituencies so that our constituents could be more fairly represented in this House.

Andrew Stephenson: Does my right hon. Friend agree that there would be a more immediate cost if the Bill were passed of abandoning the process at the point at which it has currently reached? We have already had 500 hours of public hearings, with the involvement of 20 members of staff, 21 assistant commissioners and 14 videographers. There have been 36 public hearings across England, the last of which are taking place today. The cost of scrapping all that and redrawing the boundaries on the basis of this completely new proposal would, even if it could get through in time, surely run into many millions of pounds.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, which is perhaps the mirror of the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) in his very perceptive question. I may be being unfair to the hon. Member for North West Durham—if I am, I am sure she will put me straight—but I do not think she answered my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch. Under clause 2(4), legislation would be changed, so that instead of using the registers published on 1 December 2015, the boundary commissioners, while still reporting on the same target date of 1 October 2018, would have to use “registers...published in or after 2017.” I assume that the hon. Lady has in mind the register that would be published on 1 December 2017, but that does not give the boundary commissions much time to carry out a boundary review.

Ian Blackford: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We were informed by Mr Speaker earlier that the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) was called early because he apparently had a cold. May I suggest that if he is suffering—I am sure that he has the good will of the House if that is the case—it might benefit the rest of us if he went away and took his medication? If he does not genuinely have a cold, has he brought this House into disrepute by duping Mr Speaker?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): That was obviously not a point of order, but I, too, heard Mr Speaker say to the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) that he hoped the right hon. Gentleman would come to the end of his speech quite rapidly. A great many other Members wish to speak. I appreciate how learned the right hon. Gentleman is and how personally involved in this issue he was, but I think that everyone would be very grateful if he brought his remarks to a conclusion.

Mr Kevan Jones: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Mr Speaker made very clear that the right hon. Gentleman had asked to be called early because, as we have just heard from the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), he was suffering from a bad cold. Either that was not the case, or the right hon. Gentleman has discovered some miracle cure. If he has, could he share it with us?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Again, that was not a point of order, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said.

Mr Harper: I had moved on to dealing with the specific points in the Bill, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let me just tackle the last couple of points made by the hon. Member for North West Durham before I conclude my remarks.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Harper: I will, but I shall make this the last intervention so that I can follow your injunction, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Sir Greg Knight: Before my right hon. Friend reaches the end of his introductory remarks, may I ask whether he agrees that it would help us to assess the weight of Members’ contributions if, at the outset, they informed the House of the current size of their electorates and whether or not they were facing a boundary change?

Mr Harper: That is a good point. There are dramatic differences among the numbers of constituents we all represent, with the same level of resources—and, as I said earlier, a further factor that was not reflected in the Act is that Ministers and Members of the House of Commons are not really responsible for much of the domestic legislation in parts of the United Kingdom where government has been devolved, because that is taken care of by the devolved Administrations.

Let me finally deal with the central point made by the hon. Lady. She said—and I have no reason to doubt her integrity in this regard—that she wanted to enable the boundary commissioners to conduct the review and to hit the target date of 2018 so that we could have new constituencies, according to her rules, before the 2020 election. Let us assume that the commissioners will use the December 2017 registers, and let us accept the argument—advanced very clearly by the hon. Lady and a number of other Members—that the issue is of interest to our constituents, and that the public hearings and public consultation for which the existing legislation provides will therefore take place, given that the hon. Lady does not wish to alter those provisions. That process will take 24 weeks. Effectively, the hon. Lady is giving the boundary commissioners 17 weeks in which to draw up initial proposals from the 2017 registers, engage in the consultation, listen to all the responses, come up with revised proposals, run another set of consultations, listen to any proposals for change in those, and then present final proposals in a matter of a few weeks. I do not think that that is credible. I do not know whether the hon. Lady has had any discussions with the four boundary commissions about whether it is in any way doable, but I do not think it is.
I served as the Minister responsible for these matters. I looked into the resourcing of boundary commissions, and had conversations with their secretariats about the work that they’re involved in. I think that what is really at work here is a set of changes that would, in practice—my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch put his finger on it—make a boundary review before the next general election impossible. This is a repetition of what the Labour party, along with the Liberal Democrats, did in the last Parliament. The aim is to push things out so that we can have a general election in 2020 based on boundaries that are 20 years out of date, on the basis of registers that do not effectively include people over the last two decades. I think that that would be an outrage.

I hope that the Bill is not given a Second Reading, but if it is, we shall want to amend many parts of this wide-ranging legislation in Committee to ensure that it does not make progress in its current form. If it were to do so, we would be ensuring that voters were not equally represented and their voices were not equally heard. I think that this is a very retrograde and bad Bill.

Paul Flynn: My hon. Friend refers to the crisis of scrutiny in this place. That is another major scandal, although one glorious exception is the meeting of one Committee of the House which is going to be made into a musical.

We should also remember that the Government’s proposal is a pre-Brexit proposal. There will be a huge amount of extra work to be done here. How can it make any sense to reduce the number of Members of Parliament in those circumstances? The Government’s proposal will make Parliament less representative, and it will no longer be a model for those in other countries. The Brexit proposal will impose a huge burden of legislation on the House.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): When the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, the electorate will have 73 fewer elected parliamentarians to represent their interests, and if the number of Members here is reduced as well, a shocking 57% of our lawmakers will be unelected peers. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that reform needs to happen next door before any further changes are made in this place?

Paul Flynn: A range of reforms must be made. We are losing the Members of the European Parliament, and we have a crisis in Wales. The Welsh Assembly has only 60 members and their work has trebled, but it is impossible to argue in isolation for more Assembly Members, although virtually every member of the ruling party is a Minister, a deputy Minister, or the Chair of a Committee. The problems that exist in many areas can be dealt with only by a comprehensive and balanced Bill that takes account of the need for more Members of the Welsh Assembly and the need for fewer peers, and that will require a constitutional convention involving give and take and balanced decision-making. But at the moment we have the extraordinary situation of the Executive becoming immensely more powerful. That is bad government as far as scrutiny is concerned.

In the 1920s, 10% of the governing party was on the Government payroll vote. Under the Government’s current proposals to reduce the number of MPs, the Electoral Reform Society says that up to 43% of Government Members will have their mouths bandaged by the discipline of their party, through which they are inhibited from taking a full part in the scrutiny of matters considered by the House. That is a retrograde step.

I urge the House to look at the problems before us. Wales will be particularly hard hit by this. My constituency—my city—offers an excellent example of what will happen and the damage that will be done. There are two marginal seats now; one was won by a Conservative in the past. Those two seats will be merged into one and it will become not a marginal seat, but a rock-solid safe Labour seat, which will be to the advantage of the successor MPs.

The effect is similar throughout the country; this is a diminution in the value of our democracy. People are unhappy that they are not being represented, and the only way we can make sure votes count is with a proportional representation element. Otherwise, politics will be distorted, as always, by the system we have inherited.

If the Government are serious about reforming democracy, they should of course take the boundaries into consideration. The boundaries are an element of
the reforms that are needed, but only a relatively small one. In the last Parliament we had a Committee on constitutional reform that produced a long document urging overall reform. At the moment the public are right to be cynical, but the only reform the Government are interested in is the one that will give them maximum political advantage. This is a party political stunt by them, ignoring the problems of the House and the ludicrous situation in the House of Lords where it is still possible to buy a place in our legislature by giving a big enough contribution to a major party. They are ignoring that scandal. Some 261 peers were added by David Cameron, which is outrageous. What has that done to the cost of democracy? The other place does great work in scrutinising this House, but it is hopelessly illogical that its membership is larger than that of this House, which has the role of creating legislation and scrutinising it. Nothing has been done about that; nothing has come from the Government, but that is essential.

We need a constitutional convention; we need root-and-branch reform. We are losing public confidence in our democracy, and rightly so. We have institutions here for discipline, which are very permissive. We also have an Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, which is totally futile and has no powers. It is not a watchdog; it is a pussycat without teeth or claws.

There is rising resentment and cynicism among the public about the level of our democracy. That ends up in an obscenity like Trump taking over. We must defend our democracy and the quality of our democracy. That is crucial, and we do not do it by a tiny move by one party to gain political advantage for itself. We ought to come together as representatives and seize the opportunity for a major, massive, overhaul reform.

10.54 am

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is a great honour and a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn); I spent 13 years living in his constituency trying to get rid of him with absolutely no success whatsoever. While we hardly agree on anything, he is undoubtedly a leading parliamentarian, and I am pleased, in the best possible sense, that he is now back on the Back Benches and not constrained by being on the Labour Front Bench.

I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) on choosing this most important subject to be debated on one of the 13 private Member’s Bill days we have in this House, and congratulate all the Members who have made the effort to attend today. I hope that we will get a Division on this Bill and the House will decide one way or the other.

I also congratulate the hon. Lady on the tone in which she introduced the Bill. I thought it was the right tone. There are party political issues, as the hon. Member for Newport West said, and I will touch on them, but the hon. Lady got to the heart of the matter: this is about Parliament and scrutiny. I did spend a brief moment in her constituency during the EU referendum campaign, and it was a really pleasant constituency. I met people from many different parties, and it is a great shame from her constituency point of view that she has decided not to stand again.

I am also following another parliamentarian of great skill, my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Sir William Cash), for Christchurch (Mr Chope), for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) and for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner). So the Division was not entirely along party lines. There were people who were prepared to vote against, including, to their great credit, many from the Democratic Unionist party.

This issue goes back, therefore, to something the hon. Member for Newport West made the point upon: the balance between the Executive and Parliament. Since what we might loosely call the expenses scandal, Parliament has been getting more powers back. We have had a Speaker who has put Parliament first and championed it, we have had Select Committees, and we have had other movements in that direction, including the establishment of the Backbench Business Committee. All the moves have been to take power away from the Executive and give it to Parliament. This move, however, completely reverses that trend.

I am all in favour of broadly equal-sized seats. That is fair, within a threshold, and I would be happy for the Committee scrutinising this Bill to look at that issue. The hon. Member for Newport West touched upon: the balance between the Executive and Parliament. Since what we might loosely call the expenses scandal, Parliament has been getting more powers back. We have had a Speaker who has put Parliament first and championed it, we have had Select Committees, and we have had other movements in that direction, including the establishment of the Backbench Business Committee. All the moves have been to take power away from the Executive and give it to Parliament. This move, however, completely reverses that trend.

I am all in favour of broadly equal-sized seats. That is fair, within a threshold, and I would be happy for the Committee scrutinising this Bill to look at that issue. The hon. Member for Newport West made the point that there were exceptions for certain geographical areas. The previous proposals referred to the Isle of Wight and to what I call the Western Isles, which had two constituencies. I think that that makes sense, and we should consider whether that could be expanded for certain constituencies—but I want to get back to the Executive.
The Electoral Reform Society has said that if there were a general election under the proposed new arrangements and the same proportion of MPs were to be elected as there are now, 43% of Conservative MPs would be on the payroll. That cannot possibly be right. We should not all be here to be in government. There are two equal roles for an MP, one of which is to scrutinise Bills that go through this House. Ever since the Blair years, the Bills that have come to this House have been programmed. Sometimes we do not even debate certain clauses of a Bill, and it is actually the other place that does the proper scrutiny. The elected Members here should have the time to carry out that scrutiny.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend has reminded us of that previous debate. Does he agree that one of the reasons that some of us could not support the Government on that occasion was that they would not answer the straight question as to whether there would be a pro rata reduction in the size of the Executive if there were a reduction in the number of MPs. The Government would not answer that, saying that it was premature to ask the question.

Mr Bone: I remember my hon. Friend making that point, with which I entirely agreed.

Things have got worse. We now have more Government Departments, and rightly so, given that we are coming out of the European Union, but I guess that we are also going to have 60% more laws to look at. The argument for reducing the number of MPs seems to be false, especially as we are getting rid of 70-odd MEPs. Also, the Government cannot possibly claim that they are doing this on the basis of cost. We have only to look at how much more money is being spent on Spads. Even during the Blair years it was only a few million, but it is something like £9 million now.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Does my hon. Friend agree, however, that this is also a matter of fairness and fair representation for all our constituents?

Mr Bone: I absolutely agree that as a matter of fairness we should try to equalise the seats, but it is absolutely wrong to reduce the number of MPs and to say that it is being done on the basis of cost. Democracy cannot have a cost put on it. We could of course have a dictator—that would be very cheap! But that is not how it works. In fact, the Government have tended to go a little way towards being a dictatorship. We have had sofa decisions that were not made in Cabinet, and at times it has been really difficult for us in this House to vote on certain issues because of these wretched programme motions. My hon. Friend the Member for Kettering and I spent a lot of our time during the coalition Government voting against programme motions on every occasion, because we had said in our manifesto that that was what we were going to do.

The former Prime Minister made a great speech on Parliamentary sovereignty, and if those proposals had been enforced, MPs would have been encouraged to have a free vote in Committees—although the Government would have been able to change things on Report—and we would have had more open debates without programme motions. That all fell by the wayside, however, because the Government do not really want that to happen; and, to be honest, the shadow Government do not want it either. That is why we have never made progress on that. Hon. Members will remember that the timetable for this House was going to be run by a parliamentary business Committee within two years of us coming into power. I remember talking to the then Chief Whip, who said that that would happen over his dead body, and of course it never did happen. So please do not talk to me about manifesto commitments.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): May I take the hon. Gentleman back to his point about the number of Members of Parliament who are on the payroll? Any Government—those whom I support and those whom I oppose—will have not only Members who are on the payroll but Members who want to be on the payroll. Reducing the number of MPs to 600 will inevitably mean fewer independent-minded MPs. Those on both our Front Benches would probably welcome that, but we should not do so. It will be a retrograde step, to say the least, if that happens, but it seems inevitable that it will.

Mr Bone: The independent Member is entirely right. Of course, I have to be really careful about what I say today because this could ruin my chances of getting on to the Front Bench. This is a serious and important matter; however, I say gently that there has been a tendency for some Members to come to this House not because they want to be Members of Parliament but because they want to be Ministers. They are not interested in the role of scrutiny. We cannot scrutinise the Government properly if nearly half those on our side are on the payroll. Equally, there will be Opposition Members who are on the “payroll”, even though they do not get paid, unless they are Whips. I have never understood why Whips get paid. We should do away with that, but that is another issue.

The role of scrutiny is really important. I have seen in a recent email that about six Select Committees have vacancies for Conservative Members. If we are having problems filling Select Committees now, what will it be like when there are 50 fewer MPs? Those 50 MPs will not, by their nature, have been in the Executive. As my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch said, there are absolutely no proposals to reduce the size of the Executive in parallel with the reduction in the number of MPs, although there should be.

I want to deal with the question of timing. In my view, it is more than likely that we will have a general election in May, if not before. Such an election would of course be fought on the current boundaries. The argument that we have to get all these boundary changes in place before 2020 is therefore nonsense. Also, it is not good for a Conservative to say that something is out of date just because it is 20 years old. It might be time to start looking at it if it is 120 years out of date, but not after just 20 years.

I want to speak briefly about something that I feel passionately about, which is the other side of our role. We spend a lot of our time here in Parliament from Monday to Thursday—or Monday to Friday if it is one of the 13 weeks in which the House sits on a Friday—doing exactly what we are doing today. The rest of the time, we are looking after our constituents. I have been looking back, and I can tell the House that in the last 100 years,
we have never had fewer than 615 Members of Parliament. Way back then, however, they did not have the constituency workload that we have now. I am not complaining about this; constituency work is a very important part of our role. For example, my Listening to Wellingborough and Rushden campaign generates an enormous amount of work. Most Members hold a surgery every week, and my estimate is that I receive at least 1,000 emails, letters and phone calls a week. We have a limited number of staff to help us with that. That workload is going to increase because we are getting rid of MEPs, and it will also increase if we reduce the number of MPs and make the constituencies larger.

I also want to look at how busy Members of Parliament are and what we have to put up with. I am going to touch on an area that does not get a lot of coverage because we do not like to talk about it, for very sensible reasons—namely, the question of security. I doubt that there is a Member in this House who has not been threatened in the last few years. We have seen the terrible death of a colleague. Other colleagues have been attacked. Only recently, I had death threats. My wife has had death threats. The police have intervened. In my first 11 years in this House, I had to dial 999 once from my constituency office because we were worried. Since the referendum, I have had to call 999 three times. I had someone outside chained to the gates of Parliament who had threatened me. I have had two bullet holes—admittedly from air pellets—put in the windows of my office. I have had my house attacked. I have had the office windows smashed. The vile stuff that we get on Twitter is unbelievable. One of the worst things that happened is that some months ago, there was a picture of my youngest son being executed by Isis. They had actually taken another child’s photo and mocked it up, but the police rang me up to say, “Where is your son?” I said, “Well, I think he’s at school”, and they said, “Well, you’d better check.”

We have to put up with all that. We have to have contact with our constituents, and I would not change any of that. Some of us will be getting enhanced security, and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority is doing its best to help with that. We have to deal with that sort of stuff. We have to deal with constituents’ problems. Some of them are just run of the mill things where we can help out. A lot of the stuff we deal with relates to local government. A lot of it is social care issues, which this House really needs to look at from a bipartisan point of view.

Some of the stuff we deal with, however, is exceptionally serious. I can remember at least two occasions where we campaigned on such matters in this House. As a result of one of those, thanks to Gordon Brown, the NHS position on some treatment changed, and a little boy who would have died got a few years extra life out of it. That sort of thing is worth while, but it is time-consuming. The fact is that if we are going to put more work on ourselves because of leaving the EU while at the same time reducing the number of MPs, we will not do the scrutiny properly, and I am afraid that our service to our constituents will go down. I feel passionately about that, and that is why we should not reduce the number of MPs.

I will tell the House about the effect that the current reforms will have in Northamptonshire. Under the scheme, we are entitled to 6.5 MPs. It is proposed that the seat of my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) goes all the way up to the borders of Leicester. There is no logic in that and no consistency. My seat will be divided between the constituencies of four different MPs, who will all be representing one council. It does not make any sense. The Boundary Commission proposals move people around willy-nilly. I would have 6,000 coming in from the Corby constituency, 3,000 going into Kettering, another 3,000 going into Northampton South and the northern villages going into the new Daventry seat, which will go up into Leicestershire. If we had the same number of MPs, Northamptonshire would be entitled to seven MPs and we would not have those problems.

I know that there are party political issues about numbers. I urge all Members to put that to one side and to think about Parliament, the Executive and why we are here. I urge everyone to support the Bill. There obviously will be issues that will need to be looked at in Committee. If the hon. Member for North West Durham would like me to, I volunteer to serve on the Committee.

11.14 am

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). He made a thoughtful and powerful contribution on the issue. Our politics might not be the same, but he is undoubtedly a champion for parliamentary democracy, and his contribution shone through in that respect.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) for introducing this important Bill. She has done a lot of work on it, and she makes a powerful point that she is not doing so for her own political advantage because, as she told the House, she is not standing at the next election. I place on record that that will be a great loss to the House. She has been a great Member of Parliament for the people of North West Durham in the time that she has been here, particularly with her expertise on education, and she will be missed. If the last act that she performs is to ensure that the House of Commons can hold the Government to account in the future, she will have done a fine job. Opposition Front Benchers fully support her Bill.

The Labour party agrees with the principle of equal-sized seats, which has long been written into law and is the main purpose of the boundary commissions’ work. Before we hear messages to the contrary, we have to remind the House that when Labour was in office, we enacted the fifth boundary review in 2006—it was politically detrimental to the Labour party in terms of seats lost—because we believed then, as we do now, that we have to have boundaries in place that fully reflect the general populace. However, the proposals to redraw our boundaries are unfair. They run the risk of being undemocratic. In many parts of the United Kingdom, they are unacceptable to the local populations.

To see evidence of that, one only needs to consider what the Government have done while espousing the need to cut the costs of an elected Chamber. The natural of the Bill, as the hon. Member for Wellingborough said, goes beyond how many MPs there should be or who represents where. It is about how democracy in the
United Kingdom functions. I remind the Minister that, in opposition, the Conservatives promised to curb the costs of government and limit the number of special advisers, but the number of these advisers has increased by more than 20%, from 79 before the May 2015 election—the most recent election—to 97 in December 2015. That is the highest recorded number for a majority Government ever. In total, this Administration have spent £45 million on wages and severance pay for special advisers during their time in office. It is curious that Government estimates show a saving of £12 million from the cutting of 50 Members of Parliament. That is roughly the same cost to the public purse as the severance packages that the previous Prime Minister handed out to those who left office at the same time as he did.

When the new occupant of 10 Downing Street came into office in July, space had to be found for those special advisers and close friends who had been so callously thrown on to the scrapheap. They might not be experts, but they surely need a chance, too. In September, the bloated Benches of the other place swelled even further when a raft of them were ennobled by the former Prime Minister, taking its membership to more than 800—far greater than the size of this House. That act debased the other place’s responsibility to check and challenge the Government, turning it into little more than an opportunity to honour former party donors and friends.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Is the hon. Gentleman implying that Baroness Chakrabarti was a Conservative appointment?

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Lady knows that the custom and practice is that when the Government increase the number of lords, other parties also have that opportunity. However—this relates to my next point—the noble Lady that the hon. Lady references is an active Member of the House of Lords and of the Labour Front-Bench team. Many Members of the other place do not make an active contribution to the work of that Chamber and that needs to be looked at.

Only yesterday, the Government announced their intention to drop proposals aimed at changing the powers of the Lords, citing that the world has changed. Well, yes, it has, and if Brexit is the reason for stepping back from curtailing the powers of the other place, it is also a sound and justifiable reason to think again about the changes proposed to this elected Chamber. Although Lords reform is not directly linked to the Bill, it is an important part of how a fully functioning democracy works. It is worth recognising that over two thirds of the public have consistently supported real reform of the other place, yet cynicism and power are all that the Government seem concerned with when overloading the other place with former spin doctors and party workers.

I am heartened, however, by the fact that other people share my concern and that we may actually have support from the most unlikely of sources. When recently asked about his responsibilities in the Lords, Baron Lloyd-Webber of Sydmonton responded: “I was put in as an honour, not as a working peer. Not as lobby fodder. I’m fed up with the fact that I keep being asked now to go in and vote for things about which I don’t have knowledge.” The other place is so bloated that it is second only to China’s National People’s Congress—the largest legislature in the world—which is odd considering that China has 1.2 billion more citizens than the UK. For a more learned and respected opinion, I ask right hon. and hon. Members to heed the warning of the Chairman of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Mr Walker), who rightly stated: “It seems perverse to reduce the number of elected representatives in this place while the Lords continues to gorge itself on new arrivals.”—[Official Report, 8 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 502.]

Wayne David: Does my hon. Friend agree that the figure of 600 to which this place will be reduced is entirely arbitrary? There is no logic or common sense behind it whatsoever.

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely. I can remember my hon. Friend making that point when the legislation was going through. Why 600? Why not 500 or 400? Why not 700 or 800? Nobody has actually set out a reason for 600. That is why it is right to retain the 650 Members of Parliament that we have today and have had in previous Parliaments.

Sir Hugo Swire: Does the hon. Gentleman really believe that anyone other than politicians believes that there are too few of us?

Andrew Gwynne: The facts are in front of us. At a time of global uncertainty and change, we need to reconsider the proposals because it is more than likely that we will have 73 fewer politicians in the coming years because no one will be elected to the European Parliament. Their workload will come to this place—not only the scrutiny of laws that are currently scrutinised in Brussels and Strasbourg, but all the extra work that goes with that. I am sure that all the lobbyists will find a track to Westminster. They will be cancelling their tickets to Brussels and will be wanting to speak about legislation to Members of Parliament here.

Although I am sure that Members on both sides will not shirk their duties, where is the sense in cutting the number of elected Members here when we have a massive job to do of unpicking 40 years of legislation regarding our relationship with the European Union and our partners within it and of scrutinising new trading arrangements with the rest of the world? Where is the sense in cutting the number of Members when the job of holding the Government to account is absolutely vital? With larger constituencies, we will inevitably have larger caseloads from our own constituents, too.

Andrew Stephenson: The hon. Gentleman is making an eloquent case for the Bill, but we had about 650 MPs before Brexit and before we went into the Common Market. We now have the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, the Northern Ireland Assembly, police and crime commissioners, and elected mayors. We are just about to get a huge devolution of power in Greater Manchester, which he knows about and has spoken eloquently about. I would therefore suggest that this House can be reduced probably even further than the modest reduction proposed in the 2011 legislation. I would go for 400 MPs. I would happily see this place reduced much further.

Andrew Gwynne: I just do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. There is no case for reducing the size of the House of Commons when we have in front of us the big task of making a success of the Government’s negotiations
with our European and global partners. If we cannot hold the Government to account on that, this House will be failing in its duty.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Another argument for retaining the current number of Members of Parliament is that we have reports, including from the former head of the civil service in no less than The House magazine, that the number of civil servants will have to be increased quite dramatically. So the civil service will increase, but the number of people overseeing and directing the civil service and making laws will be reduced. By the way, the number of Assembly Members in Northern Ireland is going to decrease.

Andrew Gwynne: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point, because we are talking about the costs of government here, not just those of Parliament. The two cannot be disentangled.

Moving on to the review itself, its unfairness and unequal nature are compounded by the fact that many individual voters have been omitted from the calculations used by the boundary commissions. I wonder how the Government can defend their position on equalising the number of voters in each constituency, which each and every Member would support, while using information based on an electoral register with close to two million voters not counted. As Government Members will be aware, the spike of newly registered voters enthused by June's referendum and the increased sign-up from May's local election mean that around 4% of the electoral register has not been counted in the review. That serious omission risks producing a distorted picture of our nation and alienating hundreds upon thousands of younger first-time voters under 30. How dare we tell the 700,000 young people who signed up in a few short months in the run-up to the referendum that we want them to engage, but that their voice is irrelevant in deciding the political map of our communities? Put plainly, the omission of close to 2 million voters has completely distorted the boundary review process, so the aim of equalising our constituency boundaries will not be possible.

Mr Harper: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was listening when I made my remarks about the independent analysis that has been done on the 2 million figure. If these 2 million voters are equally spread across the UK, they make no difference to the distribution of seats. Either what I said, quoting an independent source, is true or it is not. If he does not think it is true and he has a different analysis produced by some independent people, perhaps he could share it with the House; otherwise, this makes no difference to the distribution of seats and is a false argument.

Andrew Gwynne: What the right hon. Gentleman says is on the premise that this is equally spread, but of course it is not. There were increases in the number of people on the electoral register in every constituency, but in parts of the country where there has historically been under-registration, the spikes were larger than in other areas.
Sir Oliver Letwin: I should begin by saying that, like the hon. Member for North West Durham, I believe that it makes sense for us to consider these issues as though we had a population that needs to be served by a system of government that works in the interests of that population. We should not be thinking about this simply in terms of the House of Commons, which is a matter of more concern to many people in this place than it is to many of our citizens, who want to be well governed but who do not know much about and do not much like the workings of the House of Commons. The House of Commons certainly should not think of itself as a model to the world, because, as the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) rightly said, there is currently much scepticism about the organs of our democracy.

Mr Bone: My right hon. Friend will doubtless make a powerful and interesting speech, but does he come to this debate with the belief that there should be a separation of powers, with an Executive outside this House? That may colour his views in this debate.

Sir Oliver Letwin: As my hon. Friend knows from previous conversations, I do take that view and have done so, uniquely in the Conservative party, I believe, for about the past 40 years. I shall briefly touch on that at a much later stage in my remarks, but for now I simply wish to observe that it is important that we think about this issue as grown-ups who are trying to look after the interests of our fellow citizens, not as people who happen to be sitting on these green Benches trying to look after the interests of the House of Commons, which is an artefact of no value whatsoever unless it is part of the good governance of our country in the interests of its citizens.

This is the first time I have attended a debate on a Friday for very many years, and I was surprised to discover that I was quite interested in the nature of the debate. It seems that, from time to time, there have actually been some arguments made—that is a rare thing to hear in the House of Commons. In principle, three kinds of arguments have been going on. The first is whether equalisation is the aim of the current Act governing the Boundary Commission activity or whether it is about gerrymandering. The second is about whether equalisation matters or it does not matter. The third is the question raised by the hon. Member for Newport West: is it right to make incremental change in pursuit of incremental improvements when large questions about the constitution as a whole also need to be addressed? I want to discuss each of those points in turn.

First, I turn to the question of whether the motive for and effect of the current Act of Parliament governing the Boundary Commission’s activities is equalisation or gerrymandering. As I would have expected, my right hon. Friend dealt very effectively with the fact that the current Boundary Commission review does not include reference to the people who registered at the last moment. I was the Minister who brought to the House arrangements to ensure that people who registered at the very last moment were able to vote in the referendum, and it is certainly right that they should have been registered. My right hon. Friend dealt very well with whether the fact that they registered after the Boundary Commission figures were produced affects the outcome of the review to any significant extent.

However, we do not need to rely on my right hon. Friend’s view on that because the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), who interjected from the Labour Benches, blew the whole argument out of the water when he quoted, quite sensibly, the Library figures. They showed that the total effect, even on an analysis less favourable to the argument I am making than that which was provided by the independent source for my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean—the House of Commons Library analysis—the total net difference was two extra in London and one fewer in the south-west and in Northern Ireland. There is no significant distributional impact.

Wayne David: The right hon. Gentleman does not mention the knock-on effect: a number of other boundaries are affected as a consequence of that change.

Sir Oliver Letwin: As a matter of fact, very few are. Even if there were a few, the net distributional impact is very slight. That has to be put in context to be understood. This was another point that my right hon. Friend made very clearly. I will come in a moment to the point that the Bill very clearly has the purpose and the effect of ensuring that we will not proceed with redistribution before 2020. If we do not proceed with it, the disequilibrium—the lack of equivalence that Labour’s spokesman, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), said his party favours—would be far, far greater than the discrepancy would be, even on the House of Commons Library figures, if the distributional impacts from the new registration were not taken into account. So either equalisation matters or it does not matter.

Mr Harper: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Oliver Letwin: In a moment.

It appears that we have cross-party consent, at least on the face of it, to equalisation. Equalisation will be achieved to a far greater degree by proceeding with the current arrangements than by not proceeding with them. The only further question we have to ask is whether it was the hon. Member for North West Durham, who introduced the Bill, or my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean and my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) who were right when the discussion went on about whether it was possible to proceed with the hon. Lady’s Bill and for it to become an Act, and to proceed with the Boundary Commission proposals in time for 2020.

As it happens, I spent quite a lot of the past few years talking to the boundary commissions about these issues. I am prepared to say in Parliament, and I think it is not improper for me to say in Parliament, that I am absolutely certain from what they told me that there is not the ghost of a chance—and I think the spokesman for the
Opposition, who appears to be a clever person, is perfectly aware that there is not a ghost of a chance—that we could have a redistribution before 2020 if we were to proceed with the hon. Lady’s Bill and it became an Act. That is, I think, the very purpose of the Bill.

Mr Harper: I am very pleased that my right hon. Friend finished that powerful point before he gave way to me, as it highlights what the Bill is really about. On the so-called missing voters, the point that he was just developing is that if we are not able to proceed with the boundary changes that the commissions are currently working on, we will fight the next election on seats that are drawn on electoral registers dating from 2000, so not only would we not be including the 2 million people who registered for the referendum and the 700,000 people who registered subsequently, but we would be missing the millions and millions of people who have registered to vote since 2000, and, by the way, we would be including all the people who were on the register in 2000 but who, sadly, are no longer with us.

Sir Oliver Letwin: My right hon. Friend is clearly right about that. It is a matter of fact, not of opinion. There would be less approximation to an equal distribution of population per seat and of registered voters per seat if we do not proceed with the current proposals than if we do. The Bill would therefore diminish the chances of there being an election based on roughly equivalent numbers of electors in each seat.

Mr Chope: On the question of whether the Bill is implementable in the timescale set out by its proponents, does my right hon. Friend recall that the Boundary Commission gave evidence to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in the previous Parliament to the effect that it would not be possible to make the changes unless the commission started, as it did this time, in February 2016? That was the latest point at which it could start if it was to produce changes in time for October 2018.

Sir Oliver Letwin: Yes, my hon. Friend is right. That is the evidence that the Boundary Commission gave, but I was always, as I know he was when he was a Minister, suspicious of claims by agencies of the state that things could not be done on certain timescales, so I went to the trouble for some while to interrogate that set of propositions and to look specifically at all the things that could be done to diminish the elapsed time by doing things in parallel rather than in series, by constricting various forms of consultation, and by accelerating the responses to the consultations. I am satisfied that the Boundary Commission genuinely in this case could do not this with any semblance of propriety. It is not a matter of being able to overcome those problems by giving it more money or more resources. It simply could not do the job. I think the spokesman for the Opposition is perfectly aware of these facts and that it is his intention to ensure that we do not proceed with equalisation.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): If we are in the business of practicality, with the right hon. Gentleman’s long experience of contamination in Government, what makes him think that hugely controversial proposals lack any consensus, that have united the Opposition parties across the House against them and that are opposed by independent-minded Conservatives, have any chance whatsoever of getting an affirmative vote and an Order in Council some time in 2018? All this upset and nonsense is for nothing unless the Government start to listen to other voices.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman. My guess is that the proposals will get consent. Time will tell. We will also see whether they get consent in the other place, which is much the greater question. Clearly, we have seen in the past few days the Government withdraw from measures intended to make it easier to ensure that if this place consents, the other place can be made to consent. Nevertheless, my own guess is that both places will consent. We will see.

In this debate we are not talking about whether or not the other place will consent. We are talking about whether we should adopt legislation that would prevent any chance of our having the opportunity even to assent. My point is that if we do not have that opportunity, we can be sure that we will not have a more equalised set of seats. Of course, the right hon. Gentleman, who is one of the canniest politicians in the United Kingdom over a very long period, very well knows that that is the case and he has a very great interest.

I want to address our party interests for a moment. It is as clear as day, although many Members who have spoken have been coy about being explicit about it, that there are party interests on both sides of the Chamber. It is perfectly true that equalisation would remove a bias in the electoral system that has existed against the Conservative party for a little while. It used to be the other way round at one stage; these things happen over time. The fact is—it is quite an important fact—that it is not in the interests of a political party to have the boundaries redrawn for 2020. As things currently stand in the polling, the Conservative party will have a massive majority in the House of Commons after the 2020 election and—[Interruption.] No, indeed, not in Scotland.

If things go terribly wrong between now and 2020, I do not believe that these changes will protect the Conservative majority under those circumstances. My whole experience of politics, which I suspect is shared by the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), whose experience is longer and deeper than mine, is that when the mood of the country shifts, it does not make too much difference what the system is—it shifts pretty decisively one way or the other. So, although there are party interests here, they are not nearly as important as either side may believe, and we should be trying to do a sensible and right thing, rather than something that is in the interests of one party or the other.

Alex Salmond: I am sure the right hon. Gentleman is totally disinterested, but I am also sure he is aware that the Scottish proposals, which would be of great interest to me, would mean that, on the same votes as at the last election, the SNP would have all the seats bar one in Scotland. Does he not understand, in a disinterested way, that I am trying to save the last Conservative MP in Scotland?

Sir Oliver Letwin: Actually, no. With his typical brilliance, the right hon. Gentleman is alluringly enticing us to avoid noticing that there would be a reduced number of
Scottish Members altogether in this House. As his party currently controls almost all the Scottish seats, it is to his advantage to maintain the number of Scottish Members and, indeed, a system in which Scottish electors are typically over-represented by the number of their Members of Parliament, almost all of whom are from the SNP.

As I say, I do not actually believe that that is the material question. The material question is whether having the current set of proposals being operated by the Boundary Commission would equalise better than not having them, the answer to which is clearly yes. Is it right to equalise more rather than less? The Opposition and the Government appear to agree that that is right, and even my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough agrees that it is right. Are we going to equalise more or less if we proceed with this Bill rather than the current arrangements? The answer is clearly that we are more likely to equalise better if we proceed with the current arrangements rather than the Bill.

I want to turn now to the second question, about the number of Members of Parliament. There was a very interesting contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough, and the Opposition spokesman made some echoing remarks about it. Both of them were really trying to argue that 650 is a better number—incidentally, I do not suggest that either of them suggested that there was a perfection about 650—than 600 for the purposes of doing what they each described as holding the Government to account. That is obviously a serious argument, in the sense that in a House of Commons in which 99.9% of its Members were on the payroll, the 0.1% of its Members who were not on the payroll would have some difficulty holding the 99.9% to account.

I do not personally believe that the difference between 650 and 600—or, while we are at it, 600 and 550, or 600 and 500—makes terribly much difference to the effectiveness with which this House is able to hold the Government to account. My experience is that one good MP, one effective Select Committee or one Opposition spokesman who knows what they are doing can hold a Government to account very powerfully, and a very large number of incompetent and inadequate people sitting on these Benches can wholly fail to hold Governments to account. I do not believe there is any clear relationship, still less any systemic relationship, between the number of people entitled to sit on these green Benches—most of whom, mostly, are not here—and the amount of actual, effective scrutiny of Government. It is quality, not quantity, that affects the scrutiny of Government.

It seems to me that we should address a different question in looking at whether 650 is a better number than 600 or vice versa—of course I accept that neither is a perfect number, and there is no absolute standard in terms of the right numbers. I think there is a certain myopia on this. We have to open our eyes and ask ourselves just how we look to the world. People have mentioned the other place, which, incidentally, I think is ludicrously structured altogether and is definitely in need of reform. Indeed, I tried very hard to get it reformed into a proper elected Chamber, and I shall go on arguing that case, because it is the only thing that will save that part of our democracy and actually create some checks and balances in our system. People have observed that the other place is now the largest legislature other than that in China, which obviously has more than 1 billion people in it. That may be true, but there is another legislature in this country that is almost as large—it is here. We have 650 Members of Parliament seeking to be the primary source of legislation, if I can put it that way, for 60 million people. In the United States, there are 100 Senators, who are counterpoised against, roughly speaking, the same number of representatives as we have in this House. If we add the two numbers in the United States together, the total is not that much greater than our 650, but those people are looking after the interests of 300 million people, instead of 60 million people.

Mr Bone: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Oliver Letwin: I will, but let me just anticipate what I think my hon. Friend might be about to say. It used to be said that the reason that is appropriate is that the states in the United States have so much power. It is no longer the case—this is very much the point raised by various of my hon. Friends—that we live in a wholly centralised system; we live in something that is getting very much closer to being a federal system, in which vast amounts of the power that used to reside in this place have been devolved in one way or another to Administrations elsewhere, and more of that is going on all the time.

We are vastly overweight; there are many more of us MPs per head of population than in most other serious democracies. I am not aware of any Member of Parliament who could not handle some more constituents. Now, I accept that it is more difficult for those who live in and represent seats that are much larger. My own seat is middling, in the sense that it is 400 square miles. I do not have the advantage that urban MPs have of representing a very small patch, but I am not, of course, challenged in the way that some of our Scottish colleagues, for example, are with their vast seats, and I do accept, therefore, the reason for some exceptions. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean said, that issue was debated when we moved from 650 to 600, and a balanced judgment was struck about creating enough exceptions to try to deal with those who face particular geographical problems.

Mr Bone: My right hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech, which appears to be plausible, until we listen to the substance. He is talking about the United States of America, where there is a wholly different system. There is the split of powers, and, of course, the states have their rights. The comparison is completely unfair, and my right hon. Friend might want to look at look at the point again.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I think that is the nearest thing to a compliment I have ever received from my hon. Friend, and it is probably the nearest I am ever going to get, so I shall celebrate it quietly. I do not accept the second part of his argument—the first part I have already dealt with. He asserts that, in the absence of a separation of powers, which, as I have said, I would actually prefer to see, the danger from the numbers of MPs on the payroll, or the crypto-payroll of the Opposition, is that nobody is really holding anybody to account. Actually, the dynamic of this House of Commons—one can see it sitting here or standing here right now—is a dynamic of dialectic. The principal form of the holding to account...
of the Government of the day resides on the Opposition Front Bench, not, I regret to say this, with my Back-Bench colleagues, among whom I now number myself. It is the quality of the Front-Bench arguments from the Opposition that principally challenges the Government of the day. This House is designed to reflect that, and that is the reason we do not sit in a circle, but opposite one another. That is behind the whole structure of debate in this House. Indeed, the timetable of this House is organised on that principle. If my hon. Friend’s charmingly nostalgic, although never-existing picture of a House of Commons that was holding Governments to account from the Back Benches were accurate, we would not recently have introduced a bit of Backbench Business; we would have substituted Opposition days, of which there are many, with Back-Bench days.

Mr Bone: Absolutely. Good idea.

Sir Oliver Letwin: My hon. Friend would be very much in favour of that, but that is not how this place works or has ever worked. This place works in terms of the dialectic between Opposition and Government. It is a very powerful dialectic. It reaches certain crucial moments each week at question times. It reaches its most crucial moment at Prime Minister’s questions, and that is the jousting match—often, alas, not terribly illuminating, but nevertheless—that causes the Government to be on their toes most, and that forces Prime Ministers to find out what is going on in their own Governments and to defend them across the Dispatch Box. That is much more powerful as a form of holding people to account than anything that can be done from the Back Benches, and it is nothing to do with the numbers. So I reject the argument that the numbers have any significant impact on the ability of this House to hold the Government to account.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that much of the change in Government policy in recent months has come as a result of Conservative Back Benchers scrutinising and challenging the Government when they think they have got it wrong rather than challenges from Opposition Members?

Sir Oliver Letwin: I agree that at a time when, regrettably, there is a rather weak Opposition, and when there are, as it happens, many very enterprising Government Back Benchers, not all of whom are willing to go along with everything, we will get cases in which the Government Back Benchers do perform a very important role in holding the Government to account. However, that is due to the quality and not the quantity of the contributions that are made by my hon. Friends on the Back Benches. We could have hundreds of lemons sitting here and not having the slightest effect on the Government of the day, or we could have five, or three, very effective Back Benchers who could cause very considerable trouble for the Government of the day. It is about quality, not quantity.

I want finally to address the interesting point made by the hon. Member for Newport West, whose argument was different in kind from that of the hon. Member for North West Durham and the other speakers. I hope he would agree that I am not doing his argument any injustice if I say that he was arguing, first, that there are many large constitutional deficiencies in Britain today—and Opposition with which I abundantly agree—and secondly, that it makes no sense to try to change one particular element of the whole picture, though he admitted that it was an element that probably did require change, in the absence of an overall and thoroughgoing change of the whole system.

That is a very serious argument, but it is also very seriously wrong. I think it is wrong for two reasons: first, practically, and secondly, theoretically. Of course, in the end, the practical argument matters more than the theoretical one. The practical truth is that we are not going to get the kind of constitutional change that I think he, and certainly I, want any time in the near future. I personally was partly responsible for the total failure to secure the reform of the House of Lords. The House of Lords, in its current structure, is a wholly indefensible object. No rational human being could possibly argue that it is a good idea to have a legislature constituted in the way that the House of Lords is constituted. Indeed, I never heard anybody, in the whole of that debate, make an argument in favour of the House of Lords as currently constituted, except that they thought it was the lesser evil. What they meant by that varied. Some of the people I failed to convince said that what is better about the House of Lords is that it is totally useless, so it cannot do anything, and so the House of Commons reigns supreme. Some said that what is better about it is that it is not another House of Commons. Some said that what is better about it is that it cannot intervene in such a way as to prevent the Government of the day having their will, or create the kinds of checks and balances that I suspect that the hon. Gentleman wants, and certainly I want, to see in our constitution.

There were many reasons why people defended the House of Lords, all of which were of the character that things as they are indefensible, but less bad than they would be if we had a properly elected Chamber at the other end of the building. They were a rainbow coalition of people with different points of view on just that one point about the reform of the House of Lords, which made it quite impossible. There was a fascinating interchange between my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean and Opposition Members, and indeed my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough, about whether we had to withdraw the proposal. By golly, we had to withdraw it, because we had done the sums and we knew perfectly well that we were going to get nowhere near being able to carry it through. This was something that had been in the manifestos of both the two largest parties, and was the primary goal, once AV—the alternative vote—had bitten the dust, of the minor party in the coalition. All three parties had it in their manifestos, and one of them really cared about it, yet we could not even get that through.

Therefore, the chances of getting through major constitutional reform to create a system of checks and balances based on the separation of powers in a written constitution, which are things this country certainly needs, are very dim indeed. In fact, my guess is that some decades—possibly some centuries—from now, people will still be standing in this place talking about those issues. If we were to wait for that before making incremental
change, we would have registers that are 50, 100 or 200 years out of date. That would not, practically speaking, be a sensible way to proceed.

Mr Bone: The point that I hope my right hon. Friend and I can agree on is that the Government decided not to proceed with the Bill on the Floor of the House without a programme motion. It is not that they would not have got it through, but that they refused to give up the time to allow it to be debated without a programme motion.

Sir Oliver Letwin: We ought to have a historical seminar about this. My hon. Friend is only partly right. It is perfectly true, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean said, that if we had tried to proceed without a programme motion, the main sacrifice is that we would have been unable to do almost anything else that was in our programme for government and that the Government needed to do.

Mr Bone: It was a choice.

Sir Oliver Letwin: It was indeed a choice. What my hon. Friend does not recognise, though, is that it was perfectly clear, having done the sums, that we were not, at the end of it all, going to get anything through, so we would have achieved the miracle of sacrificing almost the entire rest of our programme for the sake of achieving nothing whatsoever. That was not an attractive prospect, and that is why we withdrew the proposal, even though the corollary of doing so—this is the supreme irony of discussing the matter today—was that the Liberal Democrats in the coalition refused to support the implementation of the very changes that we are now discussing.

Paul Flynn: I am grateful for the serious attention that the right hon. Gentleman is giving to the points raised. Does he think that given the current situation of intense public cynicism, it is unwise to put forward a piecemeal measure that advantages only one party and intensifies the problems of scrutiny and representation that we have in this country when we are nowhere near to making sure that every vote counts?

Sir Oliver Letwin: No, because, as I have tried to argue in the first two parts of my speech, first, I do not think that the changes going forward at the moment are simply gerrymandering, but that they are fairer. Secondly, I do not believe that reducing the numbers reduces the quality of accountability. I therefore reject the hon. Gentleman’s argument. I accept that if it were a bad thing to do, it would be a bad thing to do piecemeal, but if it is a good thing to do, it is a good thing to do piecemeal, even though it would be better if we could—unfortunately we cannot—achieve major constitutional reform alongside it.

Wayne David: Surely the lesson of our discussion about Lords reform, and of the debate about boundary changes, is that the only way to bring about major constitutional change of this kind is on the basis of political consensus between all the parties.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I am afraid that I was receiving instructions to be brief while the hon. Gentleman was speaking, so I did not really gather the purport of his remarks, which I shall have to read in Hansard—I do apologise.

Even from a theoretical point of view, it is not proper for us to think that we should not make incremental changes that are to the benefit of the constitution simply because they do not achieve everything that could be achieved through full constitutional change. The reason that I do not think that that is true theoretically is that it is not how British history has proceeded. The whole of our history has been a process of incremental change of our constitution. There has not been a thoroughgoing review of our constitution since 1688, and even that was pretty ramshackle. Certainly, 1216 was extraordinarily ramshackle. If Members actually read Magna Carta, as opposed to the propaganda about it, they will see that it did very little other than enforce that the actions of the king be done through his court rather than by sole fiat. Some significant changes were made in 1688, but an awful lot was left undone. We then went through a whole series of incremental changes to create the universal franchise, which took a very long time indeed. On the arguments of the hon. Member for Newport West, we might well have had any of those changes, because we would have been waiting the whole time for a proper Bill that would have moved us immediately to a full universal franchise, which was obviously the right thing to do from the beginning.

The fact is that our constitution has evolved by slow, incremental change. I do not welcome that fact. I think that the United States is blessed in having had a constitution that was more or less fully formed from the beginning. By creating the Basic Law all in one go, I think that we did a better job in Germany after the war than we have done in Britain, but alas, that ain’t how things are done in the UK. It is in the spirit of our constitutional tradition to make incremental changes that make things fairer and enable us to proceed. That is what the current proposals do. The Bill would prevent us from doing that, so I support the Government’s rejection of it.

12.9 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin). It is obvious from his appearance here on a Friday morning that the Government’s loss is the gain of Friday Back-Bench business. I sensed the lemons bristling a little when he referred unkindly to some of his fellow Back Benchers. I am sure that they will respond to him in kind.

We overwhelmingly support the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass), and we will do what we can to ensure that it progresses through Parliament and becomes legislation. In fact, we debated the issue a few weeks ago, when we invited the Government to reconsider their plans to reduce the number of MPs, and encouraged them to have a look at what is actually going on in our democracy and Parliament.

We profoundly believe that there is no case whatsoever for increasing the number of unelected Lords in that absurd institution down the corridor while cutting the number of parliamentarians elected by the people. It is simply absurd that, in this mother of Parliaments, more parliamentarians are appointed by a Prime Minister than are directly elected by the people. That is the cornerstone of our objection to what the Government are doing with the boundaries.

Of course, we do not want any Members from Scotland to have to come down to this Parliament. We have a slight hankering that the Scottish people are probably
better placed than the Westminster Tories to run the
nation of Scotland, and that the people of England
could just about muddle along without us coming down
every week to involve ourselves in their affairs. That is
our starting point, but, as long as we are part of a UK
unitary Parliament, and as long as this House exercises
significant and real powers over our nation, it is right
and proper that we have the correct number of
parliamentarians from Scotland to look after the vital
interests of our nation and our institutions.

Wayne David: I agree with much of the hon. Gentleman’s
criticism of the House of Lords, but does he want the
second Chamber to be abolished or reformed?

Pete Wishart: It needs to be abolished. It is unformable.
It is an absurd circus. I am not a unicameralist: I believe
that a nation as complex as the United Kingdom requires
a scrutinising Chamber. Some of my hon. Friends take
a different view, but my personal view is that we need a
scrutinising Chamber that is properly elected.

What an embarrassing humbling the Government
received yesterday when they had to withdraw the
Strathclyde review. You cannot take on the boys in
ermine and get done like that! The Government will
take on their overwhelming and embarrassing
defeat at the hands of the House of Lords. They took
on the aristocrats. Those guys won battles in the medieval
times in Westminster contests might find himself a
parliamentarian through the back door.

I hope that the Government reconsider their approach
to the Lords. All they are going to do is increase the
number of peers. We now face the prospect over the
next few days of having the dark lord Farage. The bad
Baron Boot-Them-out-of-Here is going to be a feature
of our democracy. Someone who has been beaten eight
times in Westminster contests might find himself a
parliamentarian through the back door.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend
think that the system of appointments to the Lords by
the Prime Minister is an example of the royal prerogative
being abused and used irresponsibly?

Pete Wishart: My hon. Friend makes a very good
point. Yes, it is. As we are into a debate about the
exercise of the royal prerogative, we should consider
that, because he makes an interesting point.

The bad baron Farage will be joining 800 or so of the
weirdest parliamentarians to be found anywhere in the
world, in the second largest Chamber in the world. He
will be joining not just the cronies, the donors and the
party placemen, but the Church of England bishops,
the aristocrats and, even worse, the Liberal Democrats—the
Chamber of unelected horrors.

In the next Parliament, if the House of Lords continues
to increase in the way that it has, we face the real
prospect of something approaching 1,000 unelected
Lords to scrutinise the work of 600 Members of Parliament.
We will almost have two unelected parliamentarians for
every elected one, yet we have the gall to lecture the
developing world about the quality of their democracy.
we have new things to do. We know how hard we work, and it is almost disgraceful to observe what happens in the House of Lords, with people refusing to turn up and even complaining about having to turn up to go about their work.

I want to talk a little about what I think was first mentioned by the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn): the findings of the Electoral Reform Society. That is very powerful information, and there could be a crisis of scrutiny. If the boundary proposals go through, 23% of all MPs could have ministerial jobs. There will therefore be fewer Back Benchers to scrutinise the work of Government. There will be an impact on our Select Committees.

Someone mentioned the Scottish Parliament, where Members have to double up on several Committees. That is one of our features; it has never been a feature of this House, but that reality might confront us in future. Members of Parliament will be expected to serve not only on one or even two Committees, but perhaps on three Committees in order for the Government to be scrutinised. We could end up with 34% of all Conservative Members on the Government payroll. That is just not good for democracy, and it is appalling for scrutiny. It might be very good for some Conservative Back Benchers who are looking at their career prospects, but it is not good for this nation or for what we are doing in this House.

As a couple of Members have mentioned, this is being done at exactly the wrong time. Seventy-three Members of the European Parliament will no longer be 53, so we will have lost almost a quarter of Scottish Members of Parliament. If this goes through, there will be an impact on our Select Committees.

This plan was dreamed up pre-Brexit. The new Government have been very good at binning all the Cameroonian nonsense. They have their own clear agenda and view about how the Government should proceed. Here is an invitation to them: bin this one—put it on the bonfire of the nonsensical Cameroonian legislation—and make their own decision. The plan was concocted pre-Brexit, and it is negative and bad to toy with this very valuable feature and to erode the constituency link. It is a wonderful sense of the type of things that interest them. I believe that it is very bad geographically.

This plan was dreamed up pre-Brexit. The new Government have been very good at binning all the Cameroonian nonsense. They have their own clear agenda and view about how the Government should proceed. Here is an invitation to them: bin this one—put it on the bonfire of the nonsensical Cameroonian legislation—and make their own decision. The plan was concocted pre-Brexit, and it is no longer fit for purpose in the new real world.

Ian Blackford rose—

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

Pete Wishart: Oh, here we go. My hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) caught my eye first.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. On geography, the fact is that three MPs in the Highlands will represent 33,000 sq km—40% of the landmass of Scotland, with less than 5% of the MPs. It will be about 180 miles, or four and a half hours’ drive, across each of the three constituencies. How on earth are people supposed to be properly represented when it will be so difficult for any elected Member of Parliament to get around their constituency? Argyll, Bute and Lochaber will have more than 30 islands. Why are we not including the islands off the west coast of Scotland among the constituencies to be protected?

Pete Wishart: I think we should hear from the other part of the highlands.

Drew Hendry: We have heard that the ludicrous proposals include the meaninglessly named Highland North constituency, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan) pointed out, will be as big as Northern Ireland. Is my hon. Friend aware that the other proposed constituency, Inverness and Skye, would be the size of the country of Cyprus? We do not need Aristotle to point out that that is bad philosophy, but Thales would surely point out that it is very bad geographically.

Pete Wishart: That was eloquently put by my hon. Friend. All I can say is that I have a very modest 80 miles from east to west in my constituency, which feels decidedly small compared with the challenges and issues faced by both my hon. Friends. I am grateful to them for making that point, because it emphasises that when we equalise constituencies, we must take our geography into account, particularly the very challenging geography in the Scottish highlands.

Hannah Bardell: Does my hon. Friend agree that this is also about identity? My constituency of Livingston, which is in the county of West Lothian, prides itself on its uniqueness, as it lies between the two great cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. Changing the constituency to Edinburgh Pentland and Livingston makes it sound as though it is just an extension of Edinburgh, which it absolutely is not.

Pete Wishart: We have heard that point again and again during this debate, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right.

What is fantastic and one of the key things that we have got right—I talk about things when they go right in this House—is the constituency link. It is a wonderful and marvellous thing to have the privilege to represent constituencies in defined areas, where we can build up a relationship with our constituents over the years. I have had the pleasure of being a Member of Parliament in this House for 15 years, and I have got to know my constituents. I know exactly the type of issues they will bring to me. From having represented them, I have a sense of the type of things that interest them. I believe that it is negative and bad to toy with this very valuable feature and to erode the constituency link.

When I was first elected, there were 72 Scottish Members of Parliament. If this goes through, there will be 53, so we will have lost almost a quarter of Scottish Members of Parliament within 10 years. I accept that some of that has been necessary—it was right and proper—because, with the Scottish Parliament, it was thought that the number of Members of Parliament
should be reduced. However, to have 53 MPs to represent an area the size of Scotland will be very demanding and challenging for many of my hon. Friends.

In the last debate on this matter I mentioned that if the changes go through we will have more Members of the House of Lords from Scotland than we will MPs: I had detected 61 Lords with registered Scottish addresses. Since then I have done a little more research, and have found that I have five—this one solitary Member for Perth and North Perthshire has the benefit of five Members of the House of Lords. So, just to be equitable, how about we equalise the House of Lords along with the House of Commons? I would quite happily gift some of my Lords to urban constituencies, so that they could have the benefit of one of them serving them. Perhaps we should start to think about how to do that. People often ask us what we will do with the Scottish Lords when we become independent. I will put the House’s mind at rest: as a parting gift and gesture of largesse we are quite happy to donate the Scottish Lords to the rest of the United Kingdom. You cannot get more generous than that.

I will finish by saying a little about what I think the boundary changes are really about. I do not believe they are about reducing the cost of Parliament, because the amount is peanuts in terms of budgets—it does not amount to much at all. This is all to do with trying to stymie the Labour party. That is what is behind all this. I have spoken privately to Conservative Members who have come to me and told me that that is what it is about—to ensure that the Labour party never gets back into government again. They want to do it now, while they have a majority. But the Labour party really does not need any assistance in becoming an electoral liability. It is doing it perfectly well on its own. It does not need Conservative assistance—let it get on with making itself unelectable. It is doing a fantastic job.

In trying to stymie the Labour party, however, the Conservatives are starting to erode the quality of our democracy. That is a dangerous thing given all the other knockabout stuff going on. Mucking about with something that seems to be working quite well and is one of the essential parliamentary devices that enable Back Benchers to address issues that concern us and our constituents and, in some cases, to secure good, sustainable changes in public policy and legislation. I have successfully piloted two private Member’s Bills on to the statute book, the Marine Navigation Act 2013 and the Deep Sea Mining Act 2014, and I am very proud to have done so.

I do not agree with the provisions in the Bill that reverse the decision to reduce the number of Members of this House from 650 to 600. I stood on a manifesto in 2015 that said that we would “reduce the number of MPs to 600 to cut the cost of politics” and I stand by that pledge.

Mr Kevan Jones: Is the hon. Lady not an example of that very rare thing, a turkey voting for Christmas? When these changes were first mooted in 2010, the main losers in Cornwall would have been the Liberal Democrats. If the changes go forward, some of her Tory colleagues will surely lose their seats. Why would she want to support that?

Mrs Murray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his view, but I happen to disagree. I am hopeful that, at the next election, Cornwall will still be represented by Conservative MPs, and I stand by that election pledge. My constituents voted me to this place to represent them, knowing that that was my pledge.

I have a lot of respect for the hon. Member for North West Durham, but I have to tell you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I was going to raise a point of order during her speech this morning. In the interest of the smooth transition of the debate, however, and having asked to make a speech, I have chosen instead to raise the matter now. The hon. Lady said that she had received more representations on her Bill from Cornish people than from anyone else. I am sure she respects the unwritten protocol in this House that if representations are made to us from another MP’s constituents, we inform the MP and usually pass on the representations. I am quite happy to take an intervention, so that she can confirm that none of those representations came from South East Cornwall because nothing has been passed on to me.

Pat Glass: I do not know where they came from. They said they were from Cornwall. They contacted me by email and on Twitter. The hon. Lady can look on Twitter and see.

Mrs Murray: I just felt that I ought to put it on the record that I, a Member for a Cornish constituency, have not been informed of any emails sent to another MP. I am quite disappointed about that.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am not quite sure what the hon. Lady’s point is. From what she is saying, she would not change her mind anyway, so it would be a complete waste of time her constituents lobbying her on the Bill.

Mrs Murray: It is a case of treating other Members, no matter what their political affiliation, with some respect.

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend is making an eloquent point. The Guardian today cites people saying they are against Cornwall being split in half. Any Member they contact should be telling them that there is a
12-week consultation. We are well into it now, but people can still submit representations through the Boundary Commission website. They can still lobby and they can still change things. More than 40,000 representations were made by members of the public during the 2013 abandoned review. Surely, as Members of Parliament, we should be encouraging people to engage with the process, not trying to scrap or abort it, so that we have a general election based on electoral figures that are 20 years out of date.

**Mrs Murray:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I would like to quote the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg). I know that he has already been quoted today and it is not something that I do often in this place, but he outlined well how we compare around the world. He said:

“Reducing the number of MPs allows us to bring our oversized House of Commons into line with legislatures across the world. The House of Commons is the largest directly elected chamber in the European Union, and it’s half as big again as the US House of Representatives.”

My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) mentioned that last point earlier. The Government have estimated that the reduction in the number of MPs will save £66 million over the course of the Parliament. I am quite disappointed with Opposition Members who seem to have made light of that figure. That money could be focused on looking after and benefiting our constituents.

**Mr Kevan Jones:** The hon. Lady, using the larger figure spun by Cameron, talks about £66 million, but the figure is £12 million a year. She was part of a Government who spent £9 million on a leaflet arguing their case for the EU. Where is her perspective?

**Mrs Murray:** If the hon. Gentleman refers back, he will see that I did not agree with that. I am sure that these savings would be welcomed by taxpayers across the country. We often have to take difficult decisions to try and balance the country’s books, so should this place not do what it can to contribute? We often have to take difficult decisions to try and balance the country’s books, and it stipulated that no constituency should cross over to Devon. As far as I remember, that was supported by my Cornwall colleagues at the time. Unfortunately, we lost that argument, and the legislation was enacted, with priority given to providing each elector with an equal say in who runs the country. Our Cornwall population is not currently such that a cross-over seat with Devon was avoidable—no matter how undesirable it was.

Last month, I upset councillors when I made a comment about Cornwall Council. Since then, rather than focus on local government matters, the council has been spending money on a Queen’s counsel and has convened a full council meeting to discuss the very subject that we are debating today—parliamentary boundaries. I will not call the council what I called it in this place last month but leave my constituents to make up their own minds on whether that is good use of resources.

I am similarly concerned about the cost of the Bill. This provision would be an unnecessary disruption to the boundary commissions’ well advanced reviews and undoubtedly mean more unnecessary costs, but the Government want to make an estimated £66 million saving. Although the hon. Member for North West Durham is no longer in her place, I ask her where she would find this money if not from legislation—would it come from further cuts to our NHS, our schools or our armed forces? I say no.

**Mr Jones:**

**Mrs Murray:** I am just coming to my conclusion. Let us kick this expensive piece of legislation into the long grass where it belongs. Let us save some money, so that we can invest in our NHS, our schools and our armed forces, as a Conservative Government would, instead of spending money on politicians, which Labour seems to want to do.

12.39 pm

**Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP):** Members of my party are in favour of equalisation in terms of constituencies, but we are resolutely opposed to the Government’s proposals for a reduction in the number of MPs, and we will therefore support the Bill.

The general arguments applying to the whole United Kingdom have already been well rehearsed today, so I shall not go through them all. I will say, however, that I agree with what has been said about increasing the power of the Executive at the expense of parliamentary scrutiny, and I agree that it is wrong for us to deal with the number of Members of the House of Commons without addressing the issue of the House of Lords. I agree that although we shall have 73 fewer Members of the European Parliament, the workload of this Parliament will increase enormously, and, given that it has more Departments, many more civil servants are apparently to be employed. What about the cost of that, and what about the cost of the extra special advisers? It has not
been mentioned. Meanwhile, the number of legislators sent here by the people is to decrease.

Those general arguments apply, but I want to deal specifically with the impact of the Government’s proposals on Northern Ireland. The parties in Northern Ireland are taking steps—voluntarily, under the fresh start agreement—not under the direction of the Government here—to reduce the number of Members of the Legislative Assembly by more than 16% by the time of the next election. We are losing our three Members of the European Parliament, all of whom do a great job—although I must declare an interest, as one of them is a close relative of mine.

Reducing the number of seats in Northern Ireland from 18 to 17 may seem a small matter. However, the boundary proposals, as well as being a dog’s breakfast, have managed to achieve a consensus that used to be very rare in Northern Ireland, although, thankfully, it is now increasingly common: they have attracted cross-party, cross-community opposition. One party seems to be in favour of the proposals, but all the others are against them. If they are passed unamended, the majority of the Northern Ireland seats in the House of Commons will be represented—or rather, sadly, not represented—by abstainers and abstentionists. That is an unconscionable position.

Moreover, it should be borne in mind that the boundaries in Northern Ireland also dictate the Assembly elections. The number of Members per constituency, elected under the system of proportional representation, will be reduced from six to five. If the balance of the Assembly is at stake, through ill-considered, badly devised boundaries dictated by the necessity of reducing numbers and equalising on that basis, we face a real prospect that the stability of devolution in Northern Ireland itself could be at risk.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that not just the stability of Northern Ireland but the overall democratic principles of the way in which we all work together are at threat? Does he agree that the proposed changes are so major that it will be very hard to tweak any of them and that the best thing we can do is to try to prevent them from happening altogether?

Mr Dodds: I entirely agree. The hon. Gentleman is not a member of my party, but his party, along with the Social Democratic and Labour party and others—

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP) rose—

Mr Dodds: I give way to the SDLP representative.

Dr McDonnell: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the boundaries that we were offered in Northern Ireland under the original proposals are devastating? They cut across all communities and all borders. Most of our towns and cities have been carved up in a way that fractures communities and makes it very difficult for them to function and represent themselves.

Mr Dodds: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

I think that, in the light of all the arguments that have been advanced today, the Government must reconsider. These are serious matters. Major changes of this kind should result from a desire for party-political advantage. The knock-on effects of such a major constitutional change—not just for the House of Commons but for the Northern Ireland Assembly, especially when it comes to the peace process—need to be carefully weighed. I urge the Government to think again, and I wish the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) every success with her Bill.

12.44 pm

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is a pleasure to be able to make a small contribution to this debate.

In the last Parliament, I was a member of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee. As the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) said, the Committee produced a report towards the end of the Parliament drawing attention to many of the issues reflected in the Bill before us today. Unfortunately, one aspect of the recommendations has not been incorporated: that a Bill or any proposals to this effect should be brought forward at the beginning of this Parliament because it is going to take time to implement them if they are to be brought into effect by the time of the next general election in 2020. The Bill of the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) comes, I fear, too late to enable those changes, many of which I support, to be implemented in time.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Which is more important to the hon. Gentleman: a time limit that has been set for us, or the fact that 2 million people are missing off the register?

Mr Chope: The hon. Gentleman should address that question to his hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham, because her Bill proposes that all these proposals must be brought forward by the four boundary commissions before October 2018, which is a very tall order. We took evidence from the boundary commissions in our inquiry and it was clear they would not be able to make major changes in the light of changes to the terms of reference unless they had a sufficient lead-in period. My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) made that point earlier, and it has not been contradicted. When he challenged the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, saying, “You don’t really have it in your heart to ensure we get these changes through by the time of the next general election in 2020,” the Opposition spokesman did not seem to demur from that.

The most important thing is to establish equality of constituencies. In paragraph 31 of our report, the Committee said:

“We believe that, all other things being equal, constituency electorates should be broadly equal.”

What is the position at the moment? It was in the year 2000 that we had the basis for the current boundaries, and if this situation continues beyond 2020 we will still be using that basis. Office for National Statistics figures show that in 2010 only 254 out of 650 constituencies in the UK were within the 5% limit either side of the norm, and 187 were even outside the 10% parameters,
which is what the hon. Lady proposes in her Bill. The evidence brought forward by the Boundary Commission for England is that in 2010 some 200 out of the 553 seats were within the 5% limit, but a large number were outside that. The latest figures, for 2013, are that 188 constituencies in England are more than 10% either side of the norm. That is thoroughly unreasonable and inequitable, and it needs to be rectified.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): We can see this as a mathematical exercise, but the fact of the matter is that under the terms of this boundary review a line would be cut right through the heart of Port Talbot in the centre of my constituency, smashing communities apart that have existed for many years. What we need at this time is unified political representation for our communities. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that democracy is more important than mathematics? Do we really want to turn this place into an elective dictatorship?

Mr Chope: I am trying to address that point. If we are to have proper democracy rather than mathematics, we need a reasonable period within which the boundary commissions in Wales and England can look at the evidence and work out where it will be best for the boundaries to be situated. They could then consult and hold public inquiries on that basis. We have already heard, however, that if the Bill were to be put on to the statute book with a requirement for the new arrangements to be implemented no later than October 2018, it would not be possible for the boundary commissions—certainly those in England—to do the necessary spadework to ensure an equitable outcome, rather than one that would be subject to judicial review as a result of having been rushed and not taking into account the representations that had been made.

Mr Bone: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I want to get it clear in my mind what he is saying. Is he suggesting that we should equalise the seats and keep the same number of Members of Parliament, for reasons of democracy and scrutinising the Government, but that this cannot be achieved in the proposed timescale? Should we not simply allow the Bill to have its Second Reading and then amend it in Committee?

Mr Chope: I take my hon. Friend’s point. I am trying to plead with the hon. Member for North West Durham to come up with a proposal that would enable the boundary commissioners to come forward with their proposals before October 2018 and therefore enable her Bill to be implemented in time for the next general election. I am willing her to try to find a way of achieving that. From what we have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset, however, that could be very difficult. Some rough and ready exercises might have to be carried out, possibly involving a reduction in the time for consultations. I challenge the hon. Lady to come forward with proposals that would enable someone looking at this Bill to decide that it was practical to require the boundary commissions to have their proposals in place by October 2018. I hope that she will be able to address that point when she responds to the debate. If she cannot do so today, and if the Bill gets its Second Reading, we will obviously be able to deal with this in Committee.

In its evidence to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in September 2014, the Boundary Commission for England said that the approach that it had taken to the previous review had been well received, but that “if the Commission is to continue that policy for the next Review, it does mean there is very little flexibility within the timetable outlined above.”

That timetable suggested that the commission was “working towards a formal launch for that Review around the end of February 2016”, and that it “anticipates submitting its final report of the next Review in September 2018.”

The commission stated clearly that “if changes are made to the governing legislation in the interim, that may have a consequential impact on the timetable for the next Review.”

I have not heard anything from the hon. Member for North West Durham about her conversations with the Boundary Commission on its evidence to the Committee, or about whether she thinks that that evidence could be modified in the light of the needs that she has expressed on behalf not only of Opposition Members but of many Conservative Members who have concerns about this.

It is of paramount importance that, by 2020, we have new boundaries that reflect more accurately the need for equality of electorates in each constituency. At the moment, the disparities are so great and are getting greater, so we cannot wait beyond 2020. If the hon. Lady is saying with the Bill, “I agree with that point, we must do something before 2020”, it is incumbent on her to explain—if not today, in Committee—how it can be achieved and how she has been able to work with the relevant boundary commissions to bring that about. It is only if she can demonstrate the practicality of the Bill that she will ultimately be able to get the House’s support. It is a paramount requirement that we equalise the constituencies before 2020.

I gave evidence earlier this week to the Boundary Commission inquiry into constituency changes in the south-west. I was surprised by how few people came along to give evidence. There were probably half a dozen people. It was a two-day hearing. I finished giving my evidence before lunch—my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr Syms) gave evidence, too—and only one other person was due to give evidence between then and 8 o’clock in the evening. That was the first day of the inquiry; I do not know what happened on the second day.

There may well be means by which the prolonged procedure for examining these proposals can be foreshortened, but that is the kernel of the matter that the hon. Lady is bringing forward this Bill, to address if it is to progress and get on to the statute book.

This issue is very important. I am disappointed that the Government have not been prepared to say, “If we reduce the number of MPs to 600, we will have a pro rata reduction in the size of the Executive.” They could have done that. It would have been the right approach, but they have ducked it up to now. Perhaps the Minister will be able to assure us that there will indeed be that pro rata reduction. In a sense, that would mitigate some of the problems we have been discussing today.
I expect that the Bill will receive a Second Reading, because, unlike a lot of private Members' legislation, it seems to have generated a lot of interest. It is great to see so many Members in the Chamber on a Friday. If the Bill does get a Second Reading, we need to look at its practicalities in Committee.

12.57 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): My comments will be brief. I begin with a fundamental point: the number of people on the electoral register is central to our discussion today. Some 1.75 million people who registered just before the European referendum are not included in the calculations for the new boundaries, which is profoundly wrong. Importantly, it is not only morally wrong; it has a practical effect, too.

The House of Commons Library has stated clearly that the largest increase in the electorate was in London, where there was a 6% increase. If that figure was taken forward under the legislation providing for 600 seats, there would be an extra two constituencies in London and an extra seat in the south-west. Other parts of the UK would lose out. That is important in itself, but we must realise that it would have a knock-on effect on those regions. The parliamentary boundaries would be very different from those being suggested.

The Government, against the explicit advice of the Electoral Commission, brought forward the date for full implementation of individual electoral registration by one year from December 2016 to December 2015, and the register is only 85% complete. In other words, 1.8 million people have been deliberately excluded from the electoral register, preventing them from voting and taking them out of the calculations of the new boundaries. If that is not gerrymandering, I do not know what is. It is a quite deliberate political act by this Conservative Government. Most of those who are not on the register—or those who have been excluded—are young people, many of whom live in private rented accommodation, which has a political implication that many of us know only too well.

It is important to recognise that the legislation on the statute book is politically motivated. It was dreamt up by Conservative party central office, enacted in large part by the coalition Government and refined to the detriment of the Labour party by this Administration. This Bill can be put into effect. It may need tweaking in Committee and the Boundary Commission may require something that can be used to argue against a cross-border seat, so despite all the rhetoric, it seems that the legal arguments against this boundary are very weak.

Many hon. Members will be aware that the restrictions in the current legislation mean that Cornwall will have to share an MP with Devon. There will have to be a seat that crosses the border between north-east Cornwall and north-west Devon.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Will my hon. Friend explain to me what part of his constituency may cross the border with Devon?

Steve Double: My constituency is clearly in central mid-Cornwall and no part of it will cross the border, but the people of Cornwall feel strongly about this whether they are directly impacted by the cross-border seat or not. The Minister will know that the matter has provoked strong feelings for many in Cornwall. I acknowledge that that reaction may seem strange and make little sense for people outside Cornwall—many simply view Cornwall as another English county—but the Cornish pride themselves on being different, un-English, and unique in many ways. It is therefore unsurprising that people who do not share that sense of pride and passion in being Cornish do not appreciate how the Cornish people feel. The truth is that this is an emotional reaction to the proposals.

I will admit that I have looked at many of the reasons for objecting to the cross-border seat in the current legislation, and there are no reasonable legal arguments to stop it going forward.

Mrs Murray: Will the Bill provide a basis for a legal challenge? There was great joy in Cornwall in 2014 when the Cornish were recognised under the Council of Europe’s framework convention for the protection of national minorities. We were told that it would give us the same respect has not been shown to the Cornish is now much more emotional.

Like many, I had hoped that the granting of minority status to the Cornish people would provide a basis for a legal challenge. There was great joy in Cornwall in 2014 when the Cornish were recognised under the Council of Europe's framework convention for the protection of national minorities. We were told that it would give us the same recognition as other Celtic people in the UK, but it appears that this does not apply when it comes to parliamentary boundaries. Although the Boundary Commission has recognised and maintained the borders of Scotland and Wales when drawing up the constituencies, the same respect has not been shown to the Cornish border. Sadly, legal advice obtained by Cornwall Council has stated that our Cornish minority status is not something that can be used to argue against a cross-border seat, so despite all the rhetoric, it seems that the legal arguments against this boundary are very weak.

Mrs Murray: There has been a petition on this and some of my constituents wrote to me about it. I looked at the petition website and saw that 400 of my
constituents—out of 72,000—had signed it. Does my hon. Friend know how many of his constituents signed it? He said he was speaking on behalf of the Cornish, but let me put on the record the fact that I am a Cornish girl and he was not speaking for me.

Steve Double: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I do not know how many people from my constituency signed the petition, but I have been out in my constituency, on the doorsteps, in the pub and at my surgeries, and what I do know is how many people have come directly to me to raise their strong feelings about this issue. That is what I have taken notice of. Leaving aside how many constituents have raised this issue with me, it is one that I, as a Cornishman, feel strongly about.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman inform the House as to when he felt strongly about this, because surely in 2015 he stood on a manifesto that contained these proposals? At that time, it would possibly have been Liberal Democrat seats going, rather than Tory seats. Was that the thing that has changed his mind?

Steve Double: I will address that point directly at the end of my speech. As I said, despite a lot of the rhetoric on Cornwall, there are no reasonable legal arguments against these proposals within the current legislation. I have grappled with this issue for some time, asking myself the question: why do I, like so many other people in my constituency, feel so strongly about it? As I said, this is a deeply emotional response, and there are many reasons for that. The Cornish geography has shaped our attitude for centuries. We are surrounded on three sides by the sea, and on our only land border a river cuts us off for all but a few miles. In many ways, the Cornish have an island mentality. We see ourselves as detached and separate from the rest of England. History has also shaped the way we think. For centuries, there has been a sense of detachment between this place and Cornwall. Indeed, about 520 years ago thousands of Cornishmen marched on this place to protest about the imposition of a tax on the Cornish to fund a fight with the Scottish—some of us feel that we have been paying for Scotland ever since, but there was a sense of injustice.

This Government have started to do a great deal to rebuild that bridge. We have seen this Government on the side of Cornwall more than any other Government have been for many years. We have seen greater investments in our roads, with the A30 through Cornwall being dualled, and in our railways, where we are getting new rolling stock, having had the same rolling stock for 40 years. Support and investment has also been given to our airport and for tourism. We have seen this Government grant a devolution deal for Cornwall—it is the first and, so far, only rural devolution deal in the country. That is a great sign of this Government’s support for and confidence in Cornwall. Indeed, the Prime Minister recently said that the Government recognised the unique challenges that Cornwall is facing. So I am proud to be part of this Government, who, in so many ways, are supporting Cornwall, the Cornish economy and the Cornish people far more than has ever been done before. Even so, this issue has provoked a very strong reaction in so many people in my constituency.

It is no surprise that people who do not share the way we feel find it difficult to comprehend how strongly we feel. The issue somehow stabs at the very core of the way we feel about our county. We feel that it is challenging our identity. That in-built deep sense of Cornish independence is provoked by the thought of our border being crossed. Even though it is only a line on a map that represents an area that an MP will represent, it symbolises something far deeper in the Cornish psyche.

Cornwall is unique, so how can we expect others to understand? We accept that others will not understand and will not agree with us, but we cannot accept our views not being respected. Sadly, under the current legislation I see no way to draw the boundaries that does not produce a cross-border seat with Devon. No matter how forcefully we make representations to the Boundary Commission, its hands are tied by the legislation.

Alex Salmond: The hon. Gentleman is making a very good speech, apart from that passing reference to Scotland, which we will overlook, but does he understand that, because of the nature and the criteria of the boundary commissions, nonsense such as the one that he is so ably describing will be replicated across the four nations of the United Kingdom, as well as the nation of Cornwall?

Steve Double: I recognise the point that the right hon. Gentleman makes. My primary concern is with the people of my constituency, Cornwall and the impact of the proposals.

The number of representations made to the Boundary Commission on the issue is irrelevant because the commission’s hands are tied by the legislation. There is no flexibility in the legislation to allow for boundaries to be drawn wholly within Cornwall, so the only way to change that is to support the Bill and seek to change the legislation. That is the difficult conclusion that I have come to. When the Bill goes to Committee, will the hon. Lady who introduced it seriously consider putting in an amendment that would make a special case for Cornwall under the terms of the minority status that we now enjoy, to ensure that the boundaries can be honoured and kept wholly within Cornwall and the line does not have to be crossed?

I know that many of my hon. Friends will be disappointed and perhaps even angry with me, but I feel that I should support the Bill, partly because I do not believe that this is the right time to cull 50 MPs, and because it is the only way I can see to address the issue of the Cornish border and maintain Cornish MPs in Cornwall.

1.12 pm

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): I shall be brief as I know that others wish to speak. The issue has been well aired on both sides of the House, but I shall make two points in support of the Bill. My first point is on the geographical size of constituencies and how that has to be taken into account when we talk about boundaries. One need only look at the map on the briefing paper to see the size of some of the Scottish constituencies.

Drew Hendry: Does my hon. Friend agree that a constituency the size of a country such as Cyprus is unworkable for an MP?
Steven Paterson: Indeed. It takes an hour and a half to drive across my constituency. That is manageable for me as a constituency MP, but in the case of my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), if the southern end of his constituency were where I am standing now, the northern end would be beyond Nottingham. We have to be realistic. It is not the BBC weather map but an actual map that we need to look at if we are to understand how big some constituencies are. If they are to have proper representation, it is essential that their geographical size is taken into account. We should also bear in mind the distance of some constituencies from the seat of power here in London.

If we are to do a proper job of representing our constituents, as we are determined to do, we have to consider the size of the constituencies, as well as their population. That is why I welcome the figure of 10% as an indication of the quota. That is a reasonable suggestion that we can look at in detail, but flexibility must be built in to make it work.

The second point has been covered to some extent—I am referring to the circus that is the House of Lords. It is obscene that we continue to see that revising Chamber stuffed with yet more unelected lords and ladies with no mandate and not answerable to the people of this country. At the same time, we are entertaining a conversation about reducing the size of this elected Chamber. We really need to have a look at this. David Cameron, the former Prime Minister, put 261 new lords and ladies in the circus down the corridor, and we are exercising ourselves about reducing our numbers by 50, with all the complications and all the unpleasant and unnecessary things that that entails for democracy.

Patrick Grady: My hon. Friend talks about the complications that will arise from changing boundaries. The changes are supposed to be about saving the taxpayer money, but one effect will be that, irrespective of who the Members of Parliament are, a lot of constituency offices will have to move. In Glasgow, several offices, which are currently in different constituencies, will be brought within the boundaries of one or two constituencies, so there will be a massive logistical cost to implementing all of this.

Steven Paterson: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. There are all kinds of unforeseen, untold costs that will come with these changes; they will not save the money their proponents say they will. Therefore, we should be looking at bloated undemocratic institutions such as the House of Lords along the corridor and we should start sorting that out. If we do not want to abolish the Lords all in one step—although I would—we can certainly look at time limits and limits on the numbers. We should certainly look at putting it in statute that the Lords is proportional to the size of this Chamber. We should reduce the size of that unelected Chamber along the corridor so that we never get back to the position we are in now.

I support the Bill, and I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to express my views.

1.16 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) in this important debate. I too would like to congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) on introducing the Bill. Having brought forward my own private Member’s Bill as a new Member last year, I understand the work that goes on behind the scenes to get something ready even to bring to the Chamber at this stage.

It was interesting to listen to some excellent contributions from right hon., hon. and, indeed, very learned Members, who often enlightened us—certainly me—on constitutional history.

I am rather saddened for democracy’s sake that the Bill would shelve the sixth periodic review that is now entrusted with the Boundary Commission. The current review aims to redress the widening democratic deficit now evident in this place. The Boundary Commission is an independent body, acting on a remit agreed by the previous Parliament to create constituencies with comparable electorates within a 5% tolerance of 74,769 electors per constituency.

Now to my little bit of history. One hundred years ago, the report of the Speaker’s Conference of 1917 stated that ‘each vote shall, as far as possible, command an equal share of representation in the House of Commons’. That is a really important point for us to remember in this place. Obviously, there have been many changes to the franchise throughout the last century, and the tenet of equality of representation has, I fear, been lost.

Electoral register figures from December 2015 show there were 58,359 electors in my constituency. The largest constituency electorate is the Isle of Wight, with over 100,000 electors, and the smallest is the unprotected constituency of Arfon. I believe, with an electorate of under 40,000. There is clearly a need for the current review to continue without change to its terms of reference. It should surely be the aim of all democratically minded people to work towards equality in representation, rather than to widen the disparity, as this Bill would.

The Bill could introduce a potential disparity. Reading the clauses, it seems to me that allowing for plus or minus 10% on either side could add up to 20% in some cases. If we take the stated ideal of 74,769, that would lead, based on figures from 2015 registers, to potential high and low electorates ranging from 67,293 to 82,245.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady believe that for the sake of satisfying an equation it is worth while creating constituencies the size of Cyprus or devastating the boundaries in Northern Ireland?

Wendy Morton: My constituency is a good example of the democratic deficit that the Boundary Commission review is seeking to address.

Mr Harper: I refute the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion that this about an equation. It is not a fiction about maths; it is about making sure that our constituents’ votes are of equal weight in electing us to this Parliament. That is a fundamental democratic principle that the Chartists believed in and we should try to deliver, and my hon. Friend is setting it out very well.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who is absolutely right.
In the 2017 registration figures, the disparity will be even greater. The proposals in this Bill are regressive, not reforming. In the eyes of the hon. Member for North West Durham, all electors are equal, but a growing number will be more equal than others.

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend is making an eloquent argument. Rather than changing all the rules halfway through this process—or almost towards the end of it—and trying to get this done again from scratch, would not hon. Members be better off encouraging their constituents to engage with the process? In the time between the initial proposals in the 2013 review to the concluding proposals, 60% of all the recommendations were changed. It is therefore perfectly easy, within the parameters of the 2011 Act, to come up with constituencies that reflect local communities and demographics in every area across the UK.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that, because I was about to talk about my constituency and pick up on some of those points. Aldridge-Brownhills forms part of the borough of Walsall, along with Walsall North and Walsall South. As I said, its electorate currently stands at about 60,000, which is 7,000 fewer than that of either of my Walsall neighbours. I do not feel this is right, and I accept that changes need to be made to bring my constituency more in line with others across the country. The position is similar in constituencies in Birmingham. Edgbaston, with just under 63,000 electors, borders Hall Green, which has 74,000 electors—a disparity of about 11,000. The situation is repeated in relation to Hall Green and Hodge Hill, and there are other examples across the country. I therefore question what valid democratic reason there is for this Bill to perpetuate these disparities.

Mr Bone: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Wendy Morton: I am going to make some progress because there are still Members who want to speak. Along with colleagues on the Conservative Benches, I was elected on a manifesto pledge to reduce the number of Members of Parliament, and the Government have a clear mandate from the people to do this.

Mr Bone: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Wendy Morton: I will.

Mr Bone: When that manifesto was drawn up, I am absolutely sure that the people who did so did not think that we would be leaving the European Union and having all the work from the European Union imposed on a reduced number of MPs.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, but I still maintain that I was elected on a manifesto pledge to reduce the number of MPs. I recall the same point being made when I was knocking on doors in the 2010 election. The hon. Member for North West Durham spoke of emails of support from members of the public, but I would question what consultation has been done in preparing to bring the Bill before the House. Perhaps that will be clarified at a later stage.

The House of Commons is the largest lower Chamber of any western democracy. The American House of Representatives, with 435 members, serves a population of 318 million. In Japan, the House of Representatives has 475 members representing 127 million people. It has long been argued that a small legislature is better at holding the Executive to account and at scrutinising legislation. That is why I am happy to support the Conservative manifesto pledge to reduce the number of elected Members. Much has been said this morning about the other place, but I think that we need to take the lead and put our own House in order before we seek to reform elsewhere.

As I have said, I accept that my own constituency of Aldridge-Brownhills must change. I and others in the constituency welcome the boundary commissioners’ decision to keep it intact and to expand it so that Bloxwich East and West are encompassed by the Walsall borough. Streetly is integral to that, and the boundary proposals will bring together the communities of Pelsall and Brownhills, which were previously separated by local government reorganisations.

This House should accept that a boundary review is under way and that the public are being consulted for the second time in five years. It would be wrong to ignore their views. To halt the process again would be unforgivable. If the Bill is passed, the public could be forgiven for thinking that Members of Parliament were putting their own self-interest before democratic equality and democratic accountability.

1.26 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Under the terms of the boundary review, Port Talbot, the town at the heart of my Aberavon constituency, would be cut in two, quite literally down the high street, and the steelworks would be cut off from the housing estate that was built for its workers. The clear and unified voice of Port Talbot and its people is being threatened by a Government who are determined to smash it apart.

Port Talbot and Aberavon have had a difficult 50 years, given the challenges faced by the steel industry, but we are starting to see the benefits of investment in our area. If we are to build on that and overcome the current uncertainty about the future of our steel economy, we must work to remain as one community and retain our unified political representation. That is why the Boundary Commission’s proposal is completely unacceptable. As much as iron needs oxygen to be transformed into steel, so our area needs unity if we are to build a future of security and opportunity.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Does my hon. Friend think that it is fair that some votes will not be counted because the Government have excluded nearly 2 million people from the register that was used in the referendum?

Stephen Kinnock: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. This is a barefaced gerrymander on so many levels, one of which is the missing 2 million registered electors.

By running a dividing line through the heart of Port Talbot, the Boundary Commission’s proposal threatens to shatter the unified political representation that our communities so desperately need. Instead of pressing
Members of Parliament to ensure that our representation is tight and works hard, with constituencies in line with each other.

1.33 pm

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker—

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith. That the Question be now put.

The House divided: Ayes 257, Noes 35.

Division No. 85]

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Alin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Bone, Mr Peter
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Chope, Mr Christopher
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyne, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Craddock, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danzuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Double, Steve
Doughty, Stephen
Dromey, Jack
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Ferrier, Margaret
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiell, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flinn, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harris, Carolyn

[Stephen Kinnock]

forward with this act of constitutional vandalism that will disfranchise and fracture communities, strip this House of its independent voice and compromise our ability to serve our constituents, let us stand up for the power of Parliament, fight for our communities and support this Bill.

1.28 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): It has been interesting to listen to the views of colleagues from across the House about the Boundary Commission’s review. I am in favour of what I campaigned for in 2015 and am happy with things as they stand. Although I do not fully agree with the commission’s proposals for my constituency, I think that it is sensible to equalise the constituency names. I represent a part of the country that everyone can clearly identify where they come from, and I am lucky to represent three of the five constituencies around me.

The difference in the number of electors in my neighbouring constituency of Gillingham and Rainham is 7,000. It is absolutely right that two major constituencies representing what is now quite an urban area should be equalised. I therefore completely support what the Boundary Commission is trying to do.

Much has been said about community ties, and ensuring that they are preserved and that our constituents still understand who is representing them and why certain areas are joined together. I am really lucky: I am absolutely rooted in my constituency, I have lived there forever, and so has my family, and I know the place very well. However, at a very local level—although this is a little contrary to the Bill that the hon. Member for North Antrim (Mr Dodds) introduced the Bill to be helpful, but at a regional level, Members of Parliament to ensure that our representation is tight and works hard, with constituencies in line with each other.

The other point I want to make is about geography. At the moment I represent a constituency that I can get to easily and I know it well, but the Labour party has also made proposals to change the constituency so that the MP would have to represent a part of Kent that has no relationship with the Medway towns—in fact, those constituents would not believe that they were part of the Medway towns.

I have immense respect for the hon. Lady, who has introduced the Bill to be helpful, but at a regional level, for seats such as mine, it will not help the situation. Sadly, therefore, I find that I will not be able to support her in her endeavour to introduce the Bill. I have been interested to hear some of the deeper debate about constitutional issues and, listening to the history, about how we got here. However, I still very much stand for what I campaigned for in 2015. I hope that the Boundary Commission proposals and this House continue to move forward in the endeavour to reduce the number of
Division No. 86

The House divided:

**AYES**

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, Mr Anthony
Beckett, Mr Margaret
Benn, Mr Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Olave
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Bone, Mr Peter
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, Mr Ben
Brae, Mr Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Sam
Brown, Lyn
Brown, Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burges, Richard

**NOES**

Burnham, Mr Andy
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Mr Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Clegg, Mr Nick
Clwyd, Ms Carolyn
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, Mr Yvette
Cobra, Mr Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyte, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Cruda, Mr John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nick
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martin
De Piero, Gloria
Dodds, Mr Nigel
Donaldson, Stuart

The House divided: Ayes 253, Noes 37.

The Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and Thangam Debbonaire

The Tellers for the Noes:
Chris Heaton-Harris and Mark Spencer

**Tellers for the Ayes:**


**Tellers for the Noes:**


**Ayes:**


**Noes:**


The House divided: Ayes 253, Noes 37.
Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill

18 NOVEMBER 2016

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and Thangam Debbonaire

Tellers for the Noes:
Chris Heaton-Harris and Mark Spencer

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).
Disability Equality Training (Taxi and Private Hire Vehicle Drivers) Bill

Second Reading

1.59 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

[Interjection.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I rise to delay the hon. Gentleman for a few seconds in order that the rowdy Members celebrating a victory can leave with discretion and politeness to their colleague.

Andrew Gwynne: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I want to place on the record my thanks to Guide Dogs UK for its assistance to me in putting this Bill together and those Members across the House who have indicated their support for its measures.

As a Member with, like all Members, disabled constituents specifically affected by discrimination from a minority of taxi hire vehicles, it gives me immense pride to present to the House a Bill designed to settle this issue and ensure all our constituents receive the service the law demands. For too long, this issue has flown under the radar and continues to specifically discriminate against the visually impaired, those with mobility and physical impairments and the more vulnerable in our society.

A minority of taxi and private hire vehicle licence holders frequently discriminate against assistance dog owners and other disabled people by refusing to pick them up. As I am sure Members present are aware, disabled people, including those with assistance dogs, are legally protected under section 29 of the Equality Act 2010. It is unlawful to discriminate against a person because of a protected characteristic or victimise someone when providing a service. This applies to taxis and private hire vehicles as much as any other service. Added to this, numerous disability groups, including Disability Rights UK and Muscular Dystrophy UK, report that their members are being charged higher rates, at times double the standard fare, to accommodate their wheelchairs. This is unethical and cruel.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): I interrupt the hon. Gentleman simply because we are short of time and a number of Members may want to contribute and I want to get this on the record. He has done a service to the House in introducing this Bill; there is no doubt about that. He is right about the legality, and he is also right about the ethics, and I want to assure him that I share his view. We should do more and we will do more.

Andrew Gwynne: I am grateful to the Minister for that assurance from the Government Front Bench and I am sure the people we all represent will be comforted to hear that, because it is perfectly right that disabled people want to live independent lives and do not want to be a nuisance to anyone, but often constant refusals and abuse are leaving many of them with little hope.

Catherine, a guide dog owner from Birmingham, reported:

“It makes me think if it’s worth getting a taxi at all. I rather struggle to go somewhere because I don’t want grief about my guide dog.”

Although these provisions are in place, it is undeniable that disabled people continue to suffer from severe restrictions in the use of taxis and private hire vehicles. The Law Commission confirmed this in its 2013 review of taxis and private hire vehicles. The reality, however, is worse: in-depth research from Guide Dogs UK shows that three in four assistance dog owners reported that they have been refused entry to private hire vehicles and taxis because of their guide dogs.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I previously contacted my local authority on this matter to establish whether it was aware of the issues the hon. Gentleman will be highlighting here today. It advised that, owing to my letter, it had contacted Guide Dogs UK for further information so it could incorporate that into its training for drivers. Will he join me in calling for other Members to do likewise and encourage the voluntary uptake of training measures from the relevant bodies?

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely, and I commend the hon. Lady for the work that she has done on this in her own constituency. I encourage other Members to do precisely the same in theirs.

We need this law change in England and Wales—the situation is different in Scotland—to introduce training, so that every taxi licence holder is aware of their legal obligations under the Equalities Act 2010. There can be no excuse for refusing someone with disabilities access to a taxi. That is the law, and if taxi drivers currently do not know that it is the law, that is a training issue. That is why I think that my Bill has very many merits.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important for each and every one of us in the House to raise this issue with our local authority and through columns in our local newspapers, to ensure that no one can use ignorance as a defence for refusing services to blind and disabled people?

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely. I thank the hon. Gentleman for sponsoring my Bill; his support is greatly appreciated. He is absolutely right to suggest that there is a lot more on the enforcement side that local authorities could and should be doing. At the moment, taxi licence holders who are brought before the licensing panel can plead ignorance and say that they did not appreciate that this was the law. However, if they have to have training as part of their licence requirements in the first place, or as part of their renewal requirements, they will no longer have that excuse.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, welcome though it is that local authorities are taking more seriously their responsibilities for training and enforcement, the only way to guarantee that people get the respect they deserve and that taxi drivers abide by the law is to put this requirement on to a statutory footing?

Andrew Gwynne: I absolutely agree. Best practice is in place in many areas across the country, but unless there is a statutory requirement for training as part of the licensing regime, we will never be able to weed out any bad practice that still exists.
Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing his private Member’s Bill and leading the debate today. He mentioned that the law would apply in England and Wales. We already have guidance on this in Wales, and Guide Dogs Campaigns is working with the Welsh Government on it. Will he work with the Welsh Government to ensure that a similar Bill can be enacted in Wales?

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely. I discovered as a result of the discussions I had when preparing my Bill that not all the relevant functions have yet been devolved to Ministers in the Welsh Government and that some of the duties therefore still rest with the Secretary of State for Transport here in Whitehall. That is why some of the provisions in the Bill relate to Wales. But my hon. Friend is absolutely right: we need to get these provisions in place across the whole United Kingdom. There are parts of the UK that have advanced further down this track than England and Wales have done, and my Bill is trying to put that right.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What response has my hon. Friend had from taxi drivers’ associations?

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention them.

Returning to the measures in the Bill, the Local Government Association is fully on board with my proposals, but we must ensure that local councils have the necessary tools at their disposal, so that they can properly administer the training scheme and ensure that the measures are being adhered to. Out of 297 visually impaired respondents to a Guide Dogs survey, 68% reported that they had not informed the authorities when an individual had refused them service. The most common reason they gave was that they did not believe anything would come of it. A freedom of information request and parliamentary questions that I have asked have made it clear that, since the practice of refusal became illegal in 2010, there were no convictions in 2011, there was one in 2012, one in 2013 and one in 2014. Yet we know that 42% of assistance dog users in any one year are refused a taxi service. There is a big problem here, and ignorance of the law is no justification. That is why training is absolutely crucial.

Let me be clear: those taxi and minicab drivers who are refusing to serve visually impaired and wheelchair passengers are breaking the law. The only exception for refusing someone with an assistance dog is on medical grounds, and for that they have to have a certified medical certificate permanently on display in the taxi. They cannot just turn up at a kerbside and decide that they will not take a dog because of some spurious allergy that they have just decided they have.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I had not intended to speak on the Bill given the time, but I heard the Minister and I want to give my hon. Friend’s Bill good wind. Does he agree that training, which is covered by his Bill, is absolutely essential? Even when people want to assist and understand what their duties are under the law, they can still fall foul of it. For instance, there was a report of a dog that had to travel in the sealed boot of a car. That cannot be right; training is necessary.

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely, I discovered as a result of the discussions I had when preparing my Bill that not all the relevant functions have yet been devolved to Ministers in the Welsh Government and that some of the duties therefore still rest with the Secretary of State for Transport here in Whitehall. That is why some of the provisions in the Bill relate to Wales. But my hon. Friend is absolutely right: we need to get these provisions in place across the whole United Kingdom. There are parts of the UK that have advanced further down this track than England and Wales have done, and my Bill is trying to put that right.

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owners who have been refused access. It is only when we listen to their stories that we realise just how widespread the problem is.

**Colleen Fletcher** (Coventry North East) (Lab): I have had some dealings with visually impaired people—friends and constituents—and can only reiterate everything that my hon. Friend has said. They tell me that taxis are essential to disabled people's independence because many are unable to drive or use public transport. The emotional impact of facing discrimination and confrontation when trying to carry out everyday activities takes a significant toll on disabled people, leading to a loss of confidence and independence anyway.

**Andrew Gwynne**: I absolutely agree. That is precisely why I am so pleased that Members stayed on after the previous private Member's Bill to support this one. It is a worthy cause.

I want to give the last word to my constituent Keri Doyle, who lives in Reddish. She told me: “I've been refused access to taxis because of my guide dog. It's not my choice to have sight loss and my guide dog is essential for me being able to get around. It's inconvenient, I've been late for appointments and it makes me angry that it's still happening.”

Out there today, a minority of people in our society are appointing and it makes me angry that it's still happening.

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Out there today, a minority of people in our society are appointing and it makes me angry that it's still happening.

2.17 pm

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). He is a doughty campaigner in this place, and I wish him all the best in his new role on the shadow Front Bench.

I pay tribute to Guide Dogs UK for its remarkable and fantastic campaign work on behalf of people affected by sight loss and other serious issues. There is much worthy sentiment behind today's Bill.

I was horrified by the stories recounted by the hon. Gentleman—individual testimonies from people who have been treated appallingly. I was concerned when I read the “Access All Areas” survey results and found it striking that 42% of assistance dog owners have been turned away and that 38% have been asked to pay extra for their dogs to be carried in taxis. That is completely unacceptable, but the law is clear. The Equality Act 2010 states that people must not charge extra to carry a wheelchair and that it is a criminal offence to refuse to carry an assistance dog or to charge for doing so. My experience of taxi drivers has always been positive, and taxi drivers in Corby and east Northamptonshire will be troubled by what we have heard today. They are proud of their work and proud to provide an excellent service, so they will share our horror at some of the stories and at how individuals have been treated.

It is right that fines are levied when the law has been breached. I understand that the standard fine is £1,000, and I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether the level of the fine is kept under constant review to ensure that as time moves it continues to be appropriate on and meets the scale of what happened in any particular circumstance.

**Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware of North West Leicestershire District Council's approach, whereby it is a condition of a driver's licence that all drivers undergo disability awareness training during the first year of their licence and a failure to do so results in the renewal of their badge being refused? Does he agree that that might be one thing we could consider introducing?

**Tom Pursglove**: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, as I was not aware of that example. I want to return later in my remarks to trying to spread best practice, wherever it is found, to ensure that we see improvements throughout the country. Where we see good examples of this work being done, we should not be afraid to embrace and promote them. They ought to be rolled out across the country to other local authorities.

**Mr Hayes**: My hon. Friend is right about that, as was the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). On the practical application of my good intentions—I am pleased at least that the hon. Gentleman thinks they are good—I therefore want to be clear that we need an accessibility action plan, to take account of what he said today and other measures such as those my hon. Friend and other Members have raised. We need to do this quickly. We need to consult quickly, as these consultations must not go on forever, and we then need to act quickly. We will do all those things.

**Tom Pursglove**: I am grateful to the Minister, who, once again, has been clear about the direction of travel he wants on this issue. This is a short Bill. I have studied it in detail, and it has raised a few questions in my mind. I am sure that if it were to go into Committee or be part of any consultation process the Government were looking to undertake, these particular questions would be addressed.

**Lyn Brown**: May I say something gently to the hon. Gentleman? Is he aware that if he sits down quickly and the Minister then gets up and does the same, we can get this Bill through today? We now have nine minutes left and I just want to bring that to the House's attention. If we support the Bill, our contributions need to be short.

**Tom Pursglove**: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. I am very conscious of what she says, but it is important that when we have votes in this House we have had proper scrutiny of the measures put before us, and I wish to draw out some important points before sitting down.

I note what has been said about consultation, and it is important that that is done correctly. I would be interested to know what consultation there has been, not only with local authorities but with taxi operators and the professional bodies that represent them. I would also be keen to understand a little more about who would be expected to deliver this training. Does sufficient capacity already exist?

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of North West Leicestershire District Council's approach, whereby it is a condition of a driver's licence that all drivers undergo disability awareness training during the first year of their licence and a failure to do so results in the renewal of their badge being refused? Does he agree that that might be one thing we could consider introducing?

**Tom Pursglove**: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, as I was not aware of that example. I want to return later in my remarks to trying to spread best practice, wherever it is found, to ensure that we see improvements throughout the country. Where we see good examples of this work being done, we should not be afraid to embrace and promote them. They ought to be rolled out across the country to other local authorities.

**Barbara Keeley**: The hon. Gentleman talks about consulting, but has he consulted disabled people in his constituency? That is what all the Labour Members here are concerned about. Time is short, but we have a
chance to get this Bill through. There is time for all the scrutiny measures that he is talking about later, so will he bear in mind the time and let the Minister speak?

**Tom Pursglove:** I am very grateful for the intervention and I am going to wrap up my remarks, but I have a final few points that I want to ask about.

I appreciate what the Minister said about best practice, so I am content with that. I am interested to know how the Bill’s provisions would apply to other providers, such as Uber. That is an important point. Black taxis would fall within the scope of the Bill, as drafted, but how does the Bill apply to Uber?

When the Minister responds, I would be keen for him to say a little about the Department’s thinking on taking the Bill’s provisions forward in any particular guise. It raises incredibly important issues. I am very impressed by the tenacity of the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish in introducing it, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, because wherever discrimination occurs it must be stamped out—it is completely unacceptable. The law is very clear about this discrimination, and anything we can do to help spread best practice to try to improve awareness and enforcement can only be a good thing.

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**Kwasi Kwarteng** (Spelthorne) (Con): With reference to monitoring, will my hon. Friend take into account the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) about Uber? There must be some degree of equalisation between licensed taxi drivers and others who are not.

**Mrs Murray:** Indeed. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend and with my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove). Employing mystery shoppers would be one way of ensuring that checks are carried out. Suspending the licences of drivers who have not undergone the mandatory training, as North West Leicestershire District Council has, is a good idea.

**Mr Hayes:** Given the time, I will have to say this now as I have no other means of doing so: whatever happens today, this cause will not die. I will make sure that it does not die. I invite the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) to come and see me next week to take it further. This discrimination cannot be allowed to continue. I am sorry to intervene on my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), but that is the only way I can make that point.

**Mrs Murray**:—

**Hon. Members:** Stop now!

**Mrs Murray:** It was a pleasure to receive that assurance from my right hon. Friend the Minister. I am grateful to him for giving the House that reassurance. [HON. MEMBERS: “Disgraceful.”] From my own personal knowledge, he is extremely concerned to make sure that people are treated equally. I hope the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish, who introduced the Bill, listened carefully to that reassurance. [HON. MEMBERS: “Shameful.”] I strongly agree with, and have no doubt about, the intentions behind the Bill, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing it forward.

I would also like to take the opportunity to congratulate—

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In my own constituency that is very true. We have so many villages where many elderly and disabled people rely on taxis to go to the doctor’s, the shops or even the post office. Taxis are the only means of transport and the most flexible mode of transport available. Sometimes in some of my villages people have a doctor’s appointment at, say, 11 am and there is only bus a day that leaves at 8.30 am, so they need a taxi to transport them instead. The attitude of drivers and their understanding of disabled people is vital.

The local authority that I mentioned says that it is likely that mystery shoppers will be employed to monitor industry performance. That is a good way of checking to make sure—
REGISTRATION OF MARRIAGE BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November.

STALKING (SENTENCING) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 20 January 2017.

Fireworks: Licensing of Premises

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

2.32 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Just over two years ago, an explosion and fire at a business—SP Plastics—in Stafford resulted in the tragic deaths of two people, injuries to others, the destruction of buildings and the loss of businesses. I would like to offer my heartfelt sympathy to all those who suffered as a result. I would also like to thank Staffordshire fire and rescue service, the national health service and Staffordshire police, as well as local volunteer groups that assisted them. The investigations into this tragedy have not yet concluded, so I will not comment on the causes. However, there is no doubt that the scale and nature of the fire was due to the presence of large quantities of fireworks on the premises.

I am most grateful to Stephanie Horton of River Canal Rescue for much of the information that follows. Her business premises were destroyed, and she and her 30 staff had to rebuild from scratch, all the time providing a vital service to river and canal users across the country. I pay tribute to her and her staff, and to the other business owners and staff who had to cope with the consequences of the fire.

My purpose today is to ask the Minister to look at improving the way in which the storage and sale of fireworks are regulated. I will also make some points about the way in which businesses that have suffered catastrophic events such as this are supported by public bodies.

It may help if I summarise the current regulations for the licensing of premises for the storage of fireworks. Someone who wishes to run wholesale or retail premises that store or sell fireworks, up to a total of 2 tonnes, must be licensed with the fire service, if they are based in some of the metropolitan areas, or with the trading standards department of the local council, if they are based elsewhere. Someone who intends to store or sell more than 2 tonnes, or the most powerful category 4 fireworks, which are designed for professional displays and large open spaces, will need a licence from the Health and Safety Executive.

In principle, the regulations seem reasonable. However, they depend on the training of the inspectors from trading standards or the fire and rescue services, and on proper disclosure from the owner of the business.

My first request of the Minister is that when the conclusive report into this tragic fire is released, she will consider whether the regulations are sufficient. There is a great deal of difference between a shop storing perhaps a few category 2 fireworks and a warehouse containing up to 2 tonnes of category 2 or 3 fireworks, yet the same application procedure applies to both. Should there be an intermediate category covering substantial sellers who fall below the threshold for licensing by the Health and Safety Executive, and should such larger traders perhaps be licensed by the fire service rather than the local council? After all, the storage of large quantities of fireworks—to me, 2 tonnes is a large quantity—is a fire risk. In the case of small retailers, risks are more
likely to concern consumer safety and the age of those purchasing fireworks—work for which trading standards is eminently suited.

My second suggestion arises from the experience of those at River Canal Rescue, who found themselves without sufficient insurance cover because they were unaware of what was stored in the nearby warehouse. This suggestion, which could be implemented immediately, is that all applications for licences require that the trader be properly insured for the storage and sale of fireworks, and that this should include insurance cover liability to third parties. Nowhere have I seen this on application forms. If someone wishes to obtain a licence for a motor vehicle, they have to show that it is properly insured in respect of third parties. Fireworks, and that this should include insurance cover as dangerous as motor vehicles, so it makes sense for the same rule to apply. It should also be a requirement that the insurance policy be displayed and that neighbouring businesses be informed of the fact that fireworks are stored so that they can, in turn, let their insurers know in case it is of significance.

Ms Horton of River Canal Rescue makes another reasonable suggestion, which is that those who are responsible for licensing—trading standards or the fire service—should conduct unannounced checks on premises, and that they should receive more specific training in fireworks where they do not have it. No system is perfect, but we must learn the lessons from whatever failures are shown to have occurred that resulted in the fire in Stafford. I believe that the proposal to make production of a valid insurance policy a precondition of receiving a licence is simple and capable of swift implementation.

I turn now to the aftermath of the fire and, in particular, the consequences for the businesses that were so badly affected. Ms Horton says:

“There was no support, help of concessions given to us by government bodies. We had to rebuild from scratch. We lost everything, including all of our accounts. It took nearly 6 months to reinvent these alone. Penalties, letters and a general disregard for our situation from HMRC gave us extra stress in a very stressful situation, especially when you take into account that there were 30 employees whose jobs relied on us to keep the plates spinning.”

Despite this, the company has been named medium employer of the year at the north-west national apprenticeship awards. That is an outstanding achievement given the circumstances. I suggest that there is more that Government and local government, can do, in co-operation with the business community, to ensure that businesses are fully supported after a calamity such as a fire that has affected them through no fault of their own. The local council—which, after all, collects business rates—could offer an officer, perhaps in co-operation with the chamber of commerce, who would liaise with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, banks and others to assist the business through that difficult time. In that way, jobs will be saved.

I have three suggestions to put to the Government: first, a licence system that is more appropriate to the level of risk involved; secondly, a requirement that proper insurance held by the applicant be a requirement of obtaining a licence; and thirdly, a straightforward system of support for businesses affected by fires, floods or other major disruptions. All this could, I believe, be put in place with little or no cost. At the same time, it should reduce the risk of such tragedies as happened in Stafford occurring and, even if they did, assist with recovery from them.

2.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): First, I extend my heartfelt sympathy to the families of Simon Hillier and Stewart Staples, whose lives were taken in the terrible incident at SP Plastics in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) on 30 October 2014. He will acknowledge that, as there is an ongoing police-led investigation, I will not be able to comment further on it in my response today. However, Health and Safety Executive officials would welcome the opportunity to meet my hon. Friend once the coroner’s inquest has concluded. That would provide an opportunity to consider the findings in full and whether any further work is needed to help reduce the risk of similar incidents happening again.

The prevention of accidents with the potential to cause extensive harm to workers, members of the public and the environment remains a key Government priority. In the past 10 years, there have tragically been three significant incidents involving fireworks—licensed sites where people have died. Although that is a relatively low number, the consequences can clearly be catastrophic and, as in the case of the incident in my hon. Friend’s constituency, devastating to the families involved. There is, therefore, no room for complacency.

I reassure my hon. Friend that the Government are committed to making sure that the health and safety requirements in this area are robust, to enable businesses to effectively control their risks. Businesses in Great Britain must have a licence to manufacture or store quantities or types of fireworks that are considered to be of higher hazard. That is in line with their potential for harm. As my hon. Friend has said, in Great Britain the responsibility for issuing licences to business that wish to store fireworks or, indeed, other explosives is split between the local licensing authorities, which can issue storage licences for 2 tonnes or less, and HSE, which issues storage licences for more than 2 tonnes as well as licences to manufacture.

I shall talk first about the role of local licensing authorities. If any business wishes to store 2 tonnes or less of fireworks, or of other explosives, it must apply for a licence from the appropriate local licensing authority. The authorities require applicants to be “fit people”, and for them to supply accurate details of the types of activities being carried out; the types of fireworks or other explosives being manufactured or stored; and plans of the site. That helps to ensure that the authorities have a clear picture of what businesses are requesting the licences for and whether there are any issues that need further consideration.

Local authorities can grant licences only where predetermined legal separation distances between explosives and people are met, making sure that potentially higher-hazard licensing requests are referred to the explosive specialists at HSE. The licensing authority can revoke a licence if there is a change in circumstances that means that the person holding the licence is no longer considered
fit, or if the site is no longer suitable. In addition, to acquire, or acquire and keep, certain types of explosives, the licence holder must have an explosives certificate from the police.

My hon. Friend has asked whether it would be more appropriate for the fire service to issue licences for larger traders. Licences to store smaller quantities of fireworks are issued by local licensing authorities, which include local council trading standards, fire authorities and the police. Local authorities are best placed to make decisions about licensing, as they understand, and are able to reflect, local concerns and requirements.

HSE offers guidance to local authorities to support them in their assessments, and works closely with partner licensing authorities to ensure that the licensing framework is applied appropriately.

In Great Britain, if any business wishes to manufacture explosives or to store more than 2 tonnes of fireworks or other explosives, it must apply for a licence from HSE, which requires details of the types of activities being carried out; the fireworks or explosives being manufactured or stored; plans of the site; and the proposed distances between the fireworks or other explosives and people. HSE’s explosives inspectorate considers the suitability of the applicant and of the site and whether the application can be progressed. HSE-issued licences must have the agreement of local authorities. That enables local communities to highlight local factors and make sure that specific information regarding location and proximities is considered.

My hon. Friend raises an interesting point about whether the levels of scrutiny are appropriate for the risks, and queries whether the 2-tonne threshold for HSE-issued licensing is correct. I am reminded, given the time of year, that the amount of explosive to be used in the gunpowder plot was 2.5 tonnes.

The thresholds for licensing come from a long-standing historical approach first introduced under the Explosives Act 1875. The thresholds were reviewed in 2002 and were considered still to be valid. I have extended to my hon. Friend the offer to meet the Health and Safety Executive to discuss such concerns, and I encourage him to do so. That will provide him with the opportunity to raise the issue of the 2-tonne threshold directly with the HSE.

My hon. Friend expressed concerns that business insurance policies for companies storing or manufacturing fireworks are not sufficient. Specifically, he suggested a requirement to protect third-party businesses from damages caused by any firework-related incident. Over the years, Parliament has legislated to require compulsory insurance for specific categories of risk, such as liabilities incurred by those using a motor vehicle on a road or in a public space. Businesses that employ staff are legally required to have employer liability compulsory insurance to provide redress for employees against bodily injury, illness or disease sustained in the course of employment. In addition to those requirements, businesses such as a firework display operator must have valid liability insurance.

The explosives and fireworks licensing framework focuses on the health, safety and security of the licensed premises and the impact on the surrounding community. Consequently, that health and safety legislation does not extend to cover business insurance requirements for licensed premises. However, I have already made the commitment that HSE officials would welcome the opportunity to meet my hon. Friend once the coroner’s inquest into the SP Fireworks incident has concluded to consider the findings in full.

My hon. Friend suggested that we should introduce a requirement for licensed businesses to inform neighbouring businesses of, and display, the fact that fireworks are stored on their premises. The HSE licence approval process requires businesses to notify local communities that they are applying for a licence. Applicants must publish a notice in a local paper stating: they are applying for a licence; they are inviting any representations on the application; and how the application may be inspected. Applicants should also write to or leaflet those affected. That helps to inform neighbouring businesses, communities and residential properties.

I note carefully the specific impacts that my hon. Friend described on companies in his constituency, including River Canal Rescue. He made some cogent arguments about what can go wrong when there is a lack of adequate information or separation from other businesses. I congratulate River Canal Rescue on its success in continuing to employ apprentices, which is such an important part of ensuring that our young people can go on to fulfilling careers. However, I have noted carefully what he said about the difficulties it has faced, which indeed many companies can face in emergency situations.

The Government strategy for regulators is set out in the regulators’ code, which requires regulators to ensure that they take proportionate approaches to regulation in line with the level of risk. The principles of the regulators’ code are applied by HSE’s explosives licensing team, with sites undergoing targeted interventions, including inspection. HSE has an effective enforcement policy statement and has developed an enforcement management model that aligns to the Government’s better regulation principles. Similarly, local licensing authorities also adopt a risk-based approach to targeting health and safety interventions. This principle-based framework is set out in the published local authority national code.

My hon. Friend has suggested that bodies responsible for licensing should conduct unannounced checks on premises and receive specific training in fireworks. As I have mentioned, the HSE works closely with local authorities and the industry to ensure that the licensing framework is applied appropriately. Licensing authorities use a number of intervention approaches to regulate and influence businesses, including the provision of advice and guidance, and both proactive and reactive inspection.

The Government fully recognise the importance of ensuring suitable licensing requirements for fireworks and other explosives. The Health and Safety Executive works extensively with explosives and fireworks industries to support compliance with the law. The HSE regularly engages with industry stakeholders and has developed guidance with the industry. The existing licensing framework aims to make sure that, where businesses comply with the licence conditions, the risks of an uncontrolled explosion occurring are greatly reduced. Where businesses fail to meet these requirements or harm occurs, regulatory action is swift.

As I have already mentioned, the Health and Safety Executive is undertaking a review of explosives licensing as part its ongoing commitment to continual business
improvement, and to ensure that the framework is fit for purpose. The review will look at how the HSE’s licensing approach can be improved and whether any possible burdens on business can be reduced while maintaining standards of safety. It will involve input from industry, other Departments and other regulators, including local authorities, which will provide my hon. Friend and other hon. Members with an opportunity to feed into the process.

We have heard my hon. Friend’s specific areas of concern, but there may well be others. The review is certainly a chance to scrutinise the current system. The concerns he has raised include those about the 2-tonne limit on local authority, as opposed to HSE, licensing and about the categories of fireworks, which is very important. However, there may also be other areas, such as the secondary manufacture or fusing of fireworks, which often takes place in companies seeking to put on professional displays.

My hon. Friend raised the concern that licensing should be required for any business in Great Britain manufacturing or storing hazardous quantities or types of fireworks. I hope he is reassured by my response that this is already the case. I thank him for bringing these important issues to our attention. Again, I would like to extend my sincerest condolences to the families of Simon Hillier and Stewart Staples. My officials would welcome the opportunity to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the coroner’s findings once the inquest has been concluded, and to consider any areas of further work.

Question put and agreed to.

2.51 pm

House adjourned.
Mr Speaker: I hope that colleagues in all parts of the House will want to join me in congratulating Andy Murray on winning the ATP world tour finals last night in London and on finishing the year as the world men's singles No. 1.

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Older Workers

1. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to give older workers the support they need to find or stay in work.

2. Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to give older workers the support they need to find or stay in work.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): May I, on behalf of the Government, echo the thoughts about Andy Murray? He is a great Scotsman who has made a great contribution.

There are more older people in employment than ever before, but we know that there is more to do. We recently appointed Andy Briggs, chief executive of Aviva UK, as business champion for older workers to promote the benefits they bring to employers.

Henry Smith: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. What more are the Government doing to build on the fuller working lives strategy that they launched in 2014?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend is right to point out the importance of the fuller working lives strategy. We will be publishing a new strategy in the new year to build on the success of the fuller working lives strategy, and that will set out its future direction. I am particularly keen that it should be led by employers, because I think that employers are the best people to persuade other employers of the benefits of employing older workers. That is true for the employers themselves and for individuals, and it is particularly true for the public sector.

Pauline Latham: Many older workers have caring responsibilities, which can make it hard for them to remain in work or even to return to work. What is the Secretary of State doing to encourage employers to work responsibly with those very valuable employees?

Damian Green: I agree with my hon. Friend that those employees are often particularly responsible and have particular needs, if they have caring responsibilities. That is why the Government recognise the benefits of flexible working. We extended the right of workers to request flexible working from June 2014. We have also introduced older claimant champions in jobcentres, and we are working with employers to help to highlight the benefits of employing older workers. Aviva, which I have mentioned in the context of Andy Briggs, is launching a new pilot scheme this Friday specifically to support carers. I very much hope that other companies will follow its example.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): A year ago, Ministers committed to publishing an annual report on progress towards full employment, for the benefit of older workers and others. Does that commitment still stand, and if it does, when will the first of those annual reports be published?

Damian Green: Yes, it does. We will be publishing one next year, and I am happy to report in the interim to the right hon. Gentleman that there are more older people in employment than ever before. There are 9.8 million workers aged 50-plus in the UK. That is an increase of 1.5 million over the last five years, and I think that that is one of the strengths of our labour market.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): But is it not true that there has been a relative decline in the proportion of older women in employment? Is the reason for that just the increase in the pension age, or is it that the Government are not providing the support for carers and the other things that enable older women to work?

Damian Green: I am afraid I cannot agree with the right hon. Lady on that. Currently, there are 4.05 million women aged 50 to 64 in employment. That compares with just under 3.5 million five years ago. As a percentage, it has gone up from below 60% to more than 65%. The benefits of work for older people are being applied to women as well, and that, of course, gives them much more control over their own lives.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): On the question about carers, it is now seven months since the minimum wage was increased, but the income threshold for carer’s allowance has not risen in line with the minimum wage. Will the Secretary of State act to raise it by just £5 a week to ensure that carers are not forced to cut their hours because they are caught in this loophole?

Mr Speaker: Notably in relation to older workers.

Damian Green: Indeed. Carer’s allowance applies to people other than older workers, as you will be aware, Mr Speaker. The hon. Lady will also be aware that carer’s allowance was increased significantly at the most recent announcement. We keep all benefits under review.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Older employees bring many benefits to employers, including turning up on time, taking pride in their appearance and passing on a wealth of life experience to their younger colleagues. We have national recognition schemes for innovation, technology and exports. Has the Secretary of State thought of introducing a national recognition scheme for those employers who employ a large number of older workers?
Damian Green: As so often, my hon. Friend makes an innovative and good point. We work with employers to see what the best form of recognition is for employers who are particularly good at ensuring that older workers can carry on in the workforce, but I will certainly consider his suggestion.

Self-employment

2. Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): What recent assessment has he made of trends in the level of self-employment.

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): Many people aspire to be their own boss. Although the bulk of the growth in employment in recent years has been in employment, there are now 4.7 million self-employed people currently in receipt of tax credits.

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer, but notwithstanding what he has said there is a growing issue of bogus self-employment. Trade unions such as the GMB have been at the forefront of exposing such practices, so will he commit to working with trade unions as part of the ongoing Taylor review?

Damian Hinds: Of course, what the hon. Lady refers to does not apply to the great majority of people in self-employment, but some concerns have been expressed. The growth of atypical employment was behind the Prime Minister quite rightly saying that there would be a proper review under Matthew Taylor. That review will look at a wide range of things, as its terms of reference are quite broad: rights, responsibilities, representation, training, representation of under-represented groups and so on.

19. [907349] John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am glad we are doing so much to help the self-employed get into business, but so many of them are on the legacy system for support rather than universal credit. What are we doing for those people?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We are launching a test—face-to-face and on a voluntary basis, from Jobcentre Plus work coaches—for self-employed people currently in receipt of tax credits. A range of support material is also available at gov.uk.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Ordering presents online is now a normal part of Christmas for many people, but there have been disturbing reports recently of delivery drivers who are classed as self-employed working dangerously long hours for less than the national living wage. Those workers make a vital contribution to the functioning of the digital economy. Will the Minister commit to meeting Labour’s five tests for social security for the self-employed?

Damian Hinds: I join the hon. Lady in recognising the necessity of looking at these issues. National living wage enforcement is very important. That is why we have raised the budget for it, as well raising the maximum penalty. As for the exact definition of self-employment, she will know that there are variations in definition for tax purposes and employment law purposes. The Matthew Taylor review is looking at precisely these issues to make sure that the appropriate protections are in place while enabling more and more people to avail themselves of the opportunities in the new economy.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that employers are supported in recruiting and retaining disabled people.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): We already support employers through the new Disability Confident scheme, Access to Work and the Fit for Work service. Other measures are planned. The Green Paper consultation will provide further insight into how we can support employers and their disabled employees.

David Mackintosh: What advice can my hon. Friend offer to people such as my constituent Jehanzaib Sahib, who is deaf, so struggles to speak on the telephone, worked hard to obtain a university degree and yet is really struggling to find employment in the financial sector?

Penny Mordaunt: A lot of our bespoke expertise lies in the partner organisations we work with. If my hon. Friend contacts Sarah Holtham, who is the work coach at the Northampton jobcentre, she will facilitate a meeting with Deafconnect for him and his constituent. It also does a huge amount of work getting placements in the financial services sector, in particular with Nationwide, whose headquarters are in his constituency.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that employers are supported in recruiting and retaining disabled people.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): Following numerous successful Disability Confident events, we launched the small employer offer directly to engage, encourage and signpost new employers to take advantage of this often overlooked wealth of talent. Will the Minister update the House on the progress of this vital pilot?

Penny Mordaunt: As part of the small employer offer, we will introduce over 100 employment advisers to small employers, and the feedback we have had is that that is very welcome—in particular, for organisations that do not have their own human resources departments.
Sir David Amess: Recalling the very happy days when my hon. Friend was training for her diving competition in Southend, will she join me in congratulating Southend Adult Community College and Poundland on leading the way in employing disabled people in Southend?

Penny Mordaunt: I am familiar not only with the diving boards at Southend but with that excellent college, which has done many things well, including understanding that the built environment has a huge, positive role to play in ensuring that people with profound and multiple physical and learning disabilities can achieve their full potential.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Very many individuals who previously received disability living allowance and who now receive personal independence payments are prevented from travelling to work—their Motability vehicles are being taken away because they do not qualify for the higher rate mobility component. This is a serious issue for people who are working, want to work and for whom the Government are making things more difficult. What is the Minister going to do about it?

Penny Mordaunt: I would point out that more people now have access to Motability than before, but I understand the problems that the hon. Gentleman raises, and we are looking at this in the Department.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): May I put on record congratulations to Andy Murray on his magnificent achievement and also congratulate his brother, Jamie Murray, who will end the year as doubles world No. 1? What Scotland lacks in football prowess, we more than make up for in tennis, and we are immensely proud of both Murray brothers.

Last week, Members on both sides of the House made it clear to Ministers that cutting employment and support allowance for those who are in the work-related activity group by nearly £30 a week, with corresponding cuts to universal credit, is not acceptable when the Government are still consulting on their Green Paper on closing the disability employment gap and do not have adequate support in place. Has the Minister discussed the outcome of last week’s debate with the Chancellor ahead of the autumn statement and impressed on him the need to postpone these punitive cuts?

Penny Mordaunt: I point out to the hon. Lady that the support that needs to be in place for those members of WRAG will be in place, and I gave the detail of exactly when that would be in place—before new claims come online—but I must stress that, as well as enabling people to endure and cope with such situations and the associated costs of living, we have an obligation to help them to get out of those situations. I have given assurances to the House that we will do both.

Dr Whiteford: The loss of the limited capability for work element of universal credit will mean that thousands of working disabled people will be about £1,500 a year worse off. Does the Minister think that slashing the incomes of working disabled people sends the right message about the Government’s commitment to those who are just about managing?

Penny Mordaunt: We are spending more money on disability benefits, and we are doing more in terms of support, so I do not recognise the position that the hon. Lady outlines.

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): The evidence is clear that work can be good for people’s health and particularly their mental health. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should be working with GPs and healthcare professionals to support people with mental health issues to stay in work or to get back into work as soon as possible after leaving employment?

Penny Mordaunt: Yes, I do, which is why we have brought forward a Green Paper, and we will be consulting on it until February. In the meantime, where we can make progress and foster the local connections and relationships between employment support and healthcare professionals and others those individuals will need support from, we will do so, and the flexible support fund, which goes live in December, will do that.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On behalf of Labour, I offer my congratulations to Andy Murray.

The prospect of a further £1,500-a-year cut in support to sick and disabled people found not fit for work, on top of the previous £28 billion of cuts, fills many with dread. Why is the Secretary of State touting the propaganda that the cut will incentivise disabled people to find work, when his Department’s own research says the opposite? Will he listen to MPs on both sides of the House who unanimously rejected his policy last Thursday, and stop the cut in the autumn statement?

Penny Mordaunt: As I pointed out at length, we will mitigate the financial cut to the WRAG group through several measures, including the flexible support fund, which will help with costs related directly to work, and through other measures to help with costs not directly related to getting into work. I have stated to the hon. Lady several times in the last week that we have to do both those things. We need to ensure someone’s liquidity and financial resilience, but we must also ensure that they have other kinds of support. We will not pause that support when it commences in April.

Women’s State Pension Age

4. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Whether his Department plans to take steps to introduce new transitional protection for women adversely affected by the acceleration of increases in the state pension age.

5. Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Whether his Department plans to take steps to introduce new transitional protection for women adversely affected by the acceleration of increases in the state pension age.

11. Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Whether his Department plans to take steps to introduce new transitional protection for women adversely affected by the acceleration of increases in the state pension age.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): The Government will not be introducing further transitional protection beyond the £1.1 billion already in place. Going any further could not be justified, given that the underlying imperative must be to focus public resources on those most in need.

Diana Johnson: That is a very disappointing response. There are 10,000 WASPI women in Hull, and with 4,100 names, Hull's was the largest WASPI petition presented to the House last month. Labour has suggested changes to pension credit that could be financed by clawing back handouts to the wealthiest in order to help these women. Is it not about time that the Minister understood that these WASPI women will not go away until justice is done and they get a fair deal?

Richard Harrington: As the hon. Lady has mentioned, Labour proposed using pension credit as a transition mechanism for helping these women. This was discussed extensively during our debates on the Pensions Act 2011 as it went through Parliament, and it was decided that £1.1 billion would instead be used as transitional relief.

Carolyn Harris: It is quite obvious from the Minister’s response that he is fed up with these questions, but I will keep asking them so long as I have women, such as my constituent Gillian Purcell, coming to me and saying, “I’m 60. I’ve worked all my life, but my body is telling me I can’t do it any more without a pension”. When will the Government do the honourable thing and start looking after the WASPI women?

Richard Harrington: The cost of reversing the changes varies depending on whom one asks. The different political groups have come up with different amounts, varying between £7 billion and £30 billion, and that is quite apart from the substantial practical problems, such as risk of legal challenge, deliverability and all the problems associated with such options.

Tracy Brabin: I recently spoke to a constituent working in a care home who was incredibly distressed at the thought of having to work another seven years in an increasingly physically demanding job, especially as she had already made retirement plans to look after her daughter’s children so that her daughter could go back to work. What assessment has the Department made of the implications not only for the women affected but for their families too?

Richard Harrington: As the hon. Lady implies, the Department has considered this matter long and hard. The current average age of exit from the labour market for women is 63.1 years, which is well above the previous women’s state pension age of 60.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I just want to make it clear that it is not just on the Opposition Benches that there are concerns about this matter. Of course we do not know what the autumn statement will say on Wednesday, but we ought at least to keep options open, because the current state of affairs is not very satisfactory.

Richard Harrington: As my hon. Friend knows, the public finances are very complicated, and I know that he intends to wait until Wednesday to hear what the Chancellor has to say, but this matter has been looked at long and hard and transitional funds of more than £1.1 billion have been allocated. The change to the state pension age was discussed and enacted in 1995. Since then, there have been further Acts and all this has been extensively discussed.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I understand that reverting to the 1995 state pension timetable would cost something in the region of £39 billion. Does the Minister agree that it is easy to criticise the Government over this policy, but more difficult to explain where the money would come from for any policy changes?

Richard Harrington: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and I totally agree with him.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the difficulty with Labour’s proposal on pension credit is that it does not reflect what is actually sought by the WASPI campaign, which goes right back to the Pensions Act 1995? That would almost certainly be illegal—under the rules of fair progress for both sexes on pensions, and it would cost an absolute fortune?

Richard Harrington: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. I heard a Labour Member shouting, “Tell that to the destitute.” Well, we have a very good benefits system in this country, and I am sure that those people who are destitute are very familiar with it.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The Minister has made it very clear that the Government will not act further to help those affected by the ill-managed change to people’s pension age. Will he tell us whether he or the Secretary of State have had any discussions with the Chancellor ahead of the autumn statement about whether there might be additional help for those most affected?

Richard Harrington: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I can do no better than repeat that the transitional arrangements have taken place and that Government policy is very clear. I would not want him to think or believe that there will be any change on this.

Alex Cunningham: Clearly there have been no discussions with the Chancellor. In the Westminster Hall debate on the issue, we heard about many people who have been left destitute and are living in poverty as they care for elderly relatives who may be unwell, but not ill enough to qualify for employment and support allowance, and about many others who are in dire straits. The Government have no intention of doing anything to help them and they have rejected Labour’s first-step proposal of extending pension credit to both women and men who are being denied their state pension for years to come. I ask the Minister to think again. Assuming that his hands are tied by the Chancellor and the Prime Minister, will he set up a dedicated proactive helpline for those affected so that they can access the social security benefits that the Minister says are sufficient to meet their needs?
Richard Harrington: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, there is a very good benefit system in this country and people in every area are well aware of how to access it. There are Jobcentre Plus offices and help available in every local area. If right hon. or hon. Members wish to write to me about individual constituents, as they do, I will be happy to refer them to the places in their local areas.

Autumn Statement

8. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the potential effect of the autumn statement on his Department. [907338]

12. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the potential effect of the autumn statement on his Department. [907342]

16. Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the potential effect of the autumn statement on his Department. [907346]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): I am happy to confirm that I work closely with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, and hon. Members will not be surprised to hear that I will not be pre-empting what he will be saying in his statement to the House on Wednesday.

Gavin Newlands: That is a shame. The Resolution Foundation has suggested that the best way to help the 6 million just-managing households would be to scrap the planned cuts to universal credit, including the reduction in work allowances that could see losses of up £2,800 for a working single parent. Does the Secretary of State agree that, on Wednesday, the Government need to move beyond the soundbites and reverse these cuts before low-income families pay the price?

Damian Green: No, I do not agree. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the tremendous successes we have achieved in getting people into work. We have employment at historic high rates. Very specifically, because of the introduction of the living wage, the latest Office for National Statistics data show that the group whose pay is going up the most—more than 6% last year—are the lowest-paid workers. I think that is the system working exactly as it should.

Dr Whitford: The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that with the fall in the pound since the Brexit vote, prices are being pushed up by about 2.6%. This means that there could be a rise in inflation that would coincide with this Government’s benefit freeze, adding even more pressure on low-income families. Does not the Minister agree that in view of that situation, we should get rid of the benefit freeze in the autumn statement?

Damian Green: I am sure that we shall receive a list of bids from members of the Scottish National party. I repeat that it is not for me to pre-empt my right hon. Friend the Chancellor’s autumn statement but, as I said to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), the purpose of the various benefit changes—and, indeed, the whole benefits system—is to enable people to get into work, so that they can not only earn more money, but take more control over their lives. In that respect, the system is working historically well. We have more people in work, more women in work, and fewer children growing up in workless households than ever before, and that is a huge achievement.

Stuart Blair Donaldson: Despite assurances from the Government that there would be no more austerity-driven benefit cuts, any family whose third or subsequent child is born after April 2017 will not qualify for child tax credit, which could mean a loss of more than £2,000 per child. Does the Secretary of State agree that to protect just-managing families, this repugnant measure must be abandoned on Wednesday?

Damian Green: As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said at the weekend, the House has already voted for certain benefit cuts. We do not intend to make any new cuts in benefits during the current Parliament, but Parliament has decided on various measures, including the one to which the hon. Gentleman has referred, and we shall be implementing those measures.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): A great many families who struggle to get by each month do not receive universal credit; indeed, they do not receive any welfare payments at all. We should not fall into the trap of defining this issue solely by the benefits system, and we should therefore not commit ourselves to reversing those cuts. Does my right hon. Friend agree, however, that there is a strong case for sitting down with the Chancellor and looking into what more we can do to help people on low incomes, and to support families who struggle to get by month after month?

Damian Green: My right hon. Friend is right to say that this is not purely about the payment of benefits; it is about a system that enables and helps people to get into work, or back into work, and to make progress once they are in work. As I am sure my right hon. Friend will have observed, that is the thrust of the work and health Green Paper, which is specifically designed for people with a disability or long-term health problem who have often have found it particularly difficult to find work in the past. We want to find new, innovative ways of helping those people so that they can enjoy the wider success of the modern labour market.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Unemployment in Corby, in east Northamptonshire, has fallen by more than 50% since 2010. We have seen falls in youth unemployment, and record private investments that are coming on stream will bring thousands of new jobs. As well as ensuring that all the right support is being provided, will my right hon. Friend call on the Chancellor for more of the same when it comes to job opportunities?

Damian Green: I certainly will. I am delighted to hear that my hon. Friend’s constituency is sharing so fully in the wider benefits of the more flexible, dynamic and innovative labour market that we have created over the past few years. I am sure he has found that for many of his constituents—a long with other people throughout
the country—work is absolutely the best route out of poverty, and they are benefiting from what has been done in the past. I assure him that we will continue to take such action.

22. [907353] Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The Resolution Foundation has estimated that a single parent with one child under the age of four, working full time on a minimum wage, will be up to £3,600 a year worse off by 2020. Does the Secretary of State think that the changes in welfare policy are fair, or will he be urging the Chancellor to reverse the cuts in universal credit in this week’s autumn statement?

Damian Green: I do think that the changes are fair. I also think that much of the problem with the various pieces of analysis that have been produced by a number of think-tanks is that they do not assess the effects of getting more people into work, or—I mentioned this earlier—ensuring that they make progress when they are in work. Both those actions help people’s family incomes, which is, I think, the way to give them more long-term security and to ensure that they do not just get out of poverty, but stay out of poverty.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The Government’s flagship universal credit programme has been in trouble almost since day one, which has undermined the important principle of always making work pay more than social security. Two and a half million people in low-paid work will be, on average, more than £2,000 a year worse off as a result of the Government’s cuts in universal credit work allowances. How can the Secretary of State justify his mantra that work is the route out of poverty when, under this Government, there are 7 million working families in poverty and the cut in their support will make the position worse? Why will he not honour his pledge to make work pay and ensure that the cut is reversed in the autumn statement?

Damian Green: I do not agree with the hon. Lady’s analysis of universal credit. The great thing about it is precisely that it does make work pay. We all remember the cliff edges that people were faced with: once they started to work more than 16 or 30 hours a week, they had to decide whether they would be better off in work or on benefits. That is a terrible choice to put before someone. The whole point of universal credit, which we are steadily rolling out, is that work always pays. People know that if they go into work, or if they work extra hours, they will always benefit from that. If she does not accept that, I am afraid that she and I fundamentally disagree about the fact that work is the best route out of poverty. She appears to be denying that fact.

Universal Credit

9. John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): What progress his Department is making on the roll-out of universal credit.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): Last week, we announced the remainder of the roll-out of universal credit full service through to September 2018. Universal credit is now being delivered in every jobcentre and local authority, with over 400,000 claimants now receiving it.

John Glen: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply. Given that one is more likely to be employed, to work more and to earn more on universal credit than on JSA, will he confirm, on the mechanics and progress of the roll-out, that the test-and-learn approach is enabling difficulties to be quickly identified and resolved so that the roll-out can be delivered smoothly in the next few months?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend is right to point out the technical aspects of the roll-out. We have always been clear that an undertaking of this size and scale would be bound to meet obstacles. That was precisely why we adopted the test-and-learn approach which, I am glad to report, has worked. We have listened to issues raised by our staff and officials, and by claimants and other stakeholders. We now have a solid foundation. Universal credit is delivered in every jobcentre and local authority area. As I said, 400,000 claimants are now receiving it and being supported to build a better future for themselves.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women is on 25 November. Universal credit is normally paid to a single person within a couple, but that can cause major problems for women or men in an abusive relationship, and asking for split payments could exacerbate the difficulties for someone in that situation. Will the Secretary of State consider automatically splitting payments for each partner in a couple?

Damian Green: I suspect that automatically splitting payments would introduce many technical difficulties and cause more problems than it solves. In individual instances, it is possible to split the payments to deal with problems including that which the hon. Lady rightly identifies. However, automatically splitting payments would probably not be practical.

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) can overcome his natural shyness, we will hear him.

17. [907347] Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Vulnerable people in supported housing particularly stand to benefit from the roll-out of universal credit, if it is done in the right way. When I went to visit the Salvation Army housing association in Skegness, there was concern about whether support would be in place to ensure that people spend the money over which they now have control in the best way. What support will be available to ensure that we get that right?

Damian Green: I pay tribute to the Salvation Army for its work in my hon. Friend’s constituency, in my constituency, where it has just celebrated its 125th anniversary, and throughout the country. We have developed a personal budgeting strategy to ensure that claimants have access to money advice in the transition to universal credit. A small minority might need alternative payment arrangements, which can be set up in various forms. Particularly in the housing...
spearhead, that is a necessary part of the flexibility that we have with universal credit, so that a small minority who may not be able to cope with the way in which it is normally delivered are helped.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I am dealing with a universal credit case whereby a constituent has been left near-destitute. Following his application, the DWP has alleged that he is not a British citizen, despite the fact that he has an English birth certificate and other proof of his citizenship. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this case to help my constituent and to stop this happening to anyone else as universal credit is rolled out?

Damian Green: I am always happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss individual cases. Alternatively, if she wants to write to me, I will ensure this is dealt with as quickly as possible.

Frozen Benefits

10. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What steps the Government are taking to mitigate the effect of projected levels of inflation on the spending power of frozen benefits.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): The Government are committed to the creation of jobs and making work pay. We know that work is the best route out of poverty, and that is why our welfare reforms are focused on supporting people into work, rather than leaving them to rely on benefits.

Mr Carmichael: It is interesting that that answer does not necessarily address the question that I asked.

Last week, the Institute for Fiscal Studies highlighted the impact that weaker sterling will have on the cost of many of the essentials for which welfare benefits pay—clothing and food. It estimates that inflation for these items could be 2.7% next year. These circumstances were neither known nor anticipated when the decision was made to freeze benefits, so should they not themselves be the catalyst for a review of the decision?

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that inflation was in fact down last month. What is really important is that we support people who can work into jobs, and into better jobs—that is the whole premise behind universal credit. We know that getting people into work lifts them out of poverty. Our reforms and additional recruitment. We are also monitoring to ensure that issues get the support they need?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): Our policy is designed by service-user and appropriately.

Personal Independence Payments

14. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that personal independence payment assessments are undertaken fairly and appropriately.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): Our policy is designed by service-user panels, provision is strictly monitored and measured by independent audit, and the provider is held to account through our contract with it.

Jeff Smith: Citizens Advice and the mental health charity Mind told the Public Accounts Committee in March that private contractor assessors were comprehensively failing claimants with mental health issues, so what progress has been made since in the recruitment of registered mental health nurses by healthcare assessment providers to ensure that claimants with mental health issues get the support they need?

Penny Mordaunt: Since then we have introduced a number of new measures, including improved training and additional recruitment. We are also monitoring to ensure those doing assessments are referring to mental health services if they feel that that is required.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Fourteen-year-old Olivia in North Cornwall is the primary carer for her mother, who has multiple sclerosis. PIP assessments create uncertainty for Olivia; no one else in her household is able to work or to care for her mother. Will my hon. Friend applaud young carers such as Olivia? In the light of the DWP’s proposed end to reassessment for people with long-term illnesses, will she consider extending this to people who rely on children to care for them until such time as those children have finished further education?

Penny Mordaunt: I certainly pay tribute to Olivia and the thousands like her who do a physically and emotionally demanding job for their loved ones. We recognise the principle. We have made changes to ESA reassessments and the Green Paper affords us the opportunity to look
at how that principle could be applied to PIP. It might be to my hon. Friend’s constituent’s advantage to have further PIP assessments because her needs might increase, but there is an opportunity to have a much more streamlined process, which I hope the Green Paper will deliver.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Does the Minister not realise how wildly wrong some of these assessments can be? I had a constituent with cerebral palsy who was told that he would get no mobility component with his personal independence payment, meaning that he risked losing his car and therefore his ability to work. Are any financial sanctions imposed on the contractor for getting such assessments so wildly wrong and hence threatening people’s jobs?

Penny Mordaunt: I think the hon. Lady’s question related to PIP. We have also introduced other ways in which we can measure a contractor’s performance, including the use of clinical data. Whether in relation to PIP or to ESA, we need to ensure that the evidence needed to make these judgments is submitted early in the process. We are doing some work to ensure that that happens, and it is improving things considerably.

Supported Housing Sector

20. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What plans his Department has to help ensure long-term, sustainable and predictable funding for the supported housing sector.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): In his written ministerial statement to the House of Commons on 15 September, the Secretary of State confirmed that from 2019-20 we will be introducing a new funding model for supported housing. I can also confirm that the Department for Work and Pensions, along with the Department for Communities and Local Government, will today publish a consultation document to develop the details that will underpin the new funding model, and the evidence review of supported housing in Great Britain.

Daniel Zeichner: One in five people affected by severe mental illness rely on supported housing. What discussions has the Minister had with the Department of Health about the effect that these policy changes have had on those who suffer from a mental illness?

Caroline Nokes: Colleagues from the DCLG and I have had extensive discussions with the supported housing sector since 15 September, and those conversations will continue now that the consultation document has been published.

Workplace Pension

24. Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that people have the opportunity to save into a reliable workplace pension.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): Automatic enrolment will give about 11 million people the opportunity to save into a workplace pension scheme, all of which must meet qualifying criteria and minimum requirements. I am pleased to say that just under 7 million people have already been enrolled by more than 293,000 employers.

Mike Freer: It is welcome that more people are joining pension schemes, but the Pensions Regulator issued 3,700 penalty notices in the quarter to September, up from 861. Does that perhaps suggest that this process is becoming a bit too cumbersome for small businesses?

Richard Harrington: The vast majority of small employers are meeting their automatic enrolment duties on time and without the need for any enforcement action. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the regulator has issued more fixed penalty notices this quarter, but this is proportionate to the number of employers now implementing automatic enrolment.

Topical Questions

T1. [907356] Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): Since my appointment as Secretary of State, I have been determined to look at the benefits processes to ensure that they are working in a fair and proper way. As part of that ongoing work, I have announced an extension to the groups that can access hardship payments immediately following a sanction. Those groups now include people with a mental health condition and homeless people. This change will help to ensure that sanctions do not discourage those vulnerable groups from engaging fully with the welfare system, and that we have a system that is fair, that protects the most vulnerable and that supports people into work.

Mr Jayawardena: I welcome what my right hon. Friend has said to the House. The new figures from the Office for National Statistics show an increase of 590,000 disabled people in employment over the past three years, and I am particularly pleased that the employment rates for disabled people in my local authority areas of Hart and of Basingstoke and Deane are 16.3% and 14% above the national average. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming those figures? Can he also assure me that this Government will commit to building on this success by continuing to reduce the disability employment gap?

Damian Green: I am delighted to hear about the figures in my hon. Friend’s area, which reflect the national move that has narrowed the disability employment gap by 2.3% over the past year. There is an enormous amount still to do, which is why we produced the joint Green Paper with the Department of Health. It is a central task for this Department over the next three years, and we will pursue it with as much vigour as we can.

T5. [907355] Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): New PIP criteria have meant a reduction in the unaided walking criterion to qualify for the Motability scheme from 50 metres to 20 metres. Three of my constituents originally failed under the new criteria and were threatened with the removal of their car if they could
not pay for it themselves. Like 60% of appellants, they won on appeal. Will the Minister consider maintaining Motability payments during the appeal process and, more importantly, reinstating the 50-metres criterion?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): That particular criterion, of which I am very aware, is obviously not the sole criterion—many other factors are taken into account. I wish to do more on Motability, and we are looking closely at the whole area.

T2. [907357] Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): I continue to work with small businesses across my constituency while auto-enrolment is rolled out. I was heartened by last week’s Institute for Fiscal Studies report, which showed that that 22 to 29-year-olds in particular have seen a massive boost in pension coverage. What are the Government doing to ensure that everyone in my constituency and across the United Kingdom has the opportunity of saving for a good-quality workplace pension?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): I can reiterate the fact that plans to expand auto-enrolment are happening, and hundreds of thousands of people are signing up, which is a significant improvement. As for the self-employed and other people who are not in the scheme, that is just the sort of thing that we should be looking at in our 2017 review of automatic enrolment.

T6. [907361] Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Given that the Department promised to increase the number of people supported by the Access to Work programme, will the Minister tell us why fewer people are now in receipt of Access to Work than in the last year of the previous Labour Government?

Penny Mordaunt: I will happily write to the hon. Gentleman with the figures, but I do not recognise what he says. We have actually expanded such schemes, and the Green Paper asks what more we can do. We want to ensure that everyone who wants to get into work has the necessary equipment and support to do so.

T4. [907359] Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): These days, many more people seem to be working until they are much older, and few things are more depressing than people retiring after having worked and put into their private pensions and then getting hammered with taxation until they drop. Is the Department in discussions with the Chancellor about imaginative ways of rewarding people who have worked all their lives and have just done the right thing?

Richard Harrington: I sincerely hope that my hon. Friend does not work until he drops, but I take his main point that people are retiring later. As part of the policy of continually reducing taxation on people, I am sure that the Treasury will be looking at the matter in future. With pension freedoms and the tax-free element that pensioners enjoy, the good news is that there is much more scope for pensioners to do the kind of thing he mentions.

Mr Speaker: I call Kelvin Hopkins. Not here.
and locally administered schemes that would mitigate those costs. I am very clear that we have to do both things. We have to ensure that someone can endure and cope with the situation in which they find themselves, but we must also bring forward that support in April to enable them to get out of a situation.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): With around £4 billion of child support debts still outstanding and DWP’s own figures to March this year showing that 90,000 non-resident parents have not paid child support in full, will the Secretary of State tell the House where extra resources can be found to ensure that those parents who are due child maintenance for the care of their children receive it in full and on time?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): We encourage paying parents to pay their maintenance on time and in full and to avoid the accrual of arrears. However, if a paying parent fails to pay on time, we aim to take immediate action to recover the debt and re-establish compliance. We have a range of strong enforcement powers, including seizing property and commitment to prison. We attempt to re-establish compliance initially through a one-off card payment, or negotiated agreement, deduction from the paying parent’s earnings, or deduction directly from an individual’s bank account. We are currently in the process of responding to a consultation run earlier this year on using powers to deduct from joint bank accounts.

Caroline Nokes: The DWP has long recognised the challenges that some claimants, particularly those with multiple or complex needs, may face in the transition to universal credit. That is why we have developed the personal budgeting strategy to ensure that claimants have access to suitable financial products and money advice. For the small minority who need them, alternative payment arrangements can be set up. All APA cases are dealt with urgently and the majority of cases are processed within the first assessment period and within a five-day average clearance time.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): It was a long overdue victory for common sense that those people with chronic illnesses and long-term conditions will no longer be subject to the work capability assessment, but what about our brave veterans in receipt of war pensions? Why are they still subject to work capability assessments?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. It is one that I, as a former Armed Forces Minister, have discussed with the Department. That is why we have specific questions related to our armed forces in the Green Paper. It is a good idea.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The most challenging gap that we need to bridge in the disability employment statistics is the one relating to people with learning difficulties. In answer to a written question, the civil service was unable to break down the stats to show how many people with learning disabilities were employed. Does the Minister agree that those stats are vital to help us to provide policies and support for people in these circumstances?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree absolutely, which is why we are doing that at as local a level as possible. On 5 December we are holding a drop-in session to which every Member of this House will be invited. As well as giving them information about how they can run local events to encourage participation in the Green Paper consultation, we will be giving them some local data so that they can get that local focus on the people we are currently trying to help and the unmet need.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Why does the Secretary of State think that five of his colleagues voted for my motion last week calling on the Government to pause cuts to ESA and universal credit?

Damian Green: Hon. Members are entitled to vote in this House as they like. I am not sure that the Chief Whip would agree with me at all times, but it is a fact. I disagreed with the case that the hon. Gentleman made in that debate. As has been explored over the past hour in this Question Time, a balance clearly has to be struck between keeping the public finances in order and ensuring that our benefits system works as well as possible to help as many people as possible into work. That is what we have been doing successfully for many years now, and that is what we will continue to do.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Universal credit was rolled out in Waveney on 25 May. I am sorry to report that at present it is not going well and many vulnerable people are finding themselves in difficult situations. Can the Secretary of State assure me and my constituents that everything is being done to address these technical issues as soon as possible so that universal credit can play the role for which it was intended?

Damian Green: I am always happy to talk about any technical issues that arise as we roll out this important benefit, and if my hon. Friend wishes to bring them to my attention in detail, I will happily talk to him about them.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Should not those people who were damaged in the contaminated blood scandal by the NHS be passported on to the new PIP regime if they are already in receipt of DLA?

Penny Mordaunt: I do not know whether this is an issue that the hon. Lady has raised before. I am sorry if I am not aware of the previous correspondence that she has had with the Department. I would be happy to meet her to discuss that.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): PIP continues to lead the way in identifying and supporting those with mental health conditions to a significantly greater degree than DLA, so what more can be done to signpost the people identified to additional support provided by the NHS, charities or the Government pilot?
We have been trialling a number of measures—for example, the mental health trailblazers, which combines employment support advice with psychological support delivered through the NHS, and we are going to roll that out nationally.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State understand that the dismissive answers that the Under-Secretary of State for Pensions, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), gave about the problems faced by WASPI women are a slap in the face to women who have worked all their lives and in many cases have retired to look after sick or elderly relatives, thus saving this country millions of pounds? It is time that Ministers recognised that those who have done the right thing ought to be looked at and their situation alleviated.

Since the original legislation was passed more than 20 years ago, and since the Pensions Act 2011, the Government committed £1.1 billion to lessen the impact of the changes for those affected. In the end, we have to address the issue that having the same pension age for men and women is fair, and that at a time when we are all living longer it is necessary, if we are to keep a credible pensions system going, for the pension age to go up gradually for both sexes. [Interruption.] I am sorry that many people in the Labour party do not seem to accept those basic facts of arithmetic, but they are basis facts and the mitigations that were put in place mean that no one has seen their pension age change by more than 18 months compared to the previous timetable—[Interruption.] For 81% of those women the increase will be no more than 12 months. Finally, for the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) who is shouting from the Front Bench, other countries have done this faster than the UK. In nine European Union countries, including Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands, all of which run extremely sophisticated welfare systems, the state pension age was 65 for women as far back as 2009, so the Labour party will have to accept these basic facts.

Mr Speaker: I was hoping there would be time for the remaining two questioners. There is not, but it will have to be found anyway.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): On Saturday evening, I met one of my constituents, who came to see me about PIP reassessments for those with deafness-related conditions. The question he wanted me to put to Ministers was whether, as part of the ongoing review of the reassessment process, they will look carefully at the situation relating to this group of individuals.

Yes, the Green Paper will afford us the opportunity to do that. Around certain disabilities, there are some very sensitive issues about how someone might need assistance provided—for example, they might prefer to use sign language, as opposed to assistive technology—which we also need to take into account, and we will do that.

I was recently contacted by a constituent who was asked to complete an evaluation form at the end of a PIP assessment and who alleges that the Atos healthcare professional who conducted the assessment stood over her and watched as she completed the paperwork. I am sure the Minister will share my alarm that people may feel menaced into giving favourable feedback. Will she agree to personally look into this as a matter of urgency?

If the hon. Lady can give me any more specifics about that, I would be very happy to look into it. In terms of the satisfaction reviews that are done, the satisfaction rating is high, and I do not think—[Interruption.] No, we need to give credit where credit is due. But if that kind of practice is going on, or if any Member of this House has evidence or further examples of it, I will be very happy to look into it.
Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

3.37 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on the leadership, staffing, budget and structure of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): The inquiry was set up to look at the extent to which institutions in England and Wales failed to protect children from sexual abuse. We know the terrible impact that abuse has on survivors, sometimes for many years.

As the House knows, following the resignation of the previous chair, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary appointed as chair Professor Alexis Jay. She has a distinguished career in social work and a long-standing dedication to child protection. She led the independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Rotherham, where she scrutinised the work of social workers and proved her capability to uncover failings across institutions and professions. She is the right person to take this work forward.

Taking the work forward is vital for creating a sense of certainty for victims and survivors. The inquiry has set up 13 strands of investigation, and made 250 formal requests for information from over 120 institutions, with 164,000 documents having now been submitted. It has referred roughly 80 cases a week to the police. It has made 250 formal requests for information from over 120 institutions, with 164,000 documents having now been submitted. It has referred roughly 80 cases a week to the police. It has rolled out the truth project, providing survivors with the opportunity to tell the inquiry what has happened to them. More than 500 people have so far come forward.1

The inquiry has adequate resources to undertake its work, and we will support the inquiry with what it needs. The inquiry remains independent, which means it is not part of Government and is not run by a Government Department.

Professor Jay is mindful of the scale of the task and the need to move forward with pace. That is why she has instigated an internal review of the inquiry’s approach to its investigations, exploring new ways to develop its investigative work, while remaining faithful to its terms of reference. She has made it clear that, if any changes are proposed, the views of those affected will be sought.

We expect the outcome of this review soon. It is crucial that we now give the inquiry the space and support it needs to get on with its job—getting to the truth for victims and survivors—and I urge everyone in the House to do just that.

Lisa Nandy: I thank the Minister for that statement, but where is the Home Secretary, and why has nobody from the Government sought proactively to come to this House to provide reassurance about the serious events that have unfolded over the past week as this inquiry has unravelled in front of our eyes?

Has the Home Secretary met survivors groups since last Thursday? What steps has she taken to establish that the chair and the panel have the expertise and the working relationships for this to succeed? Has anybody from the Home Office investigated why so many lawyers have cited concerns about competency and leadership?


Does she expect further resignations? Has a new chief legal counsel been appointed? Is the former chief legal counsel, Ben Emmerson QC, still being paid, and if so, why? What action has the Home Office taken to establish that there was a disclosure of sexual assault, and is she satisfied that that disclosure was dealt with properly by the inquiry? Can she give me a personal assurance that the intelligence services are standing by the commitment to hand over all files and that that is not being obstructed? We heard about Professor Jay’s internal review for the first time in August—where is it?

This is the second time in recent weeks that I have had to ask Ministers to come to the House and account for these failings. They have lost seven senior lawyers, three chairs and several survivors groups, and it is now impossible to see that this inquiry is still operating effectively. This may be the last chance that the Prime Minister and her Home Secretary have to rescue from collapse the inquiry that the Prime Minister set up. Will the Home Secretary now stop hiding behind the smokescreen of independence, recognise that she has responsibility for this inquiry’s success, and get a grip on it?

Sarah Newton: I am absolutely delighted, as the Minister responsible for vulnerability, safeguarding and counter-extremism, to be here to answer this question. It is absolutely at the core of this Government’s priorities to safeguard children in our country. The Home Secretary was in this House as recently as 17 October answering questions in detail. The Home Affairs Committee has asked detailed questions of the permanent secretary to the Home Office. The hon. Lady is really quite wrong in asserting that there is some sort of smokescreen and hiding behind independence. It is absolutely essential that this inquiry is an independent inquiry. The terms of reference of the inquiry were shaped with the voices and the opinions of the victims, and it is very important that this independence is maintained.

The hon. Lady asked a series of operational questions, all of which are for the chair and the leadership of the independent inquiry. It would be totally wrong for me to answer those questions here, because we would be intervening in the independence of the inquiry. I am confident, as are the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary, in the ability of Professor Jay to lead this inquiry. It is really important that we all get behind the inquiry so that it can get on and do its really important work in making sure that it gets to the truth and delivers for victims.

Sir Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I do not for one moment undervalue the intentions of those who set up this inquiry and those who are working with it, although it has had a very rocky road since it was begun. Nor do I underestimate for one moment the trauma felt by those who have been affected by child sex abuse. I have acted in a number of criminal cases in which I have seen with my own eyes the terrible consequences for adults of what happened to them as children. I want to ask my hon. Friend a question from a slightly different angle. I have a constituent who, since the early part of this century, has been left in a hideous, Kafkaesque limbo. He does not know whether he is an accused person or a witness. What is his status in relation to this inquiry? He, like the victims, needs to be told when this is all going to finish, both for him and for
the victims. Will my hon. Friend please make some inquiries of the inquiry to ensure that this man can either be prosecuted or set free?

Sarah Newton: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for the customary thoughtfulness with which he asked his question and reflected on the importance of this inquiry. As he quite rightly points out, child sexual abuse can have a devastating impact not just on the victims, but on the people caught up in such inquiries. He referred to a particular case that is an operational matter for the police. While I can understand why he wants to bring this matter to a swift conclusion on his constituent’s behalf, these are operational matters for the police, who, quite rightly, are independent of the Home Office.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): This inquiry is on its fourth chair. Every time, Ministers have come to the House and asserted that the current chair is the right person to take the inquiry forward. Having said that for the fourth time, why do they expect the House, the public and, above all, the survivors to be reassured? As the Minister has said, this is of course an independent inquiry, particularly as to its conduct and findings, but that does not mean the Home Office can take no responsibility at all.

On the question of the Shirley Oaks survivors who were in the Lambeth children’s home, I have heard the Minister say that she will not answer operational questions, but she will know their concern about having a social worker as the overall chair of the inquiry. They have said they will accept a vice-chair for their strand who is not a social worker. Have Ministers put that to Alexis Jay? Above all—I hope the Minister will not dismiss this as an operational question—the Shirley Oaks survivors want to know what Home Office involvement there was in the monitoring and supervision of the Lambeth children’s home during the period when the historical child abuse occurred. Ministers cannot just let this inquiry run into the sand. The public expect better, this House expects better and the survivors expect better.

Sarah Newton: I absolutely assure the hon. Lady and every other Member in the House that we will absolutely not let this inquiry run into the sand. It is vital to the full protection of children in our country that we understand the failings of the past, seek remedies for the victims and use that intelligence to improve and have better safeguarding arrangements for children today.

The hon. Lady asked questions about operational details that she knows full well it would be completely inappropriate for me to answer. I can assure her that the chair of the independent inquiry regularly meets survivors groups, and I am sure that she will listen to the concerns raised by the Shirley Oaks Survivors Association. She is undertaking a review to make sure that the inquiry is properly focused to address the really serious concerns that are being raised.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I appreciate that this is an independent inquiry, but my hon. Friend must understand that the victims groups have become upset and disturbed about the nature of the inquiry and how long it is going to take. Will she at least assure me that the scope of the inquiry will not be reduced, and that whatever funds are required by the inquiry will be delivered by the Home Office?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. I quite understand that the victims, who have been abused, will feel disappointed at some of the issues that there have been with the inquiry. I quite understand that, but as he says, it is absolutely vital that the independence of the inquiry is maintained. The chair is meeting and engaging with the survivors organisations and individuals to make sure that the inquiry absolutely delivers on its terms of reference, which they themselves shaped. To go back to my initial response to the urgent question, the fact that 80 cases a week are being referred to the police and that over 500 people have come forward to participate in the truth project shows how valuable the inquiry already is to those victims.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): We all know that the inquiry has been dogged by setbacks and problems, so it is very disappointing to learn of further difficulties, namely the latest withdrawals and the concerns expressed by groups representing victims and survivors. I am sure that all right-minded people want the inquiry to succeed. We want it to meet its original purpose of investigating historical allegations of institutional child sexual abuse, and, wherever possible, we want, above all, justice for those people whose lives have been irreparably harmed by abuse. Yet, to do so we need to restore and secure confidence in the inquiry and its findings.

Notwithstanding the Minister’s reluctance to address what she considers to be operational matters, when does she anticipate that a suitable legal counsel will be appointed to ensure that the facts are well established throughout the proceedings? Following the resignation of the previous chair in August, does the Minister know whether internal procedures for resolving complaints about staff and panel members have been established? Most importantly—this is categorically not an operational matter—what does she plan to do to restore trust in the proceedings for those survivors of sexual abuse and to regain their support?

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Lady for her series of questions. I will take her last point first. On confidence, there is a huge amount that we can do in this House, and that is to get behind the inquiry. It is open for business. It is worth getting some perspective. Although I am really disappointed that one victims group has decided not to engage with the inquiry at the current time, I am hopeful that it will re-engage in the future. We must remember that it is one group. The inquiry is open for business and getting on with its work.

The question about the legal counsel is for the chair and the leadership of the commission. It is their responsibility to make sure that they appoint the people necessary to undertake the task. I am sure that the chair understands the concerns raised by Members and victims organisations regarding making sure that she gets on with resolving the issues so that the very important work that the inquiry is doing can come to a swift and really good conclusion.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the role of the Home Secretary, or any Secretary of State, under the Inquiries Act 2005

is to appoint the chair and the panel and to agree the terms of reference with that chair, and that for a Member to come to this House with an imperious and censorious list of questions, such as those we heard from the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), does not help the inquiry and totally fails to understand the law?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a lawyer, for asking such an insightful question. It is very disappointing that Opposition Members are coming to the House and making such censorious claims when what we really need to do is get behind this independent inquiry so that it can do the job for victims and make sure that we all learn what more we can do to keep children in our country safe.

Mr Chuka Umunnna (Streatham) (Lab): It is not just my constituents who are members of the largest survivors group, Shirley Oaks, whose more than 600 members have said that they no longer have confidence in the chair of the inquiry. White Flowers Alba, Minister and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors and lawyers representing numerous other survivors have also said that. On Friday, I was appalled that one response to Shirley Oaks’ withdrawal of support was a suggestion that it should be compelled to provide to the inquiry the evidence that it has gathered. Its members are survivors of child abuse—they are not criminals. Millions has been spent, there has been no public cross-examination of witnesses yet, and the most senior lawyers are resigning month after month. Does that not reinforce the need for a change in leadership, which is within the purview of Home Office Ministers? What we need is a senior judge of High Court standing or above to lead this inquiry. Why do the Government not act?

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He is an assiduous constituency MP and he is quite right to raise the concerns of the victims based in his constituency. The Prime Minister and the Home Secretary could not have made clearer their confidence in the chairman of the independent commission. It is really important that we carry on with the inquiry and make sure that we all learn what we can do to keep children in our country safe.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is independent?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is quite right. We set up an independent inquiry so that it can get on with its work. It shaped the terms of reference with the victims themselves, and, as we have seen from my response to the urgent question, it is making good progress.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): It is a bit rich for Conservative Members to call for patience, understanding and so on. Eighteen years ago in this House I had to bring business to a stop two nights running to get allegations about child abuse in my constituency put on the record. The Waterhouse inquiry was set up, and that took years. There have been subsequent inquiries, one after another. One of the children in my constituency committed suicide before we heard any results from an inquiry. It is absolutely essential that the survivors of abuse have those results and have confidence in what is being done.

In north Wales, for example, it has taken all these years for Chief Superintendent Anglesea to be put on trial and to be sentenced for his involvement in child abuse in north Wales. It was good investigative journalism, not inquiries, that got to the root of his case. I appeal to the Minister: do not ask for patience from the Opposition. We have been patients long enough, and it is just not good enough.

Sarah Newton: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question, and I pay tribute to her for the work she has done in campaigning so assiduously for justice for her constituents. I reassure her and everyone who is here that those lessons have been learned from the past. The inquiry is an incredibly important part of what the Government are doing to learn lessons from the past and make sure that we are doing everything that we can to keep children in our country safe. As a result of people coming forward to the inquiry, as I said in my response to the urgent question, more than 80 referrals a week are being made to the police. Information and evidence gathered by the inquiry are being used to seek the prosecutions that absolutely need to be made, as the right hon. Lady described.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): This inquiry is doing incredibly important work. Does the Minister agree that the most important aspect is that it is independent of Government? “Independent” is the first word of its title. Does she agree, therefore, that the best thing that Members on both sides of the House can do to support its work is to give it the space it needs to do that work independently?

Sarah Newton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for absolutely hitting the nail on the head. As constituency MPs, we have all met victims of domestic abuse and violence, and children who have been involved in child sexual exploitation, so we know how absolutely devastating this is. It is really important that we do everything we can to support those people and encourage them to come forward to the inquiry. Wherever the evidence takes us, we will seek those solutions and those prosecutions.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): It has taken 35 years for Gordon Anglesea to face trial at Mold Crown court, where he was convicted last month and sentenced to 12 years’ imprisonment for historical child abuse offences. While recognising the inquiry’s independence, will the Minister tell the House when the first evidence sessions in public are likely to be, so that my constituents and others can give their evidence of that level of abuse?

Sarah Newton: If the right hon. Gentleman or his constituents have any evidence whatever, they should go to the inquiry right now. We are not waiting for the end of the inquiry to take action, as I have said before; more than 80 cases are sent to the police every week so that action can be taken. It is really important that people engage with the inquiry and support their constituents in doing so, so that we can seek justice for the victims.
John Howell (Henley) (Con): I would like to pick up on a point the Minister has already made. This inquiry plays a vital part in protecting vulnerable children for the present and for the future. Will she put it in the context of what else the Government are doing?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is quite right. The inquiry is incredibly important, but is part of an overarching strategy. We want to do everything we possibly can to keep children in our country safe. We are seeing record levels of prosecutions and huge investment in supporting victims, making sure that we take apart the culture of secrecy and cover-up that contributed to the delays we have heard about from Opposition Members.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The inquiry was set up as a panel inquiry, then turned into a statutory inquiry. Was the biggest mistake not setting up a royal commission modelled on what is happening in Australia, which has had a royal commission for the past few years that is pursuing the issue very successfully and has the victims’ confidence, as well as having their interests at its heart?

Sarah Newton: Royal commissions can be very important, but they tend to take a very long time. The Government’s view was that an independent inquiry was the best way to learn the lessons and secure the justice that the victims were looking for.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): There was speculation over the weekend about the way an inquiry was taking place in Wiltshire. When events might have happened a long time ago, evidence is difficult to corroborate and high-profile figures are involved, there is always a significant risk that things might somehow just get left. Will the Minister assure the House that when victims give evidence, although that evidence might be difficult to corroborate and it might be about things that happened a long time ago, our chief constables and investigating officers up and down the country will go where the evidence takes them, as they should? Will she commit to ensuring that sufficient resources are available so that everyday policing is not affected when these serious matters happen in individual constabularies?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point. I can absolutely give him the assurance he is looking for—we must go where the evidence takes us. It can be very painful for people to revisit terrible things that happened in the past, but I encourage them, as I am sure he is doing, to come forward, go to the police and give that evidence.

The inquiry has been given the status of one of the most important police functions in our country. The police have the resources to support investigations into historical sexual abuse of children.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): On the Opposition Benches there is no question but that the inquiry is and must be independent. But this is a question of confidence, and confidence is not an operational matter. There seems to be an attempt to dismiss the Shirley Oaks Survivors Association as just one group of survivors. I can tell the Minister that that association represents 600 survivors of abuse. It has undertaken two years’ worth of rigorous, detailed, exceptionally high quality research on behalf of survivors and has very powerful evidence. I have raised concerns on the association’s behalf, as have both my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) and the Home Affairs Committee, but they have not been answered. I am afraid that it simply is not good enough for the Minister to demand our unswerving confidence when the legitimate questions we have raised have not been answered. I ask her once again: will she intervene to ensure that we can have the confidence in the inquiry that is necessary for it to do the job it needs to do on behalf of victims and survivors?

Sarah Newton: I absolutely want to put it on the record and correct any doubt in the hon. Lady’s mind that we take every victim’s story extremely seriously. Every victim’s voice must be heard. That is why we set up the inquiry. If I were to intervene, it would no longer be an independent inquiry. It is absolutely essential that it maintains its independence. Professor Jay has a long and established record. She did a really excellent job in Rotherham. If people were to speak to the victims in Rotherham, they would hear the confidence that they placed in her and what a really good job she did there. I would strongly encourage Opposition Members to go back to victims and their organisations and encourage them to re-engage with the independent inquiry and with its chairman, so that we can move forward.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on being granted the urgent question, but I do not think that it has been the best question: there has been a lot of noise from the Opposition and not a lot of clarity from them. [Interruption.] As they are proving, Sir, at this very moment. Does the Minister agree that one of the most important things is that we look after potential child victims of abuse now? Is not the simplest thing that the Government could do to take responsibility for child victims of sexual abuse, especially those who were internally trafficked, away from the Department for Communities and Local Government and make it an independent responsibility of the Home Office, because too many children are re-trafficked into sexual abuse while under the DCLG’s care?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for his helpful question. Bringing us right up to date with the incredibly important work that we are doing to ensure that we keep children safe in our country, while addressing historical issues, is very important and it informs what we do now, but we leave no stone unturned in our determination to make sure that children are safe, including those children, as he rightly points out, who might be trafficked or who are victims of modern slavery. We constantly keep under review our care for those children.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I remind the Minister that the purpose of setting up this inquiry was to find out the truth and to allow the victims of child sexual abuse to get closure? To achieve that, they have to have confidence in the inquiry. If the inquiry alone cannot command the confidence of victims, the Government still has a role to play. She or the Home Secretary should be meeting the victims’ groups. She should be hearing their concerns directly from them and seeking their remedies if the inquiry is to do the job for which we set it up in the first place.
Sarah Newton: We have absolute confidence in the inquiry. I respectfully urge everyone in the House today to get behind the inquiry to make sure that it works for victims. More than 500 victims have come forward, and that is leading to cases going forward for the police to take action. It is really important that we send out a strong and united message from the House that we all think that this independent inquiry is vitally important for victims and survivors and that we will all do our best to support the inquiry’s work.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Over a month ago, when I brought up with the Home Secretary in this place the loss of survivor testimonies by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, she suggested that I engage with the inquiry in a slightly more positive manner and that I write to her about the incident. As I have yet to receive a response to the detailed letter that I subsequently sent, and as the Home Secretary is not here today, will the Minister update the House now on what investigation has since taken place into those lost testimonies?

Sarah Newton: I agree to make sure that the hon. Lady gets a response to her letter and the detailed concerns she raises.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): There has never been an official Welsh representative on the inquiry, despite intense lobbying by Welsh Government Ministers, the then Health Minister, Mark Drakeford, and the Social Services Minister, Gwenda Thomas. Considering that this is an England and Wales inquiry, will the Minister give an assurance that there are open lines of communication with the Welsh Government, so that devolved aspects can be appropriately discussed? Will she confirm that the interests of Welsh victims are adequately protected?

Sarah Newton: Of course, it is really important that people living in Wales, like those living all over our country, can have their voices heard. It is an independent inquiry, however, so I respectfully ask that the hon. Lady makes those representations to Professor Jay to make sure that she is satisfied that victims in Wales feel they are being listened to.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): For years, I worked supporting victims of sex abuse. It is absolutely clear to everyone in the House that the seemingly endless cover-ups, scandals and delays will be painful and traumatic for all the victims and survivors. How does the Minister intend to restore trust and integrity to the inquiry as soon as possible?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Lady draws on her work and personal experience. In working with victims, she made a huge contribution before she came to the House, and I am sure that some of them look at what has happened and feel disappointed, but I can assure her that we are utterly committed to seeing the inquiry through and that we utterly support the chair, Professor Alexis Jay, who we believe is the person to see this through. I encourage the hon. Lady to speak to the victims in her constituency and assure them that this is a top priority for the Government. We will support the independent inquiry to do its job so that the victims she worked with and those all over the country get the justice they seek.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): In north Wales, where many offences of child sexual abuse took place, there is extreme scepticism about the Government’s commitment to openness. The Macur review, which reported recently, redacted the names of people in positions of responsibility, some of them Members of the House, because of continuing court proceedings. We now know that Gordon Anglesea has been convicted. If the Minister is committed to openness, will she go back to the Ministry of Justice and ask it to revisit the Macur review and to make open those redacted names to make it clear that there is openness in this inquiry and that, following their conviction for heinous crimes of child sexual abuse, those responsible will be openly put for consideration as part of reports issued by the Government?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Gentleman says there are concerns about a lack of openness and transparency, which I simply do not accept. This Government have done more than any other to make people accountable, to be more transparent, to open up processes and to make those in authority accountable for their actions.

Ian C. Lucas: Answer the question.

Sarah Newton: The question you are asking is about a specific case, but it would be completely inappropriate for me to comment on a case that is going through the courts. I have absolute confidence in our criminal justice system. The matters the hon. Gentleman raises should be raised with the justice system.

Mr Speaker: First, I should just point out that I was not asking any question, as the Chair does not do so. Secondly, notwithstanding the evident and audible frustration of the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), I simply make the point that there has been a full exchange today, but these matters will inevitably be returned to on the Floor of the House, possibly on innumerable occasions, and either the hon. Lady or some other Minister will toddle along to the Dispatch Box to respond. The matter will go on and on. I feel sure of that.
Higher Education and Research Bill  
Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

Mr Speaker: Members will note that I have, unusually, selected some starred amendments. I have done so in the circumstances applying to this particular Bill—the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh), following his point of order on this matter, will be conversant with the issues—because the deadline for tabling amendments had already passed when today’s business was announced last week. In those circumstances, it seemed to me sensible and helpful to the House to proceed in this way.

New Clause 1
DUTY TO MONITOR AND REPORT ON FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

“(1) The OfS must monitor the financial sustainability of the following registered higher education providers—
(a) those who are funded wholly or partly by a grant, loan or other payment from the OfS under section 37 or 38 (financial support for providers),
(b) those who are not so funded but are eligible to receive such funding under section 37 or 38, and
(c) those who provide higher education courses which are designated for the purposes of section 22 of the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998 (financial support for students) by or under regulations made under that section.

(2) The OfS must include in its annual report a financial sustainability summary for the financial year to which the report relates.

(3) “A financial sustainability summary” for a financial year is a summary of conclusions drawn by the OfS for that year, from its monitoring under subsection (1), regarding relevant patterns, trends or other matters which it has identified.

(4) Patterns, trends or other matters are “relevant” if—
(a) they relate to the financial sustainability of some or all of the registered higher education providers monitored under subsection (1), and
(b) the OfS considers that they are appropriate to be brought to the attention of the Secretary of State.

(5) In this section—
“annual report” means the annual report under paragraph 13 of Schedule1;  
“financial year” has the same meaning as in that Schedule (see paragraph 12(6)).”—(Joseph Johnson.)

This new clause, which is for insertion after clause 61, requires the OfS to monitor the financial sustainability of registered higher education providers who are in receipt of, or eligible for, certain kinds of public funding. It requires the OfS to include in its annual report a summary of conclusions which it draws from that monitoring regarding patterns, trends or other matters which it has identified relating to the financial sustainability of some or all of the providers monitored and which it considers are appropriate to be brought to the attention of the Secretary of State.

Brought up, and read the First time.

4.15 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 4—Committee on Degree Awarding Powers and University Title—

“(1) The OfS must establish a committee called the “Committee on Degree Awarding Powers and University Title”.

(2) The function of the Committee is to provide advice to the OfS on—
(a) the general exercise of its functions under sections 40, 42, 43 and 53 of this Act, and section 77 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992;
(b) particular uses of its powers under section 40(1) of this Act; and
(c) particular uses of its powers under section 77 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

(3) The OfS must seek the advice of the Committee before—
(a) authorising a registered higher education provider or qualifying further education provider to grant taught awards, research awards or foundation degrees under section 40(1) of this Act;
(b) varying any authorisation made under section 40(1) of this Act so as to authorise a registered higher education provider or qualifying further education provider to grant a category of award or degree that, prior to the variation of the authorisation, it was not authorised to grant; and
(c) providing consent under section 77 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 for an education institution or body corporate to change its names so as to include the word “university” in the name of the institution or body corporate.

(4) The OfS must also seek the advice of UKRI before authorising a registered higher education provider or qualifying further education provider to grant research awards under section 40(1) of this Act.

(5) The OfS does not need to seek the advice of the Committee before—
(a) revoking an authorisation to grant taught awards, research awards or foundation degrees; or
(b) varying any authorisation to grant taught awards, research awards, or foundation degrees so as to revoke the authorisation of a registered higher education provider or qualifying further education provider to grant a category of award that, prior to the variation of the authorisation, it was authorised to grant.

(6) Subsection (4) applies whether the authorisation being revoked or varied was given—
(a) by an order made under section 40(1) of this Act;
(b) by or under any Act of Parliament, other than under section 40(1) of this Act; or
(c) by Royal Charter.

(7) In providing its advice to the OfS, the Committee must in particular consider the need for students, employers and the public to have confidence in the higher education system and the awards which are granted by it.

(8) The OfS must have regard to the advice given to it by the Committee on both the general exercise of its functions referred to in subsection (2) and any particular uses of its powers referred to in subsection (3).

(9) The majority of the members of the Committee must be individuals who appear to the OfS to have experience of providing higher education on behalf of an English higher education provider or being responsible for the provision of higher education by such a provider.

(10) In appointing members of the Committee who meet these criteria, the OfS must have regard to the desirability of their being currently engaged at the time of their appointment in the provision of higher education or in being responsible for such provision.

(11) The majority of the members of the Committee must be individuals who are not members of the OfS.
(12) Schedule 1 applies to the Committee on Degree Awarding Powers and University Title as it applies to committees established under paragraph 8 of that Schedule.

This new clause would create a committee of the OfS which fulfils much the same functions as the current Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers.

New clause 7—Automatic review of authorisation—

“(1) The OfS must consider whether to vary or revoke an authorisation given under section 40(1) if—

(a) the ownership of the registered provider is transferred,
(b) the owner of the registered provider has restrictions placed on its degree-awarding powers in relation to another registered provider under its control or ownership, or
(c) for any other reason considered to be in the interest of students enrolled at the institution or the public.

(2) A decision taken under sub-section (1) to vary or revoke an authorisation shall be carried out in accordance with section 43.”

This new clause would ensure that a review of a provider’s degree awarding power would be triggered if the ownership of a provider changes, if the owner of the registered provider faces restrictions on its degree-awarding powers in another jurisdiction or if the OfS deems a review necessary to protect students or the wider public interest.

New clause 9—OfS report: international students—

“(1) The OfS shall, in accordance with information received under paragraph 8(1)(ba), produce an annual report for the Secretary of State on—

(a) EU (excluding from the UK), and
(b) non- EU students enrolled with English higher education providers.

(2) A report under subsection (1) must include an assessment of—

(a) the number of international students, and
(b) the financial contribution of international students to English Higher Education providers.

(3) The Secretary of State shall lay the report produced under subsection (1) before each House of Parliament.

New clause 12—Prohibition: use of quality of higher education when determining a visa application—

“An assessment made of the quality rating of a higher education provider in the United Kingdom under section 25 of this Act may not be used when assessing a person’s eligibility for leave to enter or remain in the United Kingdom under Part 1 of the Immigration Act 1971.”

New clause 14—Post Study Work Visa: evaluation—

“(1) Within six months of this Act coming into force, UKRI must commission an independent evaluation of the matters under subsection (1B) and shall lay the report before the House of Commons.

(1B) The evaluation under subsection (1A) must assess—

(a) the effect of the absence of post study work visas for persons graduating from higher education institutions in the United Kingdom on—

(i) the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the higher education sector, and
(ii) the UK economy, and

(b) how post study work visa arrangements might operate in the UK, including an estimate of their effect on—

(i) the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the higher education sector, and
(ii) the UK economy.”

This new clause would require UKRI to commission research on the effects of the absence of arrangements for post study work visas and assess how such arrangements could operate in the UK and their effect on the higher education sector and the UK economy.

New clause 15—Standing Commission on the integration of higher education and lifelong learning—

“(1) The Secretary of State shall establish a Standing Commission on the integration of Higher Education and Lifelong Learning.

(2) The terms of reference of the Commission shall include the following purposes—

(a) to report on progress being made in respect of the opportunities available to individuals, employers and communities to integrate higher education with lifelong learning in England;
(b) to consider the potential to update and review the range of higher education qualifications available for mature students at all registered higher education providers;
(c) to evaluate current funding systems for registered higher education providers with respect to the opportunities available to individuals, employers and communities to integrate higher education with life-long learning, in England;
(d) to examine and report on the introduction of personal learning accounts to be used for higher education—

(i) funded on the contributory principle from employers, individuals and structures of devolved local and national government; and
(ii) on the arrangements that will operate to facilitate input from corporate or trade union bodies, which can be used to support lifelong learning and adult education;
(e) to examine and report on the potential to develop education and skills accounts (ESAs), including the possibility of a single lifetime higher education entitlement; and
(f) to examine and report on the establishment of a national credit rating, accumulation and transfer system as a mechanism to improve flexible learning in further and higher education, including for mature students, and on the feasibility of a digital credit system, which could also facilitate where appropriate the integration of work-based learning and higher education.

(3) The Commission will make the following reports on the matters set out at subsection (2) to be laid before Parliament—

(a) within 12 months of its establishment; and
(b) thereafter annually.

(4) When the report in respect of ESAs required at subsection (2)(e) has been made, the Secretary of State may authorise the OfS to work with higher education providers, employers and financial institutions to develop a framework for ESAs.”

New clause 16—Migration Statistics: students—

“When the Secretary of State publishes statistics on the immigration of people to the United Kingdom, the relevant publication must provide—

(a) the figures net and gross of those people who are students studying in the UK, or
(b) a note indicating how many students included in the total immigration figures are students studying in the UK.”

Government amendment 1.

Amendment 51, in clause 5, page 4, line 9, at end insert—

“(1A) Subject to subsection (1C), initial registration conditions of all providers under paragraph (1)(a) must include a requirement that every provider—

(a) provides all eligible students with the opportunity to opt in to be added to the electoral register through the process of enrolling with that provider, and
(b) enter into a data sharing agreement with the local electoral registration officer to add those students to the electoral register.
For the purposes of subsection (1A)—

(a) a “data sharing agreement” is an agreement between the higher education provider and their local authority whereby the provider shares—

(i) the name,
(ii) address,
(iii) nationality,
(iv) date of birth, and
(v) national insurance data of all eligible students enrolling and/or enrolled with the provider who opt in within the meaning of subsection (2A)(a);

(b) “eligible” means those persons who are—

(i) entitled to vote in accordance with section 1 of the Representation of the People Act 1983, and

(ii) a resident in the same local authority as the higher education provider.

(1C) Subsection (1A) does not apply to the Open University and other distance learning institutions.

This amendment would ensure that the OfS includes as a registration condition for higher education providers the integration of electoral registration into the student enrolment process. Distance-learning providers are exempt.

Amendment 37, page 4, line 17, after “providers” insert “, staff and students”.

This amendment would ensure consultation with bodies representing higher education staff and students.

Amendment 52, in clause 8, page 5, line 35, at end insert—

“(ba) a condition that requires the governing body of the provider to provide the OfS with information on the number of international students enrolled on a higher education course at that institution and the fees charged to those students,“

Amendment 38, page 5, line 39, at end insert—

“and

d) an access and participation plan condition, as defined in section 12.”

This amendment would make access and participation plans mandatory for all higher education providers.

Government amendment 2.

Amendment 39, in clause 9, page 6, line 13, at end insert—

“(iv) age band,
(ii) people with disabilities, and
(iii) care leavers.”

This amendment would include the number of people with disabilities and care leavers, as well as the age of applicants, in the published number of applications.

Government amendments 3 and 4.

Amendment 46, in clause 25, page 15, line 25, at beginning insert “Subject to subsection (7),”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 47.

Amendment 49, page 15, line 32, at end insert—

“(1A) The scheme established under subsection (1) shall have two ratings—

(a) meets expectations, and

(b) fails to meet expectations.

(1B) Each year, after the scheme established under subsection (1) comes into force the OfS must lay a report before Parliament on the number of international students—

(a) applying to, and

(b) enrolled

at the Higher Education Providers that have applied for a rating within the meaning of subsection (1).”

This amendment provides for a pass/fail only Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) rating, and requires the OfS to report on the number of international students applying to and attending Higher Education providers each year from the coming into force of the TEF.

Amendment 47, page 16, line 23, at end insert—

“(7) No arrangements for a scheme shall be made under subsection (1) unless a draft of the scheme has been laid before and approved by a resolution of both Houses of Parliament.”

This amendment and amendment 46 would ensure TEF measures were subject to scrutiny by, and approval of, both Houses of Parliament.

Amendment 50, page 16, line 23, at end insert—

“(7) In making arrangements under sub-section (1), the OfS must make an assessment of—

(a) the evidence that any proposed metric for assessing teaching quality is correlated to teaching quality, and

(b) the potential unintended consequences that could arise from implementing the scheme including proposals on how such risks can be mitigated.

(8) Prior to making an assessment under subsection (7) the OfS must consult—

(a) bodies representing the interests of academic staff employed at English higher education providers,

(b) bodies representing the interests of students enrolled on higher education courses, and

(c) such other persons as the OfS considers appropriate.

(9) The assessments made under subsection (7) must be published.”

This amendment would require an assessment of the evidence of the reliability of the TEF metrics to be made and for the assessment to be published.

Government amendments 5 to 11.

Amendment 40, in clause 40, page 23, line 22, at end insert—

“(c) the OfS is assured that the provider is able to maintain the required standards of a UK degree for the duration of the authorisation; and

(d) the OfS is assured that the provider operates in students’ and the public interests.”

This amendment requires the OfS to be assured about the maintenance of standards and about students’ and the public interest before issuing authorisation to grant degrees.

Amendment 41, page 23, line 47, at end insert—

“(9A) In making any orders under this section, and sections 41, 42 and 43, the OfS must have due regard to the need to maintain confidence in the higher education sector, and in the awards which they collectively grant, among students, employers, and the wider public.”

This amendment would ensure that the granting and removal of degree awarding powers would be linked to a need to maintain confidence in the sector, and with a view to preserving its excellent reputation.

Amendment 58, in clause 51, page 31, line 41, at end insert—

“(A2) The power described in subsection (A1) may be exercised so as to include the word “university” in the name of the institution only if the institution can demonstrate that—

(a) it offers access to a range of cultural activities, including, but not restricted to—

(i) the opportunity to undertake sport and recreation, and

(ii) the opportunity to access a range of student societies and organisations,

(b) it provides students support and wellbeing services including specialist learning support,

(c) it provides opportunities for volunteering,
Government amendments 12, 13, 18 and 19.

Amendment 36, in schedule 1, page 69, line 37, at end insert—

“(h) representing or promoting the interests of employees in higher education establishments.”

This amendment would ensure the Secretary of State had regard for the experience of higher education employees, teaching or research staff.

Amendment 48, page 69, line 37, at end insert—

“(h) representing or promoting the interests of employees in higher education establishments.”

This amendment requires that at least one of the ordinary members of the OFS has experience of representing or promoting the interests of employees in higher education.

Government amendments 21 to 34.

Joseph Johnson: New clause 1 relates to the Office for Students, which is central to the Bill and has quality, student choice, equality of opportunity and value for money at its core. Through the creation of the independent OFS, the Bill will join up the currently fragmented regulation of the sector—essential to ensure that students are protected, and that students and the taxpayer receive good value for money from the system. The Bill will boost social mobility and promote opportunity for all. It will drive up innovation, diversity, quality and capacity in our world-class higher education sector, while protecting academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The Bill will also create UK Research and Innovation, a new body with strategic vision for research and innovation in the UK.

I am pleased that the Bill received such thorough scrutiny in Committee. I have reflected on the points made by Opposition Members and I am pleased to present some important amendments today. We made it clear in our White Paper that the OFS will have responsibility for oversight of the financial health of the sector, and will monitor the sustainability of individual institutions. It is absolutely essential that all providers who are eligible to receive some form of public funding have sustainable finances to ensure value for students and taxpayers.

We have listened to stakeholder evidence and to the Committee debates. Stakeholders including Universities UK consider the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s holistic oversight of the health of the sector to be an essential part of the regulator’s role. I understand the importance of this oversight in maintaining confidence in the sector and preserving its world-class reputation. The stakeholders share the desire to make our policy intention in the White Paper explicit in legislation. This role will include financial oversight of all the institutions’ activities, spanning teaching and research.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I understand the need for monitoring the financial sustainability of organisations, but the new clause does not say what actions will result if some of them are found to be financially unsustainable. Would my hon. Friend comment on that?

Joseph Johnson: The duty of the Office for Students will be to ensure that it is monitoring effectively the overall financial health of the sector in such a way that it is able to inform the Secretary of State, so that the Government can take appropriate actions. It will not be the role of the Office for Students to bail out struggling institutions—if there are any such institutions. These are private and autonomous bodies, and it is important that the discipline of the marketplace acts on them. It will be the role of the OFS to assist them in transitioning towards viable business plans so that they can continue to provide high-quality education to their students in the medium and long term.

New clause 1 introduces a statutory duty for the OFS to monitor and report on the financial sustainability of all registered HE providers in England which are in receipt of or eligible for OFS funding or tuition fee loans.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the regulator have the power to ensure that there are good industrial relations within our universities? There is certainly a problem with industrial relations at Coventry University, particularly as regards subcontractors.

Joseph Johnson: Higher education institutions are private and autonomous bodies that are self-organising. It is of course important that they provide a framework of governance that enables students to learn well in their institutions, and I am sure that that will include a healthy dialogue with their staff and employees. It is not for the Government to mandate particular forms of relations, given that these institutions are private and autonomous.

In performing its role, the OFS will have a clear picture of the number of international students and the income they bring—just as HEFCE currently does. I therefore do not agree that there is a need for an additional duty for the OFS to report on international students, as amendment 52 and new clause 9, tabled by the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh), would require.

Similarly, I do not believe that the Bill is an appropriate vehicle for a requirement for the commissioning of research on post-work study, as proposed by the hon. Members for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin). The Bill focuses on the creation of the necessary structures that will oversee higher education and research funding for many years to come, and a short-term piece of research on an element of migration policy is not consistent with the scope and functions of UK Research and Innovation.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Minister clearly does not believe that the Bill is the right vehicle for the issues under consideration, but does he understand why Members would pick this vehicle? His Department understands the importance of international students to UK higher education, and the Treasury understands their role, so why do the Home Office and the Prime Minister not understand it? Does the Minister not realise that, like him, we will be banging our heads against a brick wall at the Home Office?

Joseph Johnson: The Home Secretary has said that in the coming weeks we will consult on a non-European economic area migration route that will benefit international students who want to come and study at our world-class institutions, and I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to wait until we see the details of that consultation before jumping to any conclusions.
Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): The Minister referred to “an element”. The post-study work visa is not just the subject of “an element” of concern to universities in Scotland; it is of major concern, especially given that what the Home Office has proposed is a tiny and completely unrepresentative pilot. This is a matter of great importance to the university sector.

Joseph Johnson: Indeed. The Government fully agree with the hon. Gentleman that international students bring a lot to our higher education system. They bring income, valued diversity, and many other benefits to our universities. We welcome them, and we have a warm and welcoming regime to accommodate them.

Let me now deal with Government amendments 1, 12 and 13. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are keystones of our higher education system, and the Bill introduces additional protections in that area. In his evidence to the Bill Committee, Professor Sir Leszek Borysiewicz, vice-chancellor of the University of Cambridge, said that he particularly liked the implicit and explicit recognition of autonomy in the Bill. However, I wanted to make absolutely clear how important it is for the Government to protect institutional autonomy, which is why I proposed a further group of amendments to strengthen the protections even more.

I recognise the concerns expressed in Committee and in stakeholder evidence that allowing the Secretary of State to give guidance relating to particular courses might be perceived as leaving the door open to guidance being effectively the opening or closing of particular courses. One of the real strengths of our higher education system is diversity and the ability of institutions to determine their own missions, either as multidisciplinary institutions or as institutions specialising in particular areas such as the performing arts or theology. To avoid any confusion, I proposed the amendments to add an additional layer of reassurance regarding the protections given to institutional autonomy. They make it clear that the Secretary of State cannot give guidance to, or impose terms and conditions or directions on, the OFS which would require it to make providers offer, or stop offering, particular courses.

Our reforms place students at the heart of higher education regulation. I agree with Labour Members that it is important to build the student perspective into the OFS. Government amendment 21 clarifies beyond doubt that at least one member of the OFS board must have experience of representing or promoting the interests of individual students or students generally.

Labour Members tabled amendments 36 and 48, which relate to higher education staff representation. We share the view that the OFS board should benefit from the experience of HE staff. However, the Bill already requires the Secretary of State to have regard to appointing board members with experience of the broad range of different types of English providers in the sector. We are therefore confident that a number of OFS board members will be, or will have been, employed by HE providers, and we do not believe that we need to make an additional requirement in legislation.

Students make significant investments in their higher education choices, and it is right for them to be aware of what would happen if their course, campus or institution were to close. That is what Government amendment 4 will achieve. We expect all providers to make contingency plans to guard against the risk that courses cannot be delivered as agreed. The requirement for providers to produce student protection plans would be a condition of regulation. I listened to points made in Committee, and have reflected on the need to strengthen the power of the OFS to ensure that there is transparency in student protection measures, and that is exactly what the amendment does. It enables the OFS to require providers not only to develop student protection plans but to publish them, and we would expect providers to bring them to students’ attention.

The Government believe in opportunity for all and through the Bill we are delivering on that. We believe that transparency is one of the best tools we have when it comes to widening participation. Universities have made progress but the transparency duty will shine a spotlight on those institutions that need to go further. That is why I am pleased to propose amendments 2 and 3, which change the language in the Bill to make it clearer that the OFS can ask HE providers to publish and share with the OFS the number of applications, offers, acceptances and completion rates for students, each broken down by ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic background.

The Bill will also give the OFS the power to operate the teaching excellence framework. Thirty years of the research excellence framework and its predecessors have made the UK’s research the envy of the world but, without an equivalent focus on excellence in teaching, the incentives on universities have become distorted.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Minister mentioned the TEF and the REF. Does he agree that the REF took several years to bed down and to become a measure of research, and that a lot of institutions feel that the TEF is being rushed through, particularly the link between teaching excellence and fees? I have been emailed by the University of West London, which has asked me strongly to oppose that. The TEF will be done on an institution-by-institution basis, not, like the REF, by department. Courses can vary widely in quality. Will he think again in relation to those points?

Joseph Johnson: The TEF is not being rushed; it is being piloted for the first two years. Awards will not be differentiated until 2019-20, with effect from the 2019-20 academic year. That is a significant period for the reforms to bed in. The university sector has welcomed the link to fees. Universities UK has recognised that there is a need for such a link and that we need to fund on the basis of quality as well as quantity. There is no attempt by the sector to separate the link.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I applaud the Minister’s view that we should focus on quality in the sector, rather than just volume, which is one of the problems that has beset the higher education sector in the past 20 or so years. Is there any international parallel for the OFS? Does such a body exist in Canada, Australia or other big global higher education sectors? Are we taking a lead, or following elements of what has happened elsewhere?

Joseph Johnson: I thank my right hon. Friend for his helpful intervention. We have studied regulatory systems around the world in drawing up our proposals for the OFS. Our system is in line with several in the Anglophone countries that have moved towards a market-based
system in which the student is the primary funder of his or her higher education experience. It is therefore incumbent on us to put in place a system of regulation that recognises that we are moving away from the classic funder model of regulation that was put in place by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, which created the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

New clause 12 and amendment 47 seem to misunderstand the aim of the TEF. Changing the ratings, as proposed by amendment 49, would fundamentally undermine the purpose of the TEF by preventing students from being able to determine which providers are offering the best teaching and achieving the best outcomes. Amendments 46 and 47 would stifle the healthy development of the TEF, and amendment 50 ignores the reasoned and consultative approach that we have taken and will continue to take in developing the metrics.

Let me set out the reasons why amendments tabled by Opposition Members on our plans for degree-awarding powers are unnecessary—namely, new clauses 4 and 7, and amendments 40 and 41. Our reforms will ensure that students can choose from a wider range of high-quality institutions. If the higher education provider can demonstrate their ability to deliver high-quality provision, we want to make it easier for it to start awarding its own degrees, rather than needing to have degrees for its courses awarded by a competing incumbent. We intend to keep the processes on scrutiny of applications for degree-awarding powers, which have worked well so far, broadly as they are. That includes retaining an element of independent peer review for degree-awarding powers applications. Setting this out in legislation, as new clause 4 suggests, would tie this to a static process which would be inflexible. We intend to consult on detailed circumstances where degree-awarding powers and university title might be revoked, including changes of ownership, so there is no need for new clause 7. As for amendments 40 and 41, I can reassure Members that we will, as now, ensure that the very high standards providers must meet to make such awards will be retained. We are streamlining processes, not lowering standards, and these amendments are therefore unnecessary.

The hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) has proposed amendment 58 on the criteria an institution should demonstrate in order to be granted university title. None of these are current criteria. Like other institutions—Cardiff, de Montfort and many others, Sheffield, with the support of the Cabinet Office, but in other universities—Cardiff, de Montfort and many others, which have gone on to introduce it. This seems like a good opportunity, as we are looking at the registration requirements of universities, to roll it out across the country to achieve objectives we both share.

I have discussed this with the Minister and also his colleague from the Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore). There was due to be a roundtable at which we were going to discuss it further tomorrow, but that has been cancelled and kicked into the long grass of sometime in the new year, I was told last week. Given the shared objectives in this area, I would like to hear from the Minister why we cannot simply use this opportunity to get this matter sorted out.

Amendment 50 reflects concern over the reliability of the metrics used to measure teaching excellence. I emphasise, as I did many times in Committee, that we all welcome the Government’s focus on teaching excellence, and we can all work effectively together on the principle of the teaching excellence framework. However, the metrics on employment outcomes, on retention and on the national student satisfaction survey have been identified as crucial issues that we need some clarification on.

New clause 7 provides for automatic review of degree-awarding powers where ownership of a university changes. This is rooted in experience of the sort of system the Minister is seeking to create in the United States, where a number of institutions with a reasonably well-established reputation changed ownership and fundamentally changed the product and service delivered to students. We need to learn from the mistakes made in the States by ensuring that, should we find ourselves in this new terrain with institutions in this country with degree-awarding powers changing ownership, that should automatically trigger a review of their status. I would welcome some reassure from the Minister on how he intends to deal with that issue, if not through this new clause. Otherwise we could find ourselves in the same situation as the States, and not only have the reputation of the sector damaged, but students let down and still carrying a fee-debt. So this is a crucial issue that we need some clarification on.

Amendment 51 covers terrain I have discussed with the Minister on a number of occasions. It simply seeks to require universities to introduce the integrated student enrolment system with voter registration, which is recommended by Universities UK, supported by the Cabinet Office and was originally and very successfully piloted by—I have to get this reference in—the University of Sheffield.

The Minister and I share a common objective of trying to improve the levels of voter registration among students. This has been a demonstrably effective way of doing that where we rolled it out not only as a pilot in Sheffield, with the support of the Cabinet Office, but in other universities—Cardiff, de Montfort and many others, which have gone on to introduce it. This seems like a good opportunity, as we are looking at the registration requirements of universities, to roll it out across the country to achieve objectives we both share.

The amendment simply seeks to add to the Bill a requirement that the metrics used by the Government to determine teaching quality should have a demonstrable link to teaching excellence. This was the unanimous recommendation of the then Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, of which I was a member. We all agree that employment outcomes do not necessarily demonstrate teaching excellence. There are also numerous regional variations in employment outcomes and salary levels. The Minister will know that someone who comes from the right family and goes to the right school and...
Mr Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Should the demonstrable link involve a recognition of the experience and qualifications of lecturers? What does my hon. Friend have in mind when it comes to proving that teaching quality exists?

Paul Blomfield: Measuring teaching quality is difficult, but if we are going to do it, and if we are going to link fee increases to it, we should do it well rather than badly. For example, the Higher Education Funding Council for England is piloting some work on value added to determine how it can be demonstrated that good teaching has contributed to students’ learning outcomes during a particular period. That is the kind of research we should be looking at before we rush into establishing a teaching excellence framework that might end up measuring everything but teaching excellence.

Roger Mullin: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with Professor Jack Dowie’s view that the teaching excellence framework should measure the quality of teaching?

Paul Blomfield: The hon. Gentleman has expressed my concern exactly. This is the reason behind my amendment. There should be agreement across the House that the teaching excellence framework should measure the quality of teaching. That does not seem controversial to me, and I am therefore disappointed that the Government were unable to accept the unanimous recommendation of the BIS Committee. I want to press the Minister further today to find out his reasoning for this.

Amendment 49 raises new concerns that became clear only as the Bill progressed through Committee. It is apparently the Government’s intention—although I recognise that it might not be the Minister’s wish—to link the visa regime for international students to quality measures. There are Members present on both sides of the House who share my concern, so let me put it in context. The Minister will agree that international students are hugely beneficial to this country and to our universities. They enrich the learning environment of our campuses. In an even smaller world, in which we need to understand each other better than ever, it is a huge advantage for British students to learn in our classrooms and laboratories alongside students from around the world. International students add hugely to our universities’ research capacity, also strengthening local businesses, as I know from my experience in Sheffield.

We should add to that the huge benefits of the lasting relationships that we build with those who study here. According to the Higher Education Policy Institute, 55 world leaders from 51 countries studied here. That leads to the sort of soft power that is the envy of other countries—political influence, commercial contracts, and so on.

Dr Huq: I am loth to interrupt my hon. Friend because he is in full flow and making a powerful point, but does he agree that the Bill was conceived before Brexit and that the world has changed since then? I am holding a Westminster Hall debate on this subject on Wednesday and have received emails from academics and students from all over the country saying that this entire thing should be scrapped because the context is so different and everything has changed for higher education since the decision on 23 June.

Paul Blomfield: I look forward to joining my hon. Friend in Westminster Hall on Wednesday, because she makes a valid point—one that a number of us made in Committee. This pre-Brexit vision should have been parked and rethought as a result of the decision on 23 June because the challenge facing our universities is fundamentally different and of enormous proportions. We need to reconsider the proposals.

Mr Hendrick: On that point, many mainland European universities now offer courses in English. Our leaving the European Union will significantly disadvantage British universities in attracting foreign students, because degrees in some European countries are now offered in English, not necessarily in French, German or the native language.

Paul Blomfield: My hon. Friend highlights a new dimension to the challenge facing our universities as a result of Brexit. My wider point about international students existed before 23 June, but we now face a situation in which the 185,000 international students, of some 500,000, from EU countries may no longer choose to come here. However—that is crucial in relation to my hon. Friend’s intervention—30% of the non-EU students who were polled before 23 June said that the UK would be a less attractive destination if we chose to leave the European Union. Our competitors in Europe, adding to the competition that we already get from Australia, Canada and the United States, are seizing the opportunity to teach English-language courses, which will become very attractive.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Coventry has two universities. A big concern following Brexit is that international students, in particular from countries such as India, are now looking at north America, given the difficulty they will have in coming to this country when they are treated as immigrants. They should be removed from immigration figures, because the benefit to leave the European Union. Our competitors in Europe, adding to the competition that we already get from Australia, Canada and the United States, are seizing the opportunity to teach English-language courses, which will become very attractive.

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point about the importance of international students. He is right. Many universities around the country will be in crisis if there is a significant drop in the number of international students. It will mean not only that their incomes will drop, but that many of their postgraduate taught courses, which are viable only because of the levels of income that are brought through our international students, will cease to be viable, cease to exist and cease to be available for UK students. It is a hugely important issue.

4.45 pm

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman will know that I entirely accept his last point about a number of these postgraduate courses. In an ideal world, as he knows, I would not have students in the immigration figures, but we are where we are and they will remain in those figures. Surely one of the lessons of Brexit is that this issue is of massive concern to many of our fellow countrymen. Therefore, it is incumbent on universities to ensure that we get high-quality students from abroad, and that is really the focus of what the Government are trying to achieve here. We need to ensure that those students who come here are the crème de la crème and will add the sort of experience to which he referred earlier in his contribution. By having a group of high-quality students, we will command the confidence of the public that we are getting only the brightest and the best, rather than a volume operation in our universities.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He and I have worked closely on a number of these issues, and we do agree that international students should be taken out of net migration targets. On the point that he raises, I disagree with him. I know that we would come together in saying that our universities are a great British export industry, but I am genuinely puzzled why the Government do not see them as an industry in other terms. We do not put in measures to seek to discourage the automobile industry from selling cars; we try to encourage it to sell more cars. Similarly, on the point that he raises, we do not say, “Well, we just want you to sell Rolls-Royce cars. We don’t want you to sell Minis.” It is nonsense economically for our country and for the local economies that we all represent. That is the nub of the problem.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the way in which these issues are viewed by the public. International students are not viewed as a threat or as an issue on which the Government should be taking action. A recent poll showed that 75% of people wanted to see the numbers of international students either stay the same or go up, but the Government strategy, as he knows, is moving us in the other direction.

The Home Secretary, albeit against her will, made a speech to the Conservative party conference in which she put international students at the centre of her plans to cut migration—I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will agree that she was wrong to do that. She introduced a new tool, to which she has alluded, with which she planned to do it. It is by linking visa approval to the quality of courses. We need to reflect on that, because it is a very significant development, as we now have a policy objective of reducing international students—the Government did it by default in the previous Parliament.

Joseph Johnson: The hon. Gentleman should remind himself that international student applications have gone up 14%.

Paul Blomfield: Well, I would be interested to hear the Minister intervene again and say over what period, because he will know that, over last Parliament, the numbers flattened and we lost market share.

Joseph Johnson: The answer is since 2010.

Paul Blomfield: We will probably disagree on those figures. I think I have heard the Minister say previously—if it was not him then it was his predecessors and previous Immigration Ministers—that there was no damage from the measures that were taken in the last Parliament, because numbers flattened. From my point of view, flattining in a growing market is a defeat. We would not say that the world is buying 20% or 30% more cars, but the great news is that our exports are flattining. It does not make sense. However, I am sure the Minister will agree that international students are an extremely good thing for our economy. It is therefore deeply worrying that the Home Secretary put international students at the centre of her plans to cut migration.

Wes Streeting: I strongly agree with everything that my hon. Friend is saying. Can he imagine a scenario where higher education institutions are recruiting UK students on to courses, but sending a message to people from overseas that the courses are not good enough for them? What conclusion will UK students draw? If the courses are not good enough for international students, surely they are not good enough for home students.

Paul Blomfield: My hon. Friend makes the point that I was about to make. If we were looking at a teaching excellence framework in parallel with our competitors around the world, and if we were together saying that we think the world market in international education needs such a tool and that in that world market it would be helpful to have institutions ranked as gold, silver and bronze, that would be one thing; but for us unilaterally to declare to the world that we are differentiating our institutions and saying that a good two thirds of them, perhaps, are less good than others, that can do nothing other than damage our ability to recruit international students and to earn the money that we do from them, as well as the jobs and support for our economy that that brings.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there may be not just reputational damage at home, but consequences abroad? My own university, Bangor, takes a large number of Chinese students, but its good name in Bangor enables it to have a site in China and a very successful operation there. There would be reputational damage of that sort as well.

Paul Blomfield: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. It is not just the recruitment of students but the brand strength of UK universities, which is extraordinarily high, that is put at risk by the measure.

Last week in Westminster Hall I sought assurances from the Immigration Minister as to whether it is the Home Office’s intention to use the teaching excellence framework measurement of quality as a basis for its
visa regime in an attempt to cut down the number of international students. I got no reassurance. I gave the Minister a couple of opportunities to say that the Government did not intend to use the TEF for that purpose and he failed to do so.

The amendment says that until we are clear about the Government’s intention in relation to differentiation by gold, silver and bronze grading, and following a proper economic impact assessment of what that might mean for our universities, we should not seek to differentiate the teaching excellence framework in this way and we should simply have meeting expectations or not meeting expectations ratings. I accept that it is not the Minister’s intention to damage our universities by the introduction of this differentiation, but it could be the unintended consequence of the actions of the Home Office, so we need reassurance on the issue.

As we have heard, these are challenging times for our country. Charting our post-Brexit place in the world will be a big job. We need to win friends, not alienate them. The prime ministerial trade mission to India recently demonstrated that many of those friends will put access to our universities at the heart of any discussion of our future relationship, even on the issue of trade. We will not be able to separate those. We cannot afford to put the sector and the export earnings that we get from international students at risk in this way. I therefore ask the Minister to think again.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I rise to speak to new clause 14 on post-study work visa evaluation, and I reserve the right to push it to a vote, if required.

The SNP continues to press for the reintroduction of the post-study work visa. The new clause would ensure we had an evaluation of how the absence of this key visa has affected the UK economy and how a new visa may be implemented.

As we have heard, the post-study work visa is an important lever for attracting the best international student talent. There is consensus in Scotland among business, education and every political party represented at Holyrood that we need a return of the post-study work route to allow these talented students to remain and to contribute to the Scottish economy.

The outcome of the EU referendum makes it even more important that the UK Government honours the recommendation in the Smith report to explore a potential route to allow these talented students to remain and to contribute to the Scottish economy.

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The current immigration policy poses a significant risk to Scottish universities. Data published in January show that Scotland saw a 2% increase in international entrants in the academic year 2014-15, compared with the previous year. On the face of it, that may appear positive, but by comparison, from 2013-14 to 2014-15 the number of international students entering higher education in the United States increased by 10%. Rather than being able to take advantage of this growth sector and use it to create economic growth locally, our numbers are expected to remain stagnant, which is simply not good enough.

The Home Office released details of a low-risk tier 4 pilot in July this year, which was—maybe “welcomed” is not the correct word—viewed with some interest. However, we are troubled that it was introduced without any consultation with the Scottish Government, Scottish institutions or, indeed, institutions from across the UK. Universities Scotland said: “we’re disappointed that the opportunity of the pilot has been framed so narrowly to only four universities none of which are in Scotland. We’d argue that a broader pilot, involving a wider group of institutions, would have provided more meaningful lessons from which to build.”

Mark Field: The hon. Lady has made a strong case for why she feels post-study work visas should be reintroduced. Does she accept that one of the main reasons for a clampdown by the UK Government is that a number of people come in on these visas and then simply go to ground, and they cannot be removed from this country even though they are here only on a student visa? In making the case that these visas should be reintroduced, will she tell us a little about the further obligations she thinks should be on the universities granting them? They surely cannot simply get students in, take the money and then wash their hands of any responsibility.

Carol Monaghan: Certain rogue institutions—particularly private FE colleges—have in the past not complied with visa regulations, but there is little evidence that the HE institutions in the scope of this Bill have any record of non-compliance, so I do not accept the points the right hon. Gentleman makes.

Roger Mullin: In last week’s Westminster Hall debate, I specifically challenged the Home Office Minister to name any institutions in Scotland that could be said to fall into the behavioural category the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) suggested, and he said he could not name one.

Carol Monaghan: The 19 higher education institutes in Scotland have a strong record in attracting international students and a strong record of compliance, so I agree 100% with my hon. Friend. 5 pm

Mr Jim Cunningham: The Scottish Affairs Committee has been looking at some of the issues that the hon. Lady has mentioned, and we found evidence that the Government need to look at the situation in Scotland differently from that in the rest of the country. Scotland has a declining population, so we have to find an anchor to keep the talent in Scotland to develop the Scottish economy.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It is well documented that in Scotland our issue is emigration, not immigration, so this is a key lever for allowing us to trigger economic growth in Scotland and something that would make a massive difference to our local economy.
Mark Field: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Carol Monaghan: No—I have given way enough for the moment.

Last month, Professor Timothy O’Shea, the principal of Edinburgh University, addressed the Scottish Affairs Committee and warned that future restrictions on free movement would have a damaging impact on the sector.

He said:

“Yesterday the Prime Minister said helpfully that perhaps a special relationship might be necessary for workers in the City, for the car industry. But God help me if the City and the car industry deserve a special deal, then the universities...they are more dependent on the mobility of highly skilled labour than any other sector.”

As we move towards Brexit, we have the potential for a much wider pool of international students who may wish to come to study in our universities, and we need to think very seriously about the visa solution for that. For example, there is the situation of Ireland. Under the Ireland Act 1949, Ireland is stated not to be a foreign country. What special arrangements will be in place for Irish students who want to come and study in our institutions?

I want briefly to discuss the amendments tabled by the hon. Members for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) and for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) that deal with their concerns about the proposed metrics in the teaching excellence framework. There was much discussion in Committee about this. As the hon. Member for Sheffield Central said, there is concern that the metrics being used give no indication of the quality of teaching. In Committee we mentioned the Scottish enhancement-led approach, which is a far more thorough and possibly better method of determining quality. Apparently, however, the metrics proposed by the Government are being pushed ahead with. We are happy to support the amendments tabled by Labour Members.

Amendment 51 would require automatic voter registration in universities. That looks like an extremely innovative idea—and for once, I have to admit, it has not come from Scotland. Perhaps we can start to consider it in Scotland.

We are short of time and there are later amendments that my hon. Friends are keen to press, so I conclude by saying that we will support the amendments I have mentioned and that I hope we can have some movement on new clause 14.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I want to speak to new clause 16, which draws on some of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) made in relation to amendment 49. In essence, the new clause seeks to remove students from the net migration figures. It would be interesting to hear from the Minister whether the Government have that on their agenda.

I also want to comment on how damaging it would be for the university sector if the number of international students that can be recruited in any one institution is related to the traffic light system in the TEF.

As we know, international students are important not only to higher education but to our economy. The contribution of international students to UK GDP is almost certainly in excess of £10 billion, and they support about 170,000 full-time equivalent jobs. Many of the students go on to do postgraduate work, and they are involved with and drive forward world-leading research and innovation in this country. They are therefore very much to be commended and supported.

While international students are in this country, they not only get to know the UK but develop an affinity with it. They develop links with staff, and they contribute massively to soft diplomacy, as we have already heard. It cannot be overemphasised that they improve Britain’s standing in the world, so it is very important that the Government do not put the recruitment of international students at risk. Once they are in this country, such students also enrich our society and contribute to its diversity. I know that from my Durham constituency, where international students very much add to the whole cultural experience of the local population.

Mr Hendrick: I concur with my hon. Friend on the contribution of international students and the very good experience they get. My local university, the University of Central Lancashire in Preston, has many thousands of foreign students, who very much enrich the city and bring it to life. Once they leave the UK and go back to their countries of origin, these students become some of our best ambassadors and, whether they go into industry or government, their experience in the UK always makes them very positive about the future.

Dr Blackman-Woods: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The Government should take on board his point about that ambassadorial role.

We can only be bewildered at the mixed messages the Government are giving international students. One message is coming from the Department for Education, another from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and another from the Home Office. I do not yet know whether the Department for International Trade has a view on international students, but, if it does not, it really ought to. Its view should be one of promoting an important industry, as hon. Members have said clearly this afternoon.

Instead of supporting an increase in the number of international students, the Home Office seems to be giving the message that we need to reduce the numbers, and that is having an effect. The figures I have for the number of international students and the trend are very different from those read out by the Minister. It appears that the number of new entrants has fallen by 2.8%. Indeed, one study has put the reduction as high as 5%. The Minister must know that the British Council has stated that the UK is beginning to lose market share to our competitors. Again, the Government should be very concerned about that.

New clause 16 also seeks to find out whether the Minister or the Home Office has any notion of introducing a system in which the number of international students that any institution can recruit is linked to what happens to it in the TEF and, in particular, to where it is in the traffic light system. To give the Minister an example, if the institution is given a gold rating, there may be no cap whatever on the number of international students that it can recruit, but if it gets a bronze rating—oh, dear—a cap might be put on the number of students it can recruit. To use the automobile analogy that my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central used earlier, that is like telling Nissan, “You can sell as many cars as you like,” while telling Vauxhall, “We’re going to put one of your hands behind your back and limit the
number of cars you can sell.” That is clearly nonsense. We need definite reassurances from the Minister that the Bill will not be used to link the TEF to the number of international students that can be recruited.

Mr Hendrick: Given that the Government are supposed to believe in markets, it is bizarre that, when *Times Education Higher* produces university rankings across the world, they should choose to intervene and say which students should go where when students clearly have a choice in a market-based system.

Dr Blackman-Woods: My hon. Friend makes an important point. International students are central to the business model of every higher education institution in the country. In addition to the possible reputational damage that could be done to our universities, we do not want a message to go out that international students are not welcome. The Minister, the Home Office and other Departments could deal with that by saying that students are temporary visitors, which is what our international competitors do in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. That means removing students from the net migration statistics, which would be a very simple thing for the Government to do, and I hope that the Minister will tell us that he is going to do that. We should be ambitious for our universities. We should enable them to grow, particularly in international markets such as Canada, Australia and other countries, and not limit their international potential.

As the Minister will know, he has a mandate to do that. A recent ComRes study—my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central mentioned this—showed that 75% of people who expressed a view would like to see the same number or more international students in the UK. The poll also revealed that the overwhelming majority of the British public think that international students should be able to stay and work in the UK for a period of time. A very clear case has been made and I hope that the Minister will respond positively.

The Minister has referred to amendment 58. There is huge concern in the higher education sector about enabling bodies to call themselves universities even when they do not provide the range of student services and support that most of us would expect from a university. The reason that there is no particular guidance is that we have not needed it. Most of this country’s universities provide a system of student support and access to sport and recreational opportunities. They also provide wellbeing services and volunteering opportunities, enable students to join a students’ union, and play an important civic role.

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Jo Churchill: I concur, up to a point. I am hugely proud of universities, and I am hugely proud of what they deliver into our economies. But I would also argue that we have other great institutions; BT in Suffolk, for example, hopes to have a specific degree around research, learning and so on, and such things should be enabled for a future workforce that is fit for purpose. They should not just be wiped away because an institution does not offer the chance to play five-a-side football.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I, too, think that BT has a number of strengths as a company, but it is yet to be determined whether it is very good at running a university. We will only know that in due course. If BT runs a university, I want to ensure that it is a university as we would commonly understand it, not simply a company that offers a degree course.

Paul Blomfield: The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) picked out the issue of five-a-side football, but does my hon. Friend acknowledge that there is a wider issue? This is the first major Bill on higher education for a generation, and it provides an opportunity to extend university title quite widely. Is not the nub of the problem the fact that no attempt is made to define what a university is?

Dr Blackman-Woods: I concur exactly with my hon. Friend. In Committee, the Minister said that he was setting “a high bar that only high-quality providers will be able to meet.”—[Official Report, Higher Education and Research Public Bill Committee, 11 October 2016; c. 410.]
Unfortunately, at this point in time we have absolutely no idea what is meant by that high bar. I am hoping we will hear from the Minister exactly what he means by a university and what will be in the guidance, and that the quality and breadth of offer of our universities will be protected and will not be got rid of by this Government.

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to colleagues for raising so many points that came up in Committee which particularly exercised me with regard to part 1 of the Bill. Because of the shortness of time, I will restrict my remarks to two issues concerning students and staff in higher education.

I welcome Government amendment 21 on student representation on the board of the Office for Students and the fact that the Minister has listened to the huge number of representations he has received from members of the Bill Committee, from student unions and from higher education sector leaders, who really value the contribution students make and want to see students on the board. It would have been perverse to have a regulator whose purpose was to protect the interests of students and that had the word “students” on its door and headed paper but did not have students around the table on its board. I am glad the Minister has moved on that particular point.

As the Bill progresses to the other place, I hope the Minister might consider moving further on the issue of student representation. In Committee we raised the issue of having student representation on the board of the designated quality provider and in drawing up the quality code, and also ensuring that students have representation in what, as my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) pointed out, could be a wide range of private providers. Whether an institution is a traditional university, a modern university or one of the new private providers, it is absolutely crucial that students’ rights are protected and their voice is represented at the top of the institution.

I also ask the Minister to address how he sees the issue of student representation playing out on the board of the Office for Students. The wording in Government amendment 21 is not quite what I proposed in Committee—that was slightly more prescriptive, specifying that the representative should be either a student, a sabbatical officer of a students union or an officer of the National Union of Students. I am slightly cautious about the amendment the Secretary of State has tabled, because we could define someone with “experience of representing... students” quite loosely. For example, a number of Members of this House, myself included, have experience of representing students, but I am sure that we would not expect to find ourselves, years later, on the board of the OFS. Perhaps the Minister will sketch out what that representation might look like.

Jo Churchill: Will the hon. Gentleman define what he considers a typical student to be, so that I can gauge his idea of someone who could represent, for example, me—I went to college as a mature student—or a lifelong learner, or whatever? We must not be too tight with the definition. The wording in the amendment gives us scope to have a looser definition and might be more appropriate.

Wes Streeting: I certainly do not think that we will be able to find a typical student to sit on the board of the OFS because, as others have said from their perspectives, no such thing exists. That leads me on to where I wanted to direct the Minister, in as far as I can. We should value the skills and expertise that representatives of students develop through their roles in student unions, precisely because there is no such thing as a typical student or a typical student experience. We should value and champion the role that the officers of student unions play in developing their skills and experience as representatives to make sure that student unions champion the broad diversity of students at their institutions; whether students are full time or part time, or are doing part of a course on a credit-based approach, whether they are living at home and commuting to university or have moved away from home, there are a wide range of student experiences. The challenge for anyone who seeks to be a representative is to make sure that they genuinely draw on that broad range of experiences, just as we have to as constituency MPs.

I hope that, when the Minister appoints one of these representatives, he appoints one who is a students union sabbatical officer, for example, because we are lucky in this country to have a means by which students can develop a good base of skills and expertise. Many of the country’s leading chief executives of voluntary sector organisations have been students union sabbatical officers, as have many Members of Parliament and people in all sorts of professions, because the experience and skill sets that it gives them are genuinely valuable beyond the scope of representing students during their time at university. I hope that that is the sort of person the Minister has in mind and that we will not drag people back from beyond to dust themselves off from retirement.

Mr Hendrick: Although I agree with everything that my hon. Friend is saying, I think that the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) was perhaps referring to distance learning students, mature students and people who follow a less usual course to obtain qualifications. Certainly, when I have met the presidents of my students union over the years, they have been sympathetic to the needs of such students. Will my hon. Friend perhaps address the hon. Lady’s point?

Wes Streeting: I absolutely agree with that point, which brings me back to the skills and expertise that student union sabbatical officers develop in that role. The Open University students association or Birkbeck students union are institutions almost entirely dedicated to part-time students, people from non-traditional routes and people who often work alongside their studies who have returned to learning later on in life. It is important that that broad range of experience and perspective is represented on the board of the Office for Students. I hope that the Minister will appoint someone to that position who can represent the broad interests of students.

I want now to deal with staff. I should probably declare that I am a member of the trade union Unison, which represents a number of staff in higher education, and I should draw Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests on that point, too. Amendment 48 picks up the theme that I have been discussing—student representation on the board of the Office for Students—and makes the case for having staff on that board.
Staff are absolutely crucial to the success of our higher education sector, whether they are academic staff directly engaged in teaching and learning or the wide range of support staff, whose contribution to the student experience is often unheralded. Thinking back to my student experience, the first member of staff I spoke to at my university was not an academic; it was Gina Vivian-Neal in the admissions office. When I was at university, I spoke to staff such as Bill Simmonett, who was involved in catering and conferencing, because of my role as the students union entertainments officer. When I had a particularly small room in my second year and a larger one became available, Sue Jeffries made a substantial difference to my learning environment. Margaret Hay, who, I believe, recently retired from her role in the tutorial office, was absolutely central to the experience and welfare and care of students.

Bearing in mind what other hon. Members have said about the role that international staff play in our institutions, it is important that people on the board of the Office for Students have experience of representing the interests of staff. Many of our trade union colleagues, particularly in the University and College Union, have made a powerful case about the impact that the casualisation of contracts, for example, is having on our ability to recruit and retain good staff and their ability to deliver a good student experience.

Other trade unions, such as Unison and Unite, represent those staff who, while perhaps not directly engaged in teaching, often provide essential support functions that can make the difference between an excellent or a poor student experience. I hope that their voice and interests are represented on the board of the Office for Students. Given where we have taken our country in the debate about our ability to attract and retain excellent staff from around the world, we could leave ourselves in a vulnerable position in a sector such as ours that is so world-leading in its performance and reach, and we need to champion and protect the interests of staff.

I hope that the Minister will take those points on board. I thank him for the movement that he has shown since the Bill Committee. I had almost given up hope by the end of the Committee that we would see much progress, but, to give him credit, he has moved. I hope that he will listen to the points that we make today, and perhaps they can be addressed in the other place.

5.30 pm

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I apologise to members of the Public Bill Committee: I did not make the cut, so they have the advantage over me, but I assure them that I read the entire transcript, cover to cover, in one fell swoop—and riveting reading it was.

New clauses 9 and 12 deal with overseas students. The Minister tried to suggest that they would widen the scope of the Bill, but the new clauses, like Labour’s amendments, are in order, and we get very few opportunities to talk about this issue. The key point is that overseas students are very much part of the viability of the university sector, and if the Bill is about anything, it is about the viability of the university sector. We are in a brave new world, post-Brexit, and universities clearly wanted a very different outcome. I have been to many events where the Minister has tried, valiantly, to reassure a traumatised sector. It is easy to see why the sector needs reassuring: the loss of good students; the loss of opportunities for UK students; and the severe outcomes for the research sector. I recently polled a range of vice-chancellors and found that 86% of them thought that the impact of Brexit on their research programmes would be severe. The impacts are financial, cultural and academic—in the sense that it could lead to the collapse of undergraduate courses—and the impact on the research conducted by universities will be profound.

Some things are certainly true—the Minister repeats them from time to time—and nothing changes in the short term. As other Ministers have said to me, we had international students before we were ever in the EU and when Erasmus was thought to be a Dutch humanist, rather than an EU programme, but EU membership makes it a whole lot easier for British universities, and there has been a big increase in their number for as long as we have been in the EU. There is a case for following the numbers, therefore, and that is all new clause 9 endeavours to do. Numbers affect viability, and if the OFS does not do it on an independent basis, who will?

New clause 12 deals with something equally worrying, and something alluded to by the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield): nonsensically, we include student numbers in net immigration stats, but the Government—certainly in the form of the Minister—welcome international students. I have heard him on many occasions, at many events, say how welcoming we are supposed to be to international students. As has been established through polling, the public also welcome international students, even when worried, at the same time, about immigration in general. Including them in the net immigration statistics, therefore, is clearly a nonsense.

What really worries the Government is when higher education is used as a stepping stone to employment and residence. This clearly bothers the Home Office. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central has already talked about the Home Secretary’s comments, which I found worrying, but also worrying is the suggestion from the Prime Minister’s senior adviser—regarded as her brain—that the Government’s post-qualification leave to remain should depend on whether someone qualified at a Russell Group university. This is obviously silly because the Russell Group is essentially a self-selecting group and slightly snobbish.

Another way of doing it, as suggested in last week’s Westminster Hall debate, is to depend on the teaching excellence framework of a student’s institution. In my view, that would be sillier, because the teaching excellence framework is in its infancy and not suited to the task, because not all universities buy into it anyway and because an individual’s ability and utility cannot be predicated simply on the institution he or she attends. Few of us would like to be judged by the quality of the teaching we have received. Actually, surviving poor teaching is a considerable and entirely marketable skill; it is slightly easier to profit from good teaching. There are good and valuable courses in institutions that may well pan out with a poor teaching excellence framework in general. This will clearly affect the ability of some institutions to attract overseas students, and valuable courses will collapse as a result—certainly many valuable courses in the capital. Further, if overseas applicants concentrate their applications on universities with good TEFs, it could make it more difficult for UK students to access them. Universities might, in despair, simply shun the TEF if it is used for those purposes.
The list goes on. Welding together Home Office policy and education policy seldom works, but we should clear this up. The Minister has an opportunity to do so from the Dispatch Box later, but so far the Government view and the Government take on this issue has been less than clear. That is certainly the case when it comes to the Home Office. Last week in Westminster Hall, the Home Office had an opportunity to say, “Categorically, this is not going to happen,” but we do not know categorically whether it will or not.

I may not get support for my amendment, and I would be happy to support other amendments that travel in the same direction. This issue, however, will not go away because it is important to the sector.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I rise to speak to our amendments, but also to comment on others, including the Minister’s new clause 1. Let me start with that and the Minister’s other remarks to make a general observation.

Of course we welcome the move to include a student representative on the body, as has been described. I have to say, however, that it is relatively thin gruel by comparison with the range of positive amendments that would involve employees and students in respect of some of the key issues that the OFS will have to face, some of which we debated in Committee. If the Government want to calm suspicions about the OFS, they need to do more to ensure that as a body, it has sufficient powers directly defined in the Bill. I have always said that we have to work on the assumption that we will have the worst and the naughtiest Secretaries of State, not necessarily the best ones and not necessarily the best Minister with responsibility for universities. That means that we need to build things directly on the face of the Bill. We have not had the ability to do that, and it is not helpful that the ability to tease out these issues should be confined to one day’s discussion of 113 clauses and 12 schedules. Other Members who might have been able to attend today know perfectly well that many of the issues that need to be discussed will have to be dealt with in the other place.

Let me begin by speaking briefly to our amendments, particularly those relating to staff and student involvement. Amendment 37 deals with consultation regarding ongoing registration conditions. It might sound very techy, and I know that there is some consultation with bodies or informal groups representing HE staff and students at the moment. Some of the new providers that the Minister wants to see coming into the marketplace may be relatively small, and may have relatively informal groupings, so it is important that the position of their staff and students is taken into account.

Let me move on to amendments 36 and 48. My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) has already mentioned the latter. The Government must get into the right mind-set with HE and realise that it is not simply about business managers either, however excellent they are. It is not simply about business managers either, however excellent they are. It is about the support staff, who live in the local communities where the universities are situated; and it is also about excellent teaching, social mobility and student choice. Sometimes cleaning staff can be the first point of contact for live-in students who face isolation and need someone to talk to.

The Government need a cultural step-change in the way they address these issues, and should not put some of these groups in as an afterthought. We believe that these modest amendments would take us down that route.

In Committee, we talked a great deal about the whole issue of social mobility. The Minister waxed lyrical on the subject—genuinely, I believe—but those who want to walk the walk must do something about putting the beef on to the talk. That is why we tabled amendment 38, which “would make access and participation plans mandatory for all higher education providers.”

The Government have plenty of angles on the Bill, but two that are raised continually are competition and consumers’ rights. In fact, competition must go hand in hand with consumers’ rights. I am perfectly happy for the pool of new providers to be expanded—I spent 20 years working for an organisation, the Open University, which was once a new provider—but I am anxious to ensure that, if there is to be a competitive market, providers bring to the table a proper sense of the responsibilities that they will have to meet. That is why it is so important to ensure that an access and participation plan is at the heart of what the new providers do. There may be circumstances in which the numbers that that produces are relatively modest, but if the Government want the process to go ahead, providers must accept those responsibilities.

It is in the same spirit of inclusion that we tabled amendment 39, which “would include the number of people with disabilities and care leavers, as well as the age of applicants, in the published number of applications.” A number of Members have emphasised the importance of the issue of mature and older students, and indeed part-time students, about which I shall say more when I talk about new clause 15. Amendment 39 demonstrates that emphasis. If we want to have realistic expectations of where those groups are going and know what the Government need to do—and this has already been raised by several Members in the context of international students—we must have that evidence, and the amendment stresses the need to broaden the parameters.

New clause 4, which would establish a “Committee on Degree Awarding Powers and University Title”, is actually modelled on provisions in the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, which we want to passport into this Bill. The Government, rather curiously, do not want such a committee, although one might have thought that they would welcome a backstop. After all, we know that Ministers are bedding down, inevitably slowly, in a new Department with further and higher education responsibilities. Again, the Government cannot be surprised if people think that they want as little outside scrutiny of the new providers as possible.

New clause 4—which, I might point out to the Minister, is supported by all the university groups that have spoken to us—was tabled because, as the Bill stands, the OFS could revoke degree-awarding powers or university title without consulting a committee. The current arrangements for conferring degree-awarding powers require HEFCE to seek the advice of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education—the Minister made great play of that—but it is vital for the OFS to seek advice from a designated quality body prior to any conferring of degree-awarding powers and/or university title.
Amendments 40 and 41 are designed to underline points that were raised by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr. Blackman-Woods) in a hugely important intervention about her own amendment 58. We need to shine a light on and distinguish between broad-based new providers and those that could go for opportunist, fast-buck courses, or those that are inefficiently structured or financed to do the things that my hon. Friend talked about. As she and others have said, there is huge concern in the HE sector about single-course universities. What has not been mentioned much—we talked about it in Committee—is the huge amount of public money that will go into those new providers, providing they jump through the hoops that the Government are putting in front of them. We contend that those hoops are inadequate. Because of that, we want to press the matter further. Amendment 40 requires the OFS to be assured about the maintenance of standards, students and the public interest before issuing authorisation to grant a degree. That is important. I give notice that we will press amendment 40 to a vote. Whatever the outcome, I assure the Minister that the issue is unlikely to go away and that he and his team will face further questions on it after the matter goes to the other place.

5.45 pm

I have spoken against something that the Government want to do. I want to speak now about new clause 15, which would set up a standing commission on the integration of higher education and lifelong learning, and to thank the Minister for the small but important movement there has begun to be in the Government on that issue and on the issue of part-time loans, which is being looked at and is an important part of that process. We should look—we discussed this at great length in Committee, so I will not go through all the statistics—at the dire situation that adult learners have been in since 2010 and the way in which so many of those learners have been disadvantaged, when we should be arranging for them to be reskilled and retrained to meet our economic and social objectives in the 21st century.

In a speech in the House of Lords, Lord Rees said that we needed to have a revolution in the way in which we formalise the system to more readily allow for transfers between institutions and between part-time and full-time study. The demand for part-time and distance learning will grow, speeded of course by the high fees now imposed on students at traditional residential university. Lord Rees, a former president of the Royal Society, is absolutely right. The time for action is now. That is why the Labour party and the Labour Front-Bench team have tabled that significant new clause. The standing commission on the integration of higher education and lifelong learning would set the course that was originally laid out by David Blunkett in “The Learning Age” Green Paper in 1998. That issue has been sadly side-lined until now, but lifelong learning and higher education are not a nice optional extra. They are fundamental to our economic productivity, to competing in a post-Brexit world, to our social cohesion, to rebuilding a belief in the value and dignity of work and to offering personal and practical fulfilment to ordinary working people and their families, opening doors to them—often opportunities have evolved for the middle classes and professional people—rather than their being stuck on the first rung of the ladder. That is what we want to do. We want to think about how we deliver these things locally and nationally.

We are not claiming that the structure that we want to put in the Bill is perfect. We have taken wide soundings from all sorts of groups—city and guilds, Uniolearn, the Open University, the Learning and Work Institute—and considered our own thoughts on these matters. I say to the Minister, “Go away, look at the new clause, which would do some of the things that you are talking about in terms of social mobility, and take it on board.” If the Government do not take it on board, we will do so; we will take it through to the House of Lords, we will take it out into the country, and we will put this issue of proper lifelong learning in higher and further education right at the top of the agenda.

On our amendments 46 and 47, much of what I would have said about why we need in particular to make sure the TEF is taken out of the hands of Whitehall and put far more centrally into the hands of Parliament has been illustrated in the excellent speech this afternoon from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) with his interventions, the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and others. We do not trust the Government with the TEF as it is because they have demonstrated ever since they introduced this Bill that whenever they had an opportunity to do something to keep control of the process and try and get things through that would not require legislation in detail, they have turned to the TEF as an automatic link with raising tuition fees. The Home Office has turned to the TEF, too, and is currently holding a sword of Damocles over the Government and all of us on the issue of international students. They have not turned to putting on the face of the Bill in any shape or form whether the TEF is going to be done on the basis of a whole university or school or subject area, and we have also heard from my hon. Friends of the many significant issues around the metrics in this area. It is a question of confidence and trust and parliamentary scrutiny, and that scrutiny is being denied under the present process.

My hon. Friends are right to say the vast majority of people in this country do not regard students as migrants, yet we could have a situation, as we have heard with the gold, silver and bronze issue, where these things are smuggled in, with dire consequences for our social cohesion, economic productivity and so many of the things we will need post-Brexit.

This move is vehemently opposed by the sector, and the Government seem to have managed to achieve an extraordinary conjunction in the way they brought the TEF forward by having annoyed and alarmed virtually every sector of the university world, whether it be the people employed in universities, those who study in them, those who manage them, the vice-chancellors who are at the head of them, or indeed their relatives, families and everybody else, who are now worried. We had a discussion about this in Committee, and the Minister talked about my views in I think about 2002 on teaching excellence. I have not changed my views on the importance of teaching excellence and a teaching excellence framework, but the teaching excellence framework which started out in this Bill as bad enough has now been malformed and deformed by the way in which it has been used, and is threatened to be used, to be not simply something that is completely useless but something that could be an absolute danger in all the ways I have described, right at the heart of our university system.
We had to use some ingenuity to get even a discussion of the TEF in respect of the Bill, so cleverly had the Government gone about trying to keep it off the face of the Bill, but I am sure those issues around the TEF will be returned to, and with some significance and in no short order, when it goes to the other place. I therefore want to again place it on record that we will be pressing our amendment 47 on the need for these measures to be continually subject to scrutiny by, and approval of, both Houses of Parliament to a vote.

Joseph Johnson: This has been a good debate and I am glad to have the chance to respond to some of the points made. Many points were made this afternoon, and I will not be able to address all of them, but I will do my best.

The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) spoke passionately about amendment 51. We debated it in Committee, as he mentioned. He met my colleague, the Minister for the constitution, my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett), who is not in the Chamber at present, to discuss this issue. That is because we share the hon. Gentleman’s aim of increasing the number of younger people registered to vote. We demonstrated our commitment to that cause by supporting, and contributing financially to, the pilot project at the University of Sheffield, in the city he represents. That is why when we met him we undertook to encourage take-up of the initiative by other institutions by writing to describe the outcome of the pilot to vice-chancellors. We also agreed that he should attend a formal roundtable meeting on student registration, and the Minister for the constitution promised to consider other ways registration could be increased. I regret that owing to a scheduling issue with one of the external stakeholders—not the Minister—we were unable to hold the meeting as planned, and we are actively looking to rearrange it, to fulfil the commitment we made to the hon. Gentleman at that meeting following the Bill Committee.

Amendment 37 seeks to widen the base of those the Office for Students should consult before it determines or changes the initial and ongoing registration conditions, to include staff and students as well as those representing the interests of English higher education providers. The Office for Students will take the views of students into account in all of its activities. It will consult on the initial and ongoing registration conditions as part of its wider consultation on the regulatory framework. Clause 68 makes it clear that bodies representing the interests of English higher education providers, should be involved in that consultation. It is my clear expectation that the Office for Students will strongly encourage providers to engage with and consult their key stakeholders, including staff and students, as a matter of good practice. The Office for Students itself will always listen to representations from students and staff if it thinks that that would add value. The amendment is therefore unnecessary.

Hon. Members made a number of points on new clause 9 and amendment 52 relating to international students. I recognise that the number of international students our higher education system attracts and the income they provide are key issues for the sector, so I understand the motivation behind this amendment. However, I do not believe that the Bill is the appropriate vehicle for commissioning annual reports on the number of international students in UK higher education institutions and their economic impact. As I have set out, Government new clause 1 requires the Office for Students to monitor and report on the financial health of the English higher education sector in the round. To do that, the Office for Students will have a very clear picture of the number of international students and the income they bring, as the recent Higher Education Funding Council for England report did. In addition, clause 8(1)(b) requires all registered providers to give the Office for Students the information it needs to perform its functions. That will allow the Office for Students to gather information on international student numbers and income in the context of its duty to monitor financial health. In effect, new clause 1 and clause 8(1)(b) already achieve the policy intent of the amendments.

A wide range of information is also already in the public domain. The Higher Education Statistics Agency, for instance, already collects and publishes data on international students. Further to that, the Department for Education will shortly be publishing statistics on the value of education exports. As I mentioned to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central, the Home Office also publishes data, and its data show there has been a 14% increase in the number of international students coming to study in the UK since 2010.

Regarding new clause 14, I thank hon. Members for bringing this issue back to the House after it was raised in Committee, but I still do not believe that this Bill is the appropriate vehicle for commissioning research into post-study work. The Bill is focused on creating the structures needed to oversee higher education and research funding for many years to come. The scope of what this amendment proposes—a short-term piece of research on an element of migration policy—is not consistent with the scope and functions of UK Research and Innovation.

6 pm

The UK has an excellent offer for overseas students who graduate in the UK. International graduates can remain in the UK to work following their studies by switching to several existing visa routes, including tier 2 skilled worker visas. There is no cap on the number of students who can switch to a tier 2 skilled worker visa. Home Office figures show that, under our current provisions, more than 6,000 international students switched from a tier 4 to a tier 2 visa in the UK in 2015, up from 5,500 in 2014 and from around 4,000 in 2013. Britain remains the second most popular destination in the world for international students after the United States.

We have heard a lot of debate on the teaching excellence framework, and I will now respond to some of the points raised. First, on the question of the TEF and migration, I urge Opposition Members carefully to calm down and consider the Home Secretary’s party conference speech. We want our universities to continue to attract genuine students from around the world. We have no plans to introduce any cap on the number of non-EU students who can come to the UK to study. No decisions have been made on tailoring or differentiating non-EU student migration rules on the basis of the quality of the higher education institution, or on how that might be achieved. As the Home Secretary announced in her speech, we will shortly be seeking views on the study
immigration route, and we encourage all interested parties to participate to ensure that every point of view is heard. New clause 12 is therefore unnecessary and premature, as the Government intend to seek views on the matter.

Gordon Marsden: I entirely accept the Minister's bona fides and commitments on this issue, but is it true that Home Office officials accompanying the Prime Minister on her visit to India were openly talking to people about using the bronze element of the TEF as a way of reducing the migration numbers for students?

Joseph Johnson: The visit to India, which I was honoured to be part of, was a big success in that it gave us numerous opportunities to reiterate our strong message that we welcome genuine students. There is no limit on the number of genuine students who can come and study at our world-class institutions, and there is no better place than the UK to receive a higher education. We want to see more such students coming to study here.

Paul Blomfield: I assure the Minister that we are very calm about this issue, but he could calm us further by explaining what the Home Secretary meant when she talked about the use of quality in relation to the visa system, and in particular when she said that she would be “looking at tougher rules for students on lower quality courses.” What does that mean?

Joseph Johnson: High-quality institutions are compliant institutions. We want compliance to be a strong feature of our system. It is important that the sector should do all it can to be compliant with Home Office regulations. The ability to bring students in on tier 4 visas is a privilege, not a right, and it comes with an obligation to ensure that students who come to this country to study follow the terms of their visas. The sector should welcome that because it wants a high-quality system of international study. The Government will be bringing forward a consultation paper in the coming weeks that will enable everyone across the sector, including the hon. Gentleman, to contribute their views on how best this can be achieved.

Paul Blomfield: The Minister talks about compliance. Why did the Home Secretary not talk about compliance? She talked about “tougher rules for students on lower quality courses”, but there was nothing about compliance. What did she mean by that?

Joseph Johnson: If the hon. Gentleman reads the Home Secretary’s speech carefully, he will see that she did mention compliance. She mentioned compliance and quality. High-quality institutions are compliant institutions; they are one and the same.

Carol Monaghan: High-quality institutions could offer poor-quality courses, just as institutions with a bronze rating could offer extremely high-quality courses. How is the distinction going to be made?

Joseph Johnson: I urge the hon. Lady to wait for the consultation document. She will be able to assess the Government’s proposals in due course when the Home Office is ready to publish them.

Amendments 46 and 47 would require greater parliamentary scrutiny of the TEF, but I do not believe that the content of the amendments is either necessary or proportionate. As I have said, the development of the TEF has been, and will continue to be, an iterative process—as the research excellence framework was before it. Requiring Parliament to agree each and every change to the framework would stifle its healthy development. The REF scheme is not subject to that level of oversight by Parliament, nor should it be.

Hon. Members have talked about the “gold”, “silver” and “bronze” descriptors as though they were new inventions from this Government. They are in fact familiar to the sector through their use in other areas. Such terminology is already used, for example, in the Athena SWAN awards and by Investors in People in many universities. In every case, bronze is still recognised as a high-quality award, while gold is reserved for the highest quality.

Amendment 49 would not add any value to the TEF framework that we have developed. Changing the TEF ratings would fundamentally undermine the purpose of the TEF by preventing students from being able to determine which providers were offering the best teaching and achieving the best outcomes. It would simply allow for a pass/fail assessment. The teaching excellence framework assesses excellence over and above a baseline assessment of quality, and our proposed descriptors will allow students, parents, schools and employers to distinguish clearly between providers. We have consulted on the proposed metrics and considered the evidence, and we still feel that these metrics represent the best measurements for assessing teaching. They are widely used across the sector.

Turning to amendment 50, we have consulted extensively on the metrics, as I have said, and made significant improvements. Setting out the requirement to consult in legislation would be unnecessarily burdensome. We have taken, and will continue to take, a reasoned approach to the metrics. Given the co-regulatory approach I have described, we would expect the OFS to take a similar approach.

I shall now address the points made on degree-awarding powers and university title. Let me be clear that only those providers that can prove they can meet the high standards associated with the values and reputation of the English HE system can obtain degree awarding powers. If a higher education provider can demonstrate their ability to deliver high-quality provision, we want to make it easier for them to start awarding their own degrees, rather than needing to have the degrees for their courses awarded by a competing incumbent. Maddalaine Ansell, the chief executive of the University Alliance, has said:

“These plans strike a healthy balance between protecting the quality and global reputation of our country’s universities, whilst also encouraging innovation.”

Gordon Marsden: The Minister might wish to comment specifically on new clause 4, but will he tell us why the Government are so reluctant to allow a process that has served the HE sector well since 1992 to be read across into the new arrangements for the OFS? I refer to the degree-awarding powers committee proposed in the new clause.
Joseph Johnson: In relation to new clause 4, we intend to keep the processes relating to the scrutiny of applications for degree-awarding powers—which have worked well to date—broadly as they are. That includes retaining an element of independent peer review for degree-awarding powers applications. I said as much in Committee. The processes are not currently set out in legislation to avoid being tied to a static process, and we intend to keep it that way. We have published a technical note on market entry and quality assurance that sets out more detail on the operation of the quality threshold.

Turning to new clause 7, our policy is that degree-awarding powers cannot be transferred or sold for commercial purposes, and we do not see that changing. If the holder of degree-awarding powers were involved in a change of ownership, or if complex group ownerships change, the provider would be expected to inform the OFS and to demonstrate that it remained the same cohesive academic community that was awarded degree-awarding powers and that it continued to meet the criteria for university title. We intend to consult on the detailed circumstances for when degree-awarding powers and university title might be revoked, including instances of changes of ownership, so there is no need for this new clause.

Turning to amendments 40 and 41, the OFS is already required under clause 2 to have regard to the need to promote quality when carrying out its functions. The OFS will therefore have regard to the need to promote quality when authorising providers to grant degrees. I reassure Members that we will, as now, ensure that the high standards that providers must meet in order to be able to make such awards are retained. One of the key criteria for obtaining degree-awarding powers is the ability to set and maintain academic standards, and we expect that to continue. As now, we want all criteria to set a high bar, and we plan to set them out in departmental guidance to which the OFS must have regard. The amendments are therefore unnecessary.

Dr Blackman-Woods: Will the Minister give the House some idea of when that guidance might be available?

Joseph Johnson: We plan to put out guidance in the coming months. The hon. Lady will be the first to receive it when it is ready.

Turning to amendment 58, we are absolutely committed to protecting the quality and reputation of our universities. We are not changing the core concept of what a university is and are not planning any wide-ranging changes to the criteria for university title. As now, we want only those providers with full degree-awarding powers to be eligible. Students make the choice where to study based on factors—not only the qualification they will receive, but the cultural and social opportunities—and one size does not fit all. As independent and autonomous organisations, higher education providers are best placed to decide what experiences they want to offer to students and the local community. Like now, we intend to set out the detailed criteria and processes for gaining university title in guidance, not in legislation. We plan to consult on the detail prior to publication.

Several interesting points have been made in the debate on this group of amendments. Let me conclude by thanking hon. Members for their responses to the amendments that we have brought forward to enshrine the OFS’s duty to monitor and report on financial sustainability, to ensure there is always an OFS board member to represent or promote the student interest, to promote institutional autonomy further, and to compel providers to publish student protection plans.

Gordon Marsden: I think the Minister is coming to his peroration, so I just wondered whether he will be able to make any comment on new clause 15 and lifelong learning.

Joseph Johnson: I touched on that at the start of my remarks. The Opposition proposed a commission for lifelong learning in new clause 15. The Government are obviously strongly committed to lifelong education, in which the Secretary of State and I have taken a close interest. Studying part-time and later in life brings enormous benefits for individuals, employers and the general economy. Alongside our higher education reforms, we are reforming further education, including implementing the skills plan that was published earlier this year and through the recent introduction of the Technical and Further Education Bill, which had its Second Reading last week.

As the hon. Member for Blackpool South is well aware, the Government committed in the last Budget to review the gaps and support for lifetime learning, including part-time flexible study. That review is ongoing. Higher education already offers flexible options for the thousands of mature students who want to study each year. In addition, much work is under way to expand access to lifelong learning through a variety of routes to suit learners. I am confident that those reforms, like others in the Bill, will continue to have a positive impact on learning—lifelong or otherwise.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 1 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 2

STUDENT SUPPORT; RESTRICTED MODIFICATION OF REPAYMENT TERMS

“(1) Section 22 of the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998 (power to give financial support to students) is amended in accordance with subsections (2) to (4).

(2) In subsection (2)(g) at the beginning insert ‘Subject to subsections (3)(A) and (3)(B),’.

(3) In subsection (2)(g) leave out from ‘section’ to the end of subsection (2)(g).

(4) After subsection (3) insert—

‘(3A) Other than in accordance with subsection (3B), no provision may be made under subsection (2)(g) relating to the repayment of a loan that has been made available under this section once the parties to that loan (including the borrower) have agreed the terms and conditions of repayment, including during—

(a) the period of enrolment on a course specified under subsection (1)(a) or (1)(b), and

(b) the period of repayment.

(3B) Any modification to any requirement or other provision relating to the repayment of a loan made available under this section and during the periods specified in subsection (3A) shall only be made if approved by an independent panel.

(3C) The independent panel shall approve modifications under subsection (3B) if such modifications meet conditions to be determined by the panel.”
(3D) The approval conditions under subsection (3C) must include that—
(a) the modification is subject to consultation with representatives of the borrowers,
(b) the majority of the representative group consider the modification to be favourable to the majority of students and graduates who have entered loans, and
(c) there is evidence that those on low incomes will be protected.

(3E) The independent panel shall consist of three people appointed by the Secretary of State, who (between them) must have experience of—
(a) consumer protection,
(b) loan modification and mediation,
(c) the higher education sector, and
(d) student finance.”—(Wes Streeting.)

Brought up, and read the First time.

Wes Streeting: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 3—Student loans: regulation—

“(1) A loan made by the Secretary of State to eligible students in connection with their undertaking a higher education course, whether or not it is a course provided by a State, must—
(a) consumer protection,
(b) loan modification and mediation,
(c) the higher education sector, and
(d) student finance.”—(Wes Streeting.)

New clause 5—Revocation of the Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations 2015—

“This new clause would revoke the Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations 2015, which moved support for students from a system of maintenance grants to loans.

New clause 6—Higher Education loans: restrictions on modification of repayment conditions—

“(1) Loans made in accordance with regulations under section 22 of the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998, (“student loans”) irrespective of the date on which the loan was granted, shall be regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.

(2) Any person responsible for arranging, administering or offering or agreeing to manage, student loans shall be regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.”

This new clause would allow all refugees resettled to the UK, as well as people seeking asylum granted forms of leave other than refugee status, to access student finance and home fees.

New clause 10—Student support: requirement to assess repayment terms—

“(1) The Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998 is amended as follows.

(2) In Section 22 (new arrangements for giving financial support to students)—

(a) in subsection (3)(b), after “and” insert “subject to subsection (3A)”

(b) after subsection (3) insert—

(3A) Regulations under subsection (3)(b) must include a level of earnings below which a person shall not be required to make repayments of such a loan.”

(3) After Section 22 insert—

“(22A) Duty to assess consumer prices in determining terms for loan repayments

(1) In relation to regulations made under section 22(3A) the Secretary of State must, for each tax year, review UK consumer price inflation for the period since the last review under this sub-section.

(2) If the review concludes that consumer prices for the previous tax year have increased, the Secretary of State shall, by order, amend the level of earnings specified in regulations made under subsection 22(3A) by the same percentage increase as consumer price inflation determined under subsection (1).

(3) If the Secretary of State is not required to make an order under this section, the Secretary of State shall lay before each House of Parliament a report explaining the reasons for arriving at that determination.

(4) For the purpose of this section—

‘consumer prices’ means the Consumer Price Index;
‘consumer price inflation’ refers to the annual assessment made by the Office for National Statistics in the UK consumer price inflation Statistical bulletin.”

Government amendments 14 to 16 and 20.
Wes Streeting: I am grateful for the opportunity to move new clause 2 and to speak to the other new clauses concerning student finance.

Millions of people across the UK have been mis-sold loans and will end up paying thousands of pounds more than expected as a result. The perpetrator of the mis-selling scandal is not an unscrupulous high street bank or a payday lender; it is our own Government. The victims are current students and graduates who were sold student loans on the basis of false assumptions and broken promises.

For the vast majority of students in England and the rest of the United Kingdom, Government-backed loans are an essential source of financial support to cover the cost of their tuition fees and the substantial costs associated with their studies, such as the rising cost of university accommodation, food and subsistence, course materials, and making the most of their student experience. In England, students are able to take out a tuition fee loan of up to £9,000 a year and an additional maintenance loan to cover living costs of up to £11,000 a year. As a result, English students now graduate with the highest levels of debt in the western world. Following the Government’s decision to axe non-repayable student grants for the poorest students, those from lowest-income households, scandalously, graduate with the most debt. It is a terrible iniquity in the system and one that I am glad to see the Opposition Front-Bench team addressing this afternoon.

Many students will not have forgotten that the decision to scrap student grants was not taken in this House, but down the corridor and up the stairs through a statutory instrument in a Committee of which most people have never heard. That is not how the Government should take major decisions on student finance. Students and their families were sold loans on the basis of a series of simple promises from Ministers: loans will be repaid only once students have left university; they will be repaid only after graduates start earning over £21,000 a year; graduates will repay 9% of everything earned above £21,000 a year; and the £21,000 figure will be uprated each year in line with average earnings from April 2017.

Around this time last year, however, buried in the fine print of the previous Chancellor’s autumn statement was an announcement that the repayment threshold will remain frozen at £21,000. As a result, graduates will end up paying more each month and thousands of pounds more over the 30-year lifetime of their loans. Worst of all, the change will affect not only future students, who can consciously decide to sign up to those repayment conditions, but thousands of existing students and graduates who took out their loans in good faith. He could not have possibly known that a simple promise from Ministers: loans will be repaid only once students have left university; they will be repaid only after graduates start earning over £21,000 a year; graduates will repay 9% of everything earned above £21,000 a year; and the £21,000 figure will be uprated each year in line with average earnings from April 2017.

Wes Streeting: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, Friend is making an extremely powerful case. Does he not think that, had this happened in another context, the behaviour might have been described as fraudulent?

Wes Streeting: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, which is why the student loans system should be brought within the scope of the Financial Conduct Authority. Had a high street bank or a payday lender behaved in such a way, there would be outrage everywhere, including in this House. The Financial Conduct Authority would mount an investigation. The Treasury Committee, of which
I am a member, would ask questions. It seems that a Chancellor can just decide to save a few quid in the autumn statement and make retrospective changes that would penalise existing students and graduates.

This is an issue not just of fairness and equity for existing borrowers, but fundamentally of trust. What is to stop future Governments making changes further down the line about all manner of things, including interest rates, repayment periods, tapers and thresholds? On that basis, how can current or prospective students have confidence that promises being made today will be kept tomorrow? To be honest, this is a very personal issue for me. Some years ago, Martin Lewis, from Money Saving Expert, and I agreed to work with the coalition Government on an independent taskforce on student finance information. Martin was invited to take part because of his widespread reputation as one of the most trusted people in the country when it comes to financial advice and saving consumers money. It was felt, quite rightly by Lord Willetts—then the higher education Minister—that Martin would be an independent voice on those matters and someone whom people could trust. Martin then asked me to work with him as his deputy, with Lord Willetts’ agreement, on the basis that I had recently completed my term as president of the National Union of Students.

Although I opposed the decisions that had been taken by successive Governments around higher education funding and student finance, I believed that it was critical to take part. I thought it would be appalling if a single student was deterred from applying to university on the basis of misunderstanding the information. If students look at the information and the student finance system and decide to make a different choice, that is for them, but I thought that it would be a travesty if a single student was deterred on the basis of misunderstanding and misinformation.

We went round the country visiting schools, colleges and universities and we appeared in the media, promoting the Government system—not on its merit, but on the facts of the system. We served what I thought was an important public duty and purpose, but we were misled— inadvertently—which means that we therefore misled students and graduates up and down the country. We told them that the repayment threshold would go up in line with earnings from April 2017; that is what we were told by Ministers at the time. That is what students, teachers, parents, family members and advisers were also led to believe.

The Government need to reflect very carefully on what message it would send to each of those groups if future Governments can come along and retrospectively change the system to suit the Treasury. It is a terrible, terrible precedent that undermines trust not just in the student finance system, but in politics as a whole. We are not so far from a general election, or indeed from a referendum campaign, to know that trust in politics in this country is at rock bottom. People do not trust politics and they do not trust politicians. From my experience of this place in the past 18 months, I can say that, for all our disagreements, I have great pride in our political system and in the way in which it works. However, when it comes to decisions such as these, I completely understand why politicians are held in such low regard. On too many occasions, politicians have said one thing and done another. Since the coalition Government put their reforms through, with cross-party agreement and with—to be fair to them —concessions to the Liberal Democrats in government, every single concession has been undone. Student grants have been scrapped. The emphasis on widening participation in a number of respects is now weaker. Now we find that many of the actual repayment conditions, which the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg) would argue were some of the more progressive elements of the system, are also being undone. This is an issue about trust not just in the student finance system, but fundamentally in politics as a whole. Martin Lewis says:

“If you sign a contract, both sides should keep to it. If you advertise a loan, the lender should be held to the terms it was sold under.”

It is a total disgrace that, although the UK is well regarded around the world for its excellent laws and regulatory environment, there seems to be one exception, which is student loan contracts. That is why I hope that, this week before this change kicks in, the new Chancellor will take the opportunity to reverse the decision in his autumn statement. The Chancellor and the Prime Minister could go some way to rebuilding trust in politics. I also urge the Government to support new clauses 2, 3 and 6, which would ensure that no Government could be tempted to behave in this way again. It is scandalous and unjustifiable and it sets a very dangerous precedent. That is why I hope that we will see some progress on this today.

Joseph Johnson: When we reformed student finance in 2011, we put in place a system designed to make higher education accessible to all. It is working well: total funding for the sector has increased and it is forecast to reach £31 billion by 2017-18. It is vital to our future economic success that higher education remains sustainably funded.

Last year, the current Leader of the Opposition announced that he was keen to scrap tuition fees. Senior Labour party figures have criticised that, saying that it was not a credible promise to make, with Lord Mandelson, among others, noting that Labour had “to be honest about the cost of providing higher education.” Of course, it was not just Lord Mandelson. The former shadow Chancellor, Ed Balls, went further when he noted that his party’s failure to identify a sustainable funding mechanism was a “blot on Labour’s copybook”.

The Opposition need to explain how they would fund their alternatives. The Labour party has said that scrapping tuition fees and restoring maintenance grants would cost £10 billion. At a conservative estimate, this would cost £40 billion over a five-year Parliament. Not allowing high-quality institutions to increase their fees by inflation would deprive the sector of a further £3 billion by the end of this Parliament, but Labour would like to go further still. Increasing the repayment threshold for post-2012 student loans by average earnings would cost more than £6 billion by the end of this Parliament. Uprating it for all loans would cost over £7 billion. Where is all this money going to come from?
By contrast, the OECD has praised our student loan system that this Government introduced in England. It said that we are “one of the few countries to have figured out a sustainable approach to higher education finance”.

Paul Blomfield: The Minister is talking about the affordability and sustainability of systems. Does he acknowledge that when the proposals to change the student funding system were put to this House back in 2012, it was on the understanding from his predecessor, Lord Willetts, that the resource and budgeting charge—the uncollectable level of student debt—would be at around 28%? That prediction was rubbished by many experts in the sector and from the Opposition Benches, and gradually, over the lifetime of the Parliament, the percentage went up into the 30s and the 40s, to the point where it became unsustainable. The unsustainability of the system that the Government created was then dealt with by imposing that burden on students by varying the charges and the deal on student loans in the way that my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) described.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Short interventions, please.

Joseph Johnson: The estimation of the RAB charge is still broadly in that ballpark, with the current estimate being between 20% and 25%, so it is not substantially different.

On new clause 2, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) suggested that an independent panel should approve any changes to terms and conditions for student loans. However, the key terms and conditions governing repayment of the loan are set out in regulations made under section 22 of the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998. The repayment regulations are subject to scrutiny under the negative procedure, which allows Parliament to call a debate on any amendments. It is right that Parliament, rather than an unelected panel, should continue to have the final say on the loan terms and conditions.

Wes Streeting: I anticipated that the Minister would point out how permissive the terms and conditions were, which is why I suggested that student loans should be regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority. The sad truth is that I agree with him. As new clause 6 suggests, Members of both Houses should have a role in shaping the terms and conditions, but Ministers, who cannot be trusted.

Joseph Johnson: The key terms and conditions are set out in legislation—it is the law that binds us—and are subject to the scrutiny and oversight of Parliament.

New clause 5 would revoke the 2015 student support regulations. These regulations replaced maintenance grants with loans, which increased support for students on the lowest incomes by over 10%. Revoking these regulations would reduce the support available for students from some of the most disadvantaged backgrounds, while costing the taxpayer over £2.5 billion per year. Opposition scaremongering about this policy risks deterring students from attending university. The sustainable system that we have put in place has enabled us to remove the cap on student numbers and offer more support for living costs than ever before.

New clauses 6 and 10 would require the repayment threshold for all income-contingent student loans to increase in line with either earnings or prices. Loan repayments continue to be based on the ability to pay, and graduates earning less than £21,000 were not affected by the threshold freeze. Those who benefit from a university education are likely to go on to earn more than taxpayers who do not go to university, so it is only fair that graduates should contribute to the cost of their education. Uprating the repayment threshold for all income-contingent student loans, as new clause 6 proposes, would cost about £5 billion in the first year due to a reduction in the value of the loan book. Thereafter, it would increase the resource account and budgeting charge by about 7%.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Is that £5 billion a capital estimate of the value of the loan book or is it the annual running cost?

Joseph Johnson: That represents a decrease in the capital value of the loan book.

The cost of uprating by the consumer prices index, as new clause 10 proposes, would be less, but still significant. These costs would need to be paid for by taxpayers, many of whom will be earning less than the graduates who would benefit from the threshold increase.
New clause 10 relates to access to support for students recognised as needing protection. This is an important issue which was raised by the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) in Committee, and is addressed, as we have discussed, within the student support regulations. I am pleased to say that those who come to this country and obtain international protection are already able to access student support. Our regulations have for some time included provision for those granted refugee status or humanitarian protection, and their family members.

Those persons entering the UK under the Syrian vulnerable persons relocation scheme, and granted humanitarian protection, will be eligible, like UK nationals, to obtain student support and home-fee status after only three years’ residence in the UK. Persons on the programme are not precluded from applying for refugee status if they consider that they meet the criteria. Those with refugee status are uniquely allowed to access student support immediately, a privilege not afforded to UK nationals or those granted other forms of leave. There is a distinction in international law between such status and that of those in need of humanitarian protection.

Recently the Supreme Court upheld the Government’s policy of requiring most persons, including UK citizens, to be ordinarily lawfully resident in the UK for at least three years immediately prior to starting their course in order to be eligible for student support. The amendment would allow people who may subsequently be required to leave the country to access taxpayer funding for their study.

The last group of amendments includes some technical Government amendments relating to alternative student finance. Unless hon. Members show an interest in them, I will move on to my conclusion.

This Government are committed to a sustainable and fair student funding system. We are seeing more people going to university than ever before, and record numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Our funding system has enabled us to lift the cap on student numbers and, with it, the cap on aspiration that it represented. I hope the Opposition can see that if their amendments were not pressed, the student funding regime would remain sustainable, working in the best interests of students and taxpayers.

Paul Blomfield: The Minister briefly addressed new clause 8, although in anticipating it, he understated and, to some degree, misrepresented the actual position. Let me therefore explain the new clause, for which I think there is support on both sides of the House—I think there was some discomfort on the Government Benches in Committee when it was voted down.

New clause 8 would allow all refugees resettled to the UK, as well as those young people who, having made an application for asylum, are granted a form of leave other than refugee status, to access student finance and home fees. It would be of particular benefit to Syrian refugees resettled to the UK under the Government’s own policy, so it is perhaps not surprising that there is support for it on both sides of the House. Only small numbers of people would be affected, but as those of us who have dealt with such cases know, it would have a huge impact for the individuals.

Let me explain the context. Currently, individuals with refugee status can access student finance and qualify for home-fee status from the moment they are awarded their protection. That is where the Minister was economical with the truth in his comments about the new clause, because those with a slightly different status—that of humanitarian protection—are treated differently: they have to be able to show that they have been ordinarily resident for at least three years at the start of the academic year to be able to receive financial support.

The group most affected by that different definition are those Syrian refugees currently being resettled to the UK under the vulnerable persons resettlement programme, as they are granted not refugee status but humanitarian protection. The result is that a young Syrian refugee who arrives in the UK today would not qualify for student finance until the start of the academic year in 2020. The only exception is if they are resettled to Scotland, where the Scottish Government—I commend them for this—have introduced a special fee status for resettled Syrians, allowing them immediate access to student finance.

Subsection 2(a) would ensure that all resettled refugees, no matter what status they are given, and no matter where they live in the UK, could access student support immediately. Subsection 2(b) would make student finance available for those who are granted humanitarian protection after making an application for asylum. As set out in the immigration rules, humanitarian protection is granted to people who face a real risk of suffering harm if they return to their home country. That includes the risk of facing the death penalty, torture or inhumane treatment, or their lives being at risk owing to armed conflict. Now, the future of those who are granted humanitarian protection after applying for asylum is clearly in the UK. If their future is here, they should be enabled to build their lives here. They should be allowed to access university education not simply to build their lives but to contribute fully to our society.

Subsection 2(b) would also provide access to student finance and home-fee status for people who have applied for asylum and then been granted another form of immigration leave. Again, in these cases, the Government have accepted that the immediate future of these individuals is in the UK, so they should be given every opportunity to contribute and develop, yet they face significant hurdles in doing so. The reason is that, in 2012, the last Government changed the rules so potential university students in this situation could no longer access student finance. They would also have been reclassified as international students, meaning they would face higher fees.

Unsurprisingly, the Supreme Court found that the Government’s rules were discriminatory. I realise the Government have not been doing very well in the courts recently, but this is a slightly earlier case—the Tigere case. As a result of the Supreme Court ruling against the Government, the Government changed the rules and introduced the new criterion of long residence. What that means is that young people who have gone through the asylum process—including children who arrived as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children—and who are unlikely to meet the long residence criterion, will have to watch their school peers go off to university, leaving them behind.

6.45 pm

Wes Streeting: I have a constituent in just that position. They went through school, they did well, they were ready to go to university and they had a university place secured, but they were told that they had not yet met the
At a time when the Government’s own Social Mobility Commission reported only last week that our nation is facing a crisis in social mobility, it is a travesty that I have to stand here today to talk about the problems caused by scrapping maintenance grants and replacing them with a further loan, disproportionately affecting students who come from a low-income background. As this House knows, students in the UK already face the highest levels of student debt in any European country. Figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies show that the average student in the UK will leave university saddled with £44,000-worth of debt, and the Sutton Trust has suggested that the figure could go even higher. This figure is only the average; for students from low-income backgrounds, it will be much higher, and these changes will make it higher still.

Labour Members have pledged to bring back the maintenance grant. My hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), in the Bill Committee and recently at the Labour party’s north-west conference, gave powerful testimony as to why that is. It is not just because we cannot afford to lose these people from our economic process, or just because it will help to aid social mobility generally; it is because by doing so we will empower hundreds of thousands of people who will otherwise lose their life chances, or be in danger of that, under this process. There were half a million students in the last year before the Government scrapped the grant, many of whom were in higher education in further education colleges. If a significant number of those students do not take out loans because, for a variety of reasons, they do not wish to do so or are unable to do so, we will increase still further the progressive weakening that this Government have put on to the higher education and FE sector, which is currently servicing some 34,000 students who got the grant in the last year before the Government scrapped it, including a significant number of people in my own constituency pursuing higher education at the excellent Blackpool and The Fylde College.

The Government—I give credit to them for it—have put into the Bill the ability for FE colleges to have their own degree-awarding powers, and Blackpool and The Fylde College is one of those, but it is rather perverse then to introduce something that will weaken the support for such colleges. The Government seem not to think in holistic terms about further education. Taking people in higher education in further education colleges out of the equation will weaken the economic and social base of those colleges. The Government do not give anywhere near enough attention to that.

Jo Churchill: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gordon Marsden: Briefly.

Jo Churchill: Will the hon. Gentleman allude to how Labour intends to pay for all these benefits, because I think I am right in saying that it was to be via corporation tax?

Gordon Marsden: The hon. Lady must be a mind reader because I am just coming to on that issue. Bringing back the maintenance grant would help to enable over half a million students from low and middle-income backgrounds to go on to higher education.
Rumour has it that in the autumn statement this coming Wednesday, the Chancellor is set to announce a further cut in corporation tax, helping only those at the top. We are asking the Government to reconsider this position. Our policy, which has been costed, of bringing back grants would be the equivalent of a rise of less than 1% in corporation tax. Do the Government not believe that this rise would be more beneficial to our nation as a whole—

Jo Churchill: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gordon Marsden: No, I will not—the hon. Lady has had one go. Let me proceed because we do not have a lot of time.

Do the Government not believe that that rise would be more beneficial to our nation as a whole than pushing ahead with a policy that benefits only a relatively small number of large corporations, and not even a big range? If the Government are serious about supporting social mobility, they need to do something about it. The Minister, in a rather Panglossian way, went on about all the terrible things that were predicted when loans were introduced not having come to pass, but that is actually not true, or certainly not true across the board. We have seen what a disaster the introduction of advanced learning loans for level 3 was for over-24-year-olds. Only 50% of the £300 million that was allocated for them was taken up, and that money has been sent straight back to the Treasury. Now, unabashed, the Government want to serve up the same recipe to 19 to 24-year-olds.

“Nudge” has been a fashionable word in the Conservative party in recent years—indeed, Lord Willetts wrote quite a lot about it—but it is possible to nudge people away from things as well as towards them. As the Minister well knows, the quality impact assessment on grants and loans let the cat out of the bag on the difficulties that would be faced by all the groups who desperately need access to higher education, such as women, disabled people, people from the black and minority ethnic communities, and care leavers. No wonder Ministers were so keen to bury this issue in a Delegated Legislation Committee. It took our efforts in bringing it to an Opposition day debate at the beginning of the year to have a decent debate on it.

The Government need to think again on this. I give notice that we will press our new clause 5 to a vote.

Jo Churchill: Will the hon. Gentleman give way for two seconds?

Gordon Marsden: For two seconds, yes.

Jo Churchill: How does the hon. Gentleman explain the fact that covering the figure of £12 billion would mean a rise in corporation tax of between 4% and 5% rather than the 1% that he stated? Surely we need business and industry to be making money in order to create the jobs and opportunities for students once they leave education.

Gordon Marsden: That was a hell of a lot more than two seconds, but I forgive the hon. Lady. We need to look at this issue in the context of our proposal, to which I have already alluded.

New clause 6 deals with yet another regressive policy that has been highlighted during the passage of this Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North spoke about some of the significant issues in this regard. The students affected will end up having to pay more than they were loaned as a greater proportion of their income. To those who have, more will be given, because they can pay their loans back more speedily; from those who have not, more will be taken. The Government seem to have been disregarding in their education policy the fact that there is a regional and demographic dimension to this as well. Constituents of mine taking up a graduate job in the past 12 months will have had a more reasonable ability to hit a threshold that was supposed to be uprated on a regular basis. Students in parts of the country where starting incomes for graduates are much lower than in London and the south-east will be particularly badly hit by this proposal.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the situation he describes particularly hits students in places like Northern Ireland where starting salaries are much lower? Does he also accept that the Minister’s point about the affordability of this is a red herring, because when the loans were sold to students, surely the cost of raising the thresholds was taken into consideration? The Government cannot now go back and say, “We want to rewrite the rules.”

Gordon Marsden: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, as he is to make that point about the situation for students in Northern Ireland. When we discussed this matter in the Opposition day debate and again in Committee, we made the point that students in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland—the students of all of the devolved Administrations—would be affected by this process. It is nonsense for the Government to say that this will not make any difference. The Minister said to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) that the RAB charge was now okay, but as my hon. Friend said, it is only okay because this Government—the Minister and the rest of his colleagues—have created a Frankenstein’s monster that is going to cause problems for so many thousands of students.

7 pm

I cannot better the powerful speech that Martin Lewis made when he came to give evidence to the Committee. The Minister may feel that new clause 6 is unnecessary because his Government would never renege on their promises to students or retrospectively change the terms of a loan agreement. Unfortunately, they have already done so once. We would prefer both Houses of Parliament to look at this when such changes are made by the Government. We therefore want the Government to respond on new clause 6, and if my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North pushes new clause 2 to a vote, we will support him. We give the Government fair warning that, whatever the result of the vote in the House tonight, I am sure this subject will get a very strong airing in the House of Lords, because it is economically, morally and socially indefensible.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 180, Noes 278.

Division No. 87]

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Hayes, Helen  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Berger, Luciana  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  
Blenkinsop, Tom  
Blomfield, Paul  
Brabin, Tracy  
Bradhaw, rh Mr Ben  
Brahe, rh Tom  
Brennan, Kevin  
Brown, Lyn  
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
Bryant, Chris  
Buck, Ms Karen  
Burgon, Richard  
Butler, Dawn  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Campbell, rh Mr Alan  
Campbell, Mr Gregory  
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
Chapman, Jenny  
Chwyd, rh Ann  
Coaker, Vernon  
Coffeey, Ann  
Cooper, Julie  
Cooper, Rosie  
Cooper, rh Yvette  
Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
Coyle, Neil  
Crausby, Mr David  
Creasy, Stella  
Craddon, Jos  
Cryer, John  
Cummins, Judith  
Cunningham, Alex  
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Dakin, Nic  
Danczuk, Simon  
David, Wayne  
De Piero, Gloria  
Doughby, Stephen  
Dowd, Jim  
Dugher, Michael  
Durkan, Mark  
Eagle, Ms Angela  
Eagle, Maria  
Elford, Clive  
Ellman, Mrs Louise  
Elmore, Chris  
Evans, Chris  
Farrelly, Paul  
Farron, Tim  
Fiello, Robert  
Fletcher, Colleen  
Flint, rh Caroline  
Flynn, Paul  
Fovargue, Yvonne  
Furniss, Gill  
Gardiner, Barry  
Glass, Pat  
Glindon, Mary  
Godsiff, Mr Roger  
Goodman, Helen  
Green, Kate  
Greenwood, Margaret  
Griffith, Nia  
Gwynne, Andrew  
Haigh, Louise  
Hamilton, Fabian  
Harris, Carolyn  
Hayes, Helen  
Healey, rh John  
Hendrick, Mr Mark  
Hepburn, Mr Stephen  
Hermon, Lady  
Hillier, Meg  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hollem, Kate  
Hopkins, Kelvin  
Howarth, rh Mr George  
Hunt, Tristram  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hussain, Imran  
Jarvis, Dan  
Jones, Gerald  
Jones, Helen  
Jones, Mr Kevan  
Kane, Mike  
Kendall, Liz  
Kyle, Peter  
Lavery, Ian  
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
Lewis, Clive  
Lewis, Mr Ivan  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
Lucas, Caroline  
Lucas, Ian C.  
Lynch, Holly  
Maclaggart, rh Fiona  
Madders, Justin  
Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
Mahmood, Shabana  
Malhotra, Seema  
Mann, John  
Marris, Rob  
Marsden, Gordon  
Maskell, Rachael  
Matheson, Christian  
McCarthy, Kerry  
McDonagh, Siobhain  
McDonald, Andy  
McDonnell, rh John  
McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
McInnes, Liz  
McMahon, Jim  
Mears, Ian  
Mulholland, Greg  
Murray, Ian  
Nandy, Lisa  
Onn, Melanie  
Onwurah, Chi  
Osamor, Kate  
Owen, Albert  
Paisley, Ian  
Pearce, Teresa  
Perkins, Toby  
Phillips, Jess  
Phillipson, Bridget  
Pound, Stephen  
Powell, Lucy  
Pugh, John  
Rayner, Angela  
Reed, Mr Steve  
Rees, Christina  
Reeves, Rachel  
Reynolds, Emma  
Rimmer, Marie  
Ritchie, Ms Margaret  
Robinson, Gavin  
Rotheram, Steve  
Ryan, Joan  
Shah, Naz  
Sherriff, Paula  
Shuker, Mr Gavin  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  
Slaughter, Andy  
Smeeth, Ruth  
Smith, rh Mr Andrew  
Smith, Angela  
Smith, Cat  
Smith, Nick  
Smyth, Karin  
Starmer, Keir  
Stevens, Jo  
Streeting, Wes  
Stringer, Graham  
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela  
Tami, Mark  
Thomas, Mr Gareth  
Thornberry, Emily  
Thoms, rh Stephen  
Trickett, Jon  
Turner, Karl  
Twigg, Stephen  
Umunna, Mr Chuka  
Vaz, Valerie  
Watson, Mr Tom  
West, Catherine  
Whitehead, Dr Alan  
Williams, Mr Mark  
Wilson, Sammy  
Winnick, Mr David  
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie  
Zeichner, Daniel  

Tellers for the Ayes:  
Vicky Foxcroft and  
Jeff Smith  

NOES  

Courts, Robert  
Crabb, rh Stephen  
Crouch, Tracey  
Davies, Byron  
Davies, Chris  
Davies, David T. C.  
Davies, Glynn  
Davies, Dr James  
Davies, Mims  
Davies, Philip  
Dinenage, Caroline  
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  
Double, Steve  
Downer, Oliver  
Drax, Richard  
Drummond, Mrs Flick  
Duddridge, James  
Duncan, rh Sir Alan  
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain  
Dunne, Mr Philip  
Ellis, Michael  
Ellison, Jane  
Ellwood, Mr Tobias  
Elphicke, Charlie  
Eustice, George  
Evans, Graham  
Evans, Mr Nigel  
Evennett, rh David  
Fabricant, Michael  
Fallon, rh Sir Michael  
Fernandes, Suella  
Field, rh Mark  
François, rh Mr Mark  
Freeman, George  
Freer, Mike  
Fuller, Richard  
Gale, Sir Roger  
Garnier, Mark  
Gauke, rh Mr David  
Ghani, Nusrat  
Gauke, Mr David  
Green, Chris  
Green, rh Damian  
Greening, rh Justine
Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 5

REVOCATION OF THE EDUCATION (STUDENT SUPPORT) (AMENDMENT) REGULATIONS 2015

“The Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations 2015 (Statutory Instrument No. 1951/2015) are revoked.”—(Gordon Marsden.)

This new clause would revoke the Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations 2015, which moved support for students from a system of maintenance grants to loans.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put. That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 181, Noes 278.

Division No. 88

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane  
Alexander, Heidi  
Ali, Rushanara  
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
Ashworth, Jonathan  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Berger, Luciana  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  
Blenkinsop, Tom  
Blomfield, Paul  
Brabin, Tracy  
Brady, Mr Ben  
Brake, rh Tom  
Brennan, Kevin  
Brown, Lyn  
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
Bryant, Chris  
Buck, Ms Karen  
Burgon, Richard  
Butler, Dawn  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Campbell, Mr Alan  
Campbell, Mr Gregory  
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
Chapman, Jenny  
Clywd, rh Ann  
Coaker, Vernon  
Coffey, Ann  
Cooper, Julie  
Danczuk, Simon  
David, Wayne  
De Piero, Gloria  
Doughty, Stephen  
Downing, Jim  
Dugher, Michael  
Durkan, Mark  
Eagle, Ms Angela  
Eagle, Maria  
Ellman, Mrs Louise  
Elmore, Chris  
Evans, Chris  
Farrelly, Paul  
Fiennes, Robert  
Fletcher, Colleen  
Finn, rh Caroline  
Flynn, Paul  
Fovargue, Yvonne  

Wharton, James  
Whately, Helen  
Wheeler, Heather  
White, Chris  
Whittaker, Craig  
Whittingdale, rh Mr John  
Wiggin, Bill  
Williams, Craig  
Williamson, rh Gavin  
Wilson, Mr Rob  
Wollaston, Dr Sarah  
Wood, Mike  
Wright, rh Jeremy  
Zahawi, Nadhim  

Tellers for the Noes:  
Mark Spencer and  
Jackie Doyle-Price

[7.14 pm]
Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 11

UKRI REPORT: INTERNATIONAL SPECIALIST EMPLOYEES

“(1) Within six months of section 84 of this Act coming into force, and every year thereafter, UKRI shall report to the Secretary of State on—

(a) EU (excluding from the UK), and
(b) non-EU
specialist employees employed by UKRI and English higher education providers.

(2) For the purposes of this section “specialist employee”—

(a) in relation to a Council, has the same meaning as in section 88(3), and
(b) in relation to an English higher education provider, means the academic staff of the institution.

(3) Should any report made under subsection (1) identify a decrease in the number of international specialist employees since the previous report was produced, the Secretary of State must make an assessment of the impact of such a reduction on UKRI's ability to deliver its functions under section 86 of this Act.

(4) The Secretary of State shall lay any report produced under this section before each House of Parliament.”—(John Pugh.)

Brought up, and read the First time.

John Pugh: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 57, in clause 40, page 24, line 13, at end insert—

“(13) Before authorising any provider to grant research awards, the OfS must consult with—

(a) UKRI, including Research England,
(b) the appropriate National Academies and learned societies, and
(c) such other persons as the OfS considers appropriate.”

Amendment 53, in clause 85, page 54, leave out line 19.

This amendment, together with amendment 54, would keep Innovate UK as a separate organisation to UK Research and Innovation.

Government amendment 17, in clause 86, page 55, line 3, at end insert—

“(1) The functions conferred by subsection (1)(a) to (c) include, in particular, power to encourage and support the provision of postgraduate training in science, technology, humanities and new ideas.”

This amendment makes clear that the functions of UKRI under clause 86(1)(a) to (c) include the power to encourage and support the provision of postgraduate training in science, technology, humanities and new ideas.

Amendment (a) to Government amendment 17, after “humane...” insert “, social sciences”.

Amendment 54, page 56, line 30, leave out clause 89.

See explanatory statement for Amendment 52.

Amendment 42, in clause 90, page 57, line 21, after “appropriate” insert “including relevant bodies in the devolved administrations”.

This amendment allows Research England to coordinate with its devolved counterparts.

Amendment 55, in clause 94, page 58, line 38, at end insert—

“(1A) In making grants to UKRI under subsection (1), the
functions exercisable by the Councils mentioned in section 88(1) pursuant to arrangements under that section,
(b) functions exercisable by Innovate UK pursuant to arrangements under section 89, and
(c) functions exercisable by Research England pursuant to arrangements under section 90.

(a) EU (excluding from the UK), and
(b) non-EU
specialist employees employed by UKRI and English higher education providers.

(2) For the purposes of this section “specialist employee”—

(a) in relation to a Council, has the same meaning as in section 88(3), and
(b) in relation to an English higher education provider, means the academic staff of the institution.

(3) Should any report made under subsection (1) identify a decrease in the number of international specialist employees since the previous report was produced, the Secretary of State must make an assessment of the impact of such a reduction on UKRI's ability to deliver its functions under section 86 of this Act.

(4) The Secretary of State shall lay any report produced under this section before each House of Parliament.”—(John Pugh.)

Brought up, and read the First time.
Amendment 56, in clause 95, page 59, line 45, at end insert—

“(6) In giving direction to UKRI, the Secretary of State must act in the best interests of all constituent parts of the United Kingdom and, before giving such direction, must consult on research and innovation policies and their priorities with the following:

(a) the Scottish Government,
(b) the Welsh Government, and
(c) the Northern Ireland Executive.

(7) Before giving any direction to UKRI under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must seek agreement to the terms of that direction from—

(a) the Scottish Government,
(b) the Welsh Government, and
(c) the Northern Ireland Executive.”

This amendment would place a duty on the Secretary of State such that before giving directions to the UKRI in regards to research priorities, the Secretary of State must consult the devolved administrations.

Amendment 43, in clause 105, page 63, line 23, leave out “may” and insert “must”.

This amendment would ensure cooperation and information sharing between the OfS and UKRI.

Amendment 44, page 63, line 24, after “functions”, insert—

“(1A) The OfS and UKRI must cooperate with one another on—

(a) the health of disciplines,
(b) awarding of research degrees,
(c) post-graduate training,
(d) shared facilities,
(e) knowledge exchange and
(f) skills development”.

This amendment sets out where UKRI and the OfS must cooperate on issues at the interface between teaching and research.

Amendment 45, page 63, line 25, leave out subsection (2).

This amendment would ensure cooperation and information sharing between the OfS and UKRI.

Government amendment 35.

Amendment 59, in schedule 9, page 101, line 20, at end insert—

“(9) A joint committee is to be established by UKRI and OfS, which must—

(a) consist of representatives of both UKRI and OfS, and
(b) produce an annual report on the health of the higher education sector.

(10) The report must make an assessment of—

(a) the strength of the sector,
(b) work undertaken to improve equality of opportunity,
(c) the strength of separate disciplines,
(d) the availability of research funding,
(e) the awarding of research degrees,
(f) the quality of post-graduate training,
(g) access to shared facilities,
(h) the effectiveness of knowledge exchange,
(i) skills development, and
(j) measures taken to act in the public interest.”
Like a lot of people planning their lives, they wanted a bit of certainty and security. Towards the end of the conversation he made what I thought was a very shocking confession. I had conducted the conversation on the assumption—my assumption, from his impeccable English—that he himself was English. I have probably given the game away, but it turned out that he was Belgian, and shared all the concerns that he was voicing on behalf of his colleagues.

This is a personal issue for a lot of valuable and skilled people, some of whom are already facing, unbelievable though this is, an increase in prejudice and, sadly, something that amounts at times to hate crime on their university campuses. If those skilled contributors go, some courses simply will not happen, because we need those people—that is why we got them in the first place—and some will worsen; university life will itself worsen.

The Minister is a very civilised man, who I am sure wants a diverse university sector and wants the best of EU talent to stay here, and to continue to come here. He would not welcome an exodus. He speaks fluent French, so has a true continental mindset, although it may not be encouraging to describe him as having that at this stage in the Government’s deliberations. I am sure he would welcome an early warning of any kind of exodus, and any kind of problem with or diminution of the involvement of international lecturers in our universities. The new clause would simply give him that.

Carol Monaghan: I will speak to amendments 55 and 56. I will start with amendment 56, which is in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin).

The proposals in the Bill to reform the UK research councils have implications for higher education in Scotland, and we have concerns about the potential consequences for Scotland’s research base. The SNP tabled an amendment in Committee that sought to ensure representation on the UKRI board of people with relevant experience of the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland higher education sectors, as well as an understanding of the research and innovation policy context and landscape across the whole of the UK. We withdrew the amendment but reserved the right to bring it back on Report. That is what we are doing now.

We are pleased that the Government listened to the Scottish National party’s concerns in Committee and have tabled their own measure on this issue, Government amendment 36. However, although we welcome their acknowledgement of the need for the board of UKRI to include experience of the devolved Administrations, it is disappointing to note that amendment 36 requires experience of only one of those Administrations. That does not allow for the proper consideration of all devolved Administrations and their policy priorities within UKRI.

UKRI must have an understanding of the whole UK research and innovation landscape and must act in the interests of all devolved Administrations. That is why we have tabled amendment 56. What we have in front of us in Government amendment 36 does not adequately address our concerns and those of stakeholders, including Universities Scotland, Universities Wales, Queen’s University Belfast, the Scottish Council for Development and Industry, NUS Scotland, the University and College Union Scotland and the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Our amendment is not partisan, but draws on a whole sector of university opinion throughout Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and has the full support of the Scottish Government.

The UK Government said that they would introduce a Higher Education and Research Bill that included measures set out in Paul Nurse’s review of the research councils. Our amendment would ensure the Bill matched what Sir Paul Nurse noted in his review, that “there is a need to solicit and respond to distinct research priorities and evidence requirements identified by the devolved administrations”.

The Bill as it stands does not meet the overarching principles of the Nurse review, as the governance of UK Research and Innovation is accountable only to the UK Government, with principally English interests. We believe that the governance of UKRI needs to reflect the priorities of each of the Governments within the UK; if it does not, there could be a lack of consideration of Government priorities and research needs in Scotland and other devolved nations among the decision-making bodies of the research councils and of Innovate UK.

Hywel Williams: I back the hon. Lady’s points, and note that Welsh universities have particular priorities when it comes to research, not least the very low level of funding that they get, which is probably around 2%—a figure that contrasts with the fact that we are 5% of the UK population. Irrespective of the Haldane principle, that is a specific concern in Wales.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. Scotland does very well out of the research councils, because there is a large research body in Scotland and the research environment is vibrant across our 19 higher education institutes.

We want the Secretary of State and the UK Government to consult Scottish Ministers and their equivalents in the other devolved Administrations before approving UKRI’s research and innovation strategy. How else can we be certain that the new body set up in the Bill will be used in the best interests of the whole of the UK and is not simply focused on English-only priorities?

The Scottish National party is proud of our HE sector and acknowledges that it is valuable to ensure Scotland’s cultural, social and economic sectors prosper. It is worth over £6 billion to our economy, and we must ensure that this continues. The Bill has the potential to harm Scotland’s world-renowned research. The Minister and this Government need to ensure that devolved Administrations have an equal say and that their voice is heard within UKRI to ensure that the Bill will be of no detriment to any part of the UK.

Amendment 55 deals with funding. The integrity of the dual support financial system must be protected, and the Bill does not go far enough to do that. We need to be sure that the balanced funding principle is clearly defined in the Bill to ensure that the integrity of the financial system set up within cross-border higher education sectors continues. Any flow of funds between reserved and devolved budgets needs to be clearly defined, and the Bill does not address how the balance of funding allocated through competitive funding streams will be supported. There is a serious worry that Research England funding could be taken from the UK-wide pot, of which Scotland’s and other devolved Administrations’ HE institutes rightly receive a share. If that pot were to
diminish, it would be to the detriment of the Scottish HE sector and, indeed, those of Wales and Northern Ireland.

We are already seeing uncertainty about funding for our HE sector, thanks to the reckless gamble over Brexit. Is it right now that we should deprive our HE institutes by taking UK funding away from them, too? Many stakeholders in Scotland are concerned about the potential hazard that will be placed in their way because of the funding structure. Amendment 55 would ensure separate funding allocations for the research councils, Innovate UK and Research England.

Although Scotland performs well, as I have already mentioned, in attracting funding from Research Councils UK for grants, studentships and fellowships, Scotland does less well in infrastructure spending for research and currently only attracts 5% of UK spending. As with many things, a lot of this spending is concentrated on the south-east of England, and we want UKRI to have a full overview of research infrastructure across the UK.

We are very concerned that that clause 94 will allow the Secretary of State to alter the balance of funding between the research councils. Any grant to UKRI is ultimately research project funding, which should be competitively available throughout the UK. It is therefore necessary to have transparency about what goes to UKRI and what goes to Research England, given that that body will distribute funds for research infrastructure that is available only to English institutions.

We are extremely concerned that no provision in the Bill will ensure that the Secretary of State cannot give directions to UKRI to move funds in-year on its own initiative between constituent parts. If, for whatever reason, funds had to be moved by the Secretary of State between research councils and Research England or Innovate UK, this must happen only if the Scottish Government and other devolved Administrations give consent.

This SNP amendment would ensure that fairness and transparency are at the forefront of reserved funding allocation to UKRI and the allocation to Research England, while ensuring that the balanced funding principle is measured in relation to the proportion of funding allocated by the Secretary of State for reserved and for devolved England-only funding and providing clarity about when that might not be achieved.

Joseph Johnson: I thank honourable colleagues for their enthusiastic support for our world-class research and innovation system. UKRI will be a strong and unified voice, championing research and innovation nationally and internationally. It will support fundamental and strategic research, drive forward multi and inter-disciplinary research, support business-led innovation and help to promote business links with publicly funded research.

UKRI will build on the great work already being undertaken by our research and innovation bodies and maximise the benefit to the UK of a Government investment of over £6 billion a year. That is why the Prime Minister this morning announced that, by the end of this Parliament, we will invest an additional £2 billion in research and development, including through a new industrial strategy challenge fund, led by Innovate UK, by our world-class research councils and, once established, by UKRI. This is clear testament to how UKRI can help to deliver greater outcomes for the research and innovation communities and for the whole UK.

7.45 pm

UKRI will, of course, need insight not just into the research environment, but into innovation strengths and the business needs of the entire UK. We recognise the importance of UKRI board members having the appropriate experience to fulfil these important roles. Government amendment 35 will ensure that, when making these key appointments, the Secretary of State will have regard to the importance of the board having experience of the research and innovation systems in one or more of the devolved Administrations.

Amendment 42 would require Research England to consult the devolved funding bodies, when an equivalent requirement would not exist for them to consult Research England. I would highlight instead the new clause that I introduced in Committee, which will ensure that Research England can work with its devolved equivalents, as the Higher Education Funding Council for England does now. It is important that that joint working continues, and the provision in the Bill will enable that.

Turning to amendments 53 and 54, research and innovation must be joined up at the heart of our industrial strategy. Incorporating Innovate UK will bring benefits to businesses, researchers and the whole UK. It will help businesses identify possible research partners and mean that research outputs are better aligned with their needs. Researchers will benefit from greater exposure to business and commercialisation expertise, and it will deliver a more strategic, agile and impactful approach across UKRI’s portfolio.

As UKRI chair, John Kingman, has highlighted, “it would be a huge mistake, and a backward step, to set up UKRI with the innovation mission left elsewhere. The big challenges facing our country require more and better co-ordination and partnership between our great research base, Innovate UK and the business community, not less.”

And stakeholders recognise the potential here, too. The CBI has said:

“The latest proposals for integrating Innovate UK within UKRI should support valuable synergies between different aspects of the UK’s science and innovation communities. Bringing Innovate UK’s business-facing perspective into UKRI can bring strategic advantages and should be used to build partnerships, creating the best conditions for fast growing, dynamic businesses to thrive.”

Let me reassure the House, however, that I recognise the importance of Innovate UK maintaining its business-facing focus. That is why the Bill will protect Innovate UK’s distinctive focus and autonomy in the delivery of its functions. Innovate UK will continue to develop new projects and programmes, working with companies to de-risk, enable and support innovation that will grow the UK economy. Furthermore, it will retain its separate budget, set out via a grant letter from the Secretary of State.

The Secretary of State will appoint both academic and business representatives to the UKRI board, including a member to lead in promoting and championing innovation and business interests.

To realise our potential fully, we need to respond to a changing world, to anticipate future requirements and to ensure we have the structures in place to exploit the knowledge and expertise we have for the benefit of the
whole country. The way to do this most effectively is to bring Innovate UK into UKRI. It is important that we deliver the flexibility and agility that the new structure for our research and innovation landscape will provide.

Turning to amendment 55, the Government have already committed to setting out separate funding streams for each council. The funding streams will be established in the annual grant letter. It is important that UKRI retains some flexibility to manage its funds to meet immediate financial pressures, to ensure best value from its resources and to meet the aspirations for seamless administration of multi and inter-disciplinary research and joint research and innovation projects. Small-scale, practical and mutually agreed viresment is essential for any organisation that is managing a large portfolio of innovative, complex projects. This would allow UKRI's councils to adapt to changes in project timing or to shift small amounts of funding to a lead council to support an interdisciplinary project in response to creative ideas from the community. I can also reassure hon. Members that the Secretary of State would not agree to UKRI viring money in such a way as to result in a net change in Research England’s hypothecated budget over a spending review period. This will be made clear in guidance to UKRI.

On amendment 56, I would like to take this opportunity to be very clear that UK-wide research and innovation funding, as conducted through the research councils and Innovate UK, are reserved issues and will continue to be so after transition to UKRI. It is already the Secretary of State's duty, as it is mine, to work for the interests of the whole of the UK. Similarly, it is the responsibility of the research councils and Innovate UK to operate on an equal basis across the UK. Primarily, this is achieved by funding projects selected through open competition on the basis of excellence. The fact that they do so effectively is widely recognised in the research and innovation communities, as recognised by the former vice-chancellor of the University of Dundee, Sir Alan Langlands, in the evidence he gave last month to the Public Bill Committee. The research community functions remarkably well across the UK political landscape, not least because the UK Government and the devolved Administrations work together to make it do so. We would not seek to bind UKRI into a restrictive process of consultation, as proposed in this amendment.

Hywel Williams: I am sure that the record will show whether the Minister said earlier, in respect of Government amendment 35, that membership would include at least one person or more with relevant experience in relation to at least one of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Is it “one person” with relevant experience or “one person or more”?

Joseph Johnson: It will be at least one person with experience of one or more of the devolved Administrations. To be absolutely explicit, the Government have tabled an amendment that places a duty on the Secretary of State to have regard to the desirability of having at least one such member. For the individual councils, we think it right that UKRI be free to appoint the very best people for these roles, and we expect it to appoint candidates with the highest levels of relevant skills and experience from a diverse range of backgrounds, both nationally and internationally.

On new clause 11, I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) that there must be proper monitoring of the international diversity of the research sector workforce. We already take this very seriously and collect and discuss such data, but let me reiterate the Government’s position on the importance of international researchers. As I have said, we remain fully open to scientists and researchers from across the EU, and we hugely value the contribution of EU and international staff. There has been no change to the rights and status of EU nationals in the UK or of UK citizens in the EU, as a result of the referendum. As the Prime Minister said in her letter copied to Venki Ramakrishnan, president of the Royal Society, only five days after she came into office:

“Our research base is enriched by the best minds from Europe and around the world – providing reassurance to these individuals and to UK researchers working in Europe will be a priority for the Government.”

Paul Blomfield: The Minister has articulated exactly the sentiments shared by Opposition Members—for us, too, this issue is a priority—but does he not recognise that in reality the Government are failing in that objective? Around the country, we are receiving reports of EU academics saying, “Our future isn’t here, because we haven’t had the reassurances we need.”

Joseph Johnson: There is no higher authority in the Government than the Prime Minister, and we have heard from her that it is absolutely our intention to provide the reassurance that EU scientists and researchers working in this country want and need. The Brexit Secretary has given similar assurances and reminded EU nationals living and working in the UK that those who have been here for five years are already entitled to indefinite leave to remain—I understand from his figures that that relates to about 80% of the group concerned—and that those who have been here for six years are entitled to apply for dual nationality. We want brilliant researchers from other European countries to continue to enrich our universities and student experience, and we have every expectation that they will be able to do so, as long as UK nationals in other EU countries receive reciprocal rights in those countries.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Does the Minister appreciate that such statements are cold comfort to people in that position and that we need far greater certainty to make sure that our higher education institutions can flourish as they should?

Joseph Johnson: We as a Government can only reiterate that we fully appreciate and value their presence in our institutions. We welcome them and think their work crucial, and we want them to stay and to continue doing that work. We cannot be more categorical than that.

On amendments 43, 44, 45, 57 and 59, I absolutely agree that co-operation between the OFS and UKRI is critical. Clauses 105 and 106 provide for this. It is counterproductive, however, either to restrict the areas or to be too prescriptive about how and where UKRI and the OFS should work together through legislation as required by these amendments. We have recently set out in a factsheet published on 15 November further details of where we expect both bodies to work together. One key area explained in the factsheet where we believe that the OFS and UKRI should work in close co-operation...
is in the assessment of applications for research degree awarding powers. The provisions in the Bill will facilitate this.

Another important area of joint working between UKRI and the OFS is postgraduate training. In turning, therefore, to amendment 17, I would like to thank the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for raising this important issue in Committee. While the functions of UKRI, as drafted in the Bill, do enable this, the Government have tabled the amendment to provide absolute clarity that UKRI will continue to support postgraduate training. The hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) has proposed an amendment to our amendment to ensure that it includes “social sciences”. I can assure him that this is already the case, because clause 104 ensures that all references to science or the humanities include social science and the arts. Our support for postgraduate training will be across the spectrum of disciplines. The OFS will be responsible for protecting the interests of all students, including all postgraduate students. The two bodies will work together and share understanding to support their respective functions, and the Bill makes clear provision for this.

I hope that hon. Members recognise the considerable progress made in ensuring that the Bill meets the needs of the research and innovation communities. I believe that UKRI will catalyse a more strategic, agile and interdisciplinary approach to addressing global challenges and developing the UK’s research and innovation capability. This is fundamental to strengthening UK competitiveness as part of the new industrial strategy. I therefore ask hon. Members not to press their amendments.

**Gordon Marsden:** Our amendments 43 to 45 are on collaboration between the OFS and UKRI. I will come to those and the Minister’s comments on them in a moment, but shall start with amendment 42.

Amendment 42 would allow Research England to co-ordinate with its devolved counterparts. Labour considers this an important principle to establish in the Bill. The Committee did not include members from Wales or, obviously, from Northern Ireland, yet, in both Wales and Northern Ireland, universities and higher education institutions will be significantly affected by the process. They will also be affected if the process with the new bodies is not universally seen, at this important time for our university system, to be fair in sharing out its attentions. Not to consider including such provisions in the Bill is a great mistake. Surely we should consider those interests when setting up a new research body.

This is highly relevant to the future of those research bodies. The Minister will be well aware that research bodies are generally still not entirely mollified by the various blnewards and reassurances given, particularly on the role of research councils. I am sure he will hear more about that when the Bill goes to the other place. While we have not pressed further any of the amendments that were proposed in Committee, because of time pressures, I assure him that our noble Friends in another place will want to scrutinise in detail what he has said and what he is planning to do.

These are not arcane arguments about technical details. One of the problems the Government face is that they have overlooked a vital factor. There is little sense of what the knock-on effects of all this will be on the importance of what I describe as the brand UK plc in HE—particularly so, in view of the further uncertainties that have arisen since the advent of Brexit. I am not the only person to make that observation; other commentators and academics have also done so.

8 pm

HE providers across England and the devolved nations are internationally competitive because there is a trusted UK brand. If we are to maintain a trusted UK brand, it is important that all the integral parts of the UK feel that they have a say at the table. If they do not feel that and there is disgruntlement and dissonance, at a time when the UK Government need to do all they can in the Brexit negotiations to safeguard that UK brand, there will be a weak link. There needs to be a proper UK-wide strategy to safeguard the positions of our researchers, as the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) mentioned.

Amendments 55 and 56, tabled by SNP Members, provide a valuable service to the Government by waking them up to some of the implications of having a body—albeit not one that they might wish for—that appears to be too Anglo-centric. Reference was made to the amendment tabled in Committee that would have given the devolved nations more input. The Welsh Government in particular are concerned that Government amendment 45, which is the UK Government’s response to the amendment tabled in Committee, will not be adequate. Their view is very simple: Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, although they have some similarities—in that they are not English—are not a homogenous group of countries. They have very different histories, interests and experiences of HE and research and innovation, which needs to be reflected in the architecture.

The Minister is at his most eloquent this evening, on the back of the announcement today of a £2 billion industrial strategy fund, which is going to turbo-charge the future for UKRI, so that it can power away and all the rest of it. The truth of the matter—and the Minister knows it—is that the architecture that will need to be constructed and consolidated in UKRI, with Innovate UK, the research councils, the devolved Administrations and so on, is complex. It is going to take time to develop.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): On the subject of Northern Ireland, the Minister will know that Queen’s University Belfast has an extensive partnership with companies and other universities across the whole of the United Kingdom, and we are all proud to be British in relation to that. With that in mind, I am wondering what consideration the hon. Gentleman feels this Government should give to Queen’s University, particularly for its innovative medical investigations to find new cures for cancer, diabetes, chest, heart and stroke illnesses and such like?

**Gordon Marsden:** I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. It would, of course, be invidious for me to single out Queen’s University over and above others—if I did, my postbag would have no doubt be full—but he is absolutely right to champion what it is doing. There is an important point, which I am not sure the Government have entirely grasped. The research done at Queen’s and other universities and HE institutions under the devolved Administrations does not depend only on whether the Government get a good Brexit settlement with the
European Union; it depends on maintaining the trust and support of those EU nations that we will rely on to get that sort of investment for clinical trials. For example, a lot of charities—the Minister will be aware of this because they made representations to his Department—particularly those relating to heart disease and cancer, are concerned that if we do not get a decent settlement, the problems of getting field trials in Francophone Africa or Lusophone South America will become more and more complicated because we rely on those researchers and the good offices of our EU counterparts in those countries. I do not think that the Government are taking anywhere near enough notice of that particular issue.

As I said, the architecture is complex, and it is crucial to get it right. Although the Minister may think that some of these amendments are nit-picking and do not need to be on the face of the Bill, as I said to him throughout our discussions in Committee, I think he neglects the importance of sending a signal to the devolved Administrations and others that their interests are going to be represented. That is why these amendments were tabled.

Our amendments 43, 44 and 45 would ensure that there is co-operation and information sharing between the OFS and UKRI. The Minister obviously knows that UKRI and Innovate UK have historically done different things. Again, he is at pains to try to reassure us that all we will get under the new structure is the best of both worlds. Unfortunately, we sometimes end up getting the worst of both worlds. I was struck, particularly during evidence sessions in Committee, by the fact that certain concerns remain—amendment 53, tabled by the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh), is also relevant here. The chief executive of Innovate UK outlined his concerns in Committee about whether Innovate UK and the Department that supports it will be sufficiently fleet of foot to do the sort of innovative things in finance and everything else that they have so far been very good at. This is not to say that the architecture cannot work; it is just saying that the Minister and his officials need to think rather harder about the how the process will go forward.

There is also, of course, the broader issue in part 3 that the process of separating teaching and research—and in this context the Research England body is relevant—will mean that issues and activities at the interface of teaching and research, such as the health of disciplines, the awarding of research degrees, post-grad training and sharing of facilities, might not be effectively identified and supported.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): My hon. Friend will appreciate that a number of institutions are concerned—I suspect he was about to make this point—about this gap between teaching and research. I was quite surprised when my University of Cambridge told me that 89% of people who are involved in teaching at the university are also involved in research. That integration between the two is absolutely essential, yet it seems to be what is missing in some people’s eyes from the Bill. I believe that this is the force of the amendment that my hon. Friend is proposing.

Gordon Marsden: I was going to say that my hon. Friend, as the MP for Cambridge, is at the cutting-edge, or certainly at the coal face, of this particular issue. I know it is important to Cambridge University and indeed to Oxford University, whose vice-chancellor has expressed similar concerns. This is not the Minister’s fault, but it is unfortunate that at the time this comes through, we will have had the machinery of government changes in terms of the Department for Education and the new expanded Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Time alone will tell what the benefits of that are—I think there might be a number of them—but there could be problems in the short term. With the best will in the world, that bedding-down process between the two Departments—I know the Minister has a foot in both camps, so I hope he will be able to help—is going to be a real concern.

We have talked about the OFS and UKRI co-operating on the health of disciplines and so on. Our amendment proposes a mechanism by which this collaboration could be achieved. The Royal Society, as I am sure the Minister is aware, has suggested that a committee on teaching and research should be established. The Wellcome institute, with which I am sure Members are familiar, has also offered its thoughts. Teaching and research are intrinsically linked, but that intrinsic link would be lost from higher education if the bond between them were broken.

Clause 105 sets out the interactions between the OFS and UKRI, but we wanted to strengthen that co-operation by replacing the word “may”—no disrespect to the Prime Minister—with “must”. In parliamentary and governmental terms, “must” is a great deal more useful than “may”.

The Royal Society of Chemistry has said:

“...in many HE Institutions we see positive interactions between teaching and research activities. There is a risk that the separation of teaching and research in the new HE architecture will mean that the benefits of research informing teaching and learning practices could be lost.”

No one is suggesting that that would be done deliberately, but it could happen. The society has also said:

“The current draft of the Bill allows for information sharing between the OfS and UKRI. It does not, however, require their cooperation unless directed by the Secretary of State”.

Other learned bodies and societies have contacted me, and fellow members of the Committee, to make similar points.

The Minister referred to the guidance paper that he has issued. I thank him for that paper, which provides some further clarity, but it has come very late in the day. I wonder whether it was issued with an eye to the passing interest in the other place, to which the Bill is shortly to be committed, rather than with the aim of keeping us happy down here, but it is useful nevertheless. At the end of the day, however, it still does not establish an obligation or mechanism for co-operation; that is left to the whim of an individual Secretary of State or universities Minister.

As I have said, the issue is made more pressing by the new machinery of government structure and the responsibilities shared by the two Departments. Who knows what will happen in the future? The Minister may be looking forward to a long period as the universities Minister, but at some point, no doubt, he will go onward and upward, and there is no guarantee that his successor, in this or any future Government, will also share responsibilities with BEIS.

For all those reasons, we are suggesting that the Bill be amended to provide that the OFS and UKRI must co-operate without having to be required to do so by the Secretary of State. If SNP Members choose to press their amendments, we will support them.
Dr Blackman-Woods: I wish to speak about amendments 57 and 59, and amendment (a) to Government amendment 17.

In Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) and I said that the OFS should not have sole power and control over authorisations of research awards, and that UKRI and other bodies should be involved in authorising degrees. I argued that there were two major problems with giving the OFS sole power to award research degrees. First, it would not allow any research funding bodies, or indeed any other relevant agencies, to take part in the process of deciding whether to grant an institution powers to award research degrees. That is problematic, because granting research degree-awarding powers without reference to other bodies diminishes the level of expertise in the decision-making process.

Secondly, as UKRI, Research England, and the national academies and learned societies have responsibilities for providing research funding, it would surely be a major error not to consider what role they would have in the granting of research degree-awarding powers, or the effect that it could have on their funding decisions. That is particularly important given the concerns that many organisations have about giving away degree-awarding powers. For example, the University and College Union is worried about the impact of removing a minimum period before institutions are allowed to apply for full degree-awarding powers. At a time when many groups fear that the restrictions on degree-awarding powers are being watered down, we should be ensuring that organisations such as UKRI are scrutinising the decisions made by the OFS.

8.15 pm

The Minister did respond to some of my concerns about the OFS working alone. He said:

“One key area in which the OFS and UKRI should work in close co-operation is the assessment of applications for research degree-awarding powers, and the provisions in clause 103 will facilitate that.”

I appreciate that clause 105—which clause 103 has become—allows the OFS and the UKRI to work together, but the purpose of my amendment is not just to allow them to work together, but to ensure that they do so. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South has just made that point. The fact that the two institutions are allowed to work together does not mean that they will.

The Minister said:

“The Secretary of State will have powers to require that co-operation to take place if it does not do so of its own accord.”

—[Official Report, Higher Education and Research Public Bill Committee, 11 October 2016; c. 372.]

Why should not the organisations be required to co-operate at the outset, rather than the Government’s saying that they can work together, waiting until they do not work together, and then seeking to intervene?

Joseph Johnson: UKRI and the OFS are under an obligation to work efficiently and effectively, and to deliver value for money. That will inevitably mean that when collaboration would deliver those objectives, they will also be under an obligation to work together.

Dr Blackman-Woods: That seems a bit convoluted.

A number of universities are still raising issues. We have just heard from the University of Cambridge, which says that

“the Bill itself does not contain any specific duty on the OFS to consult with UKRI towards the award of research DAPs. We believe that this should be specifically provided for in the Bill.”

I agree. I think that we would all like the Minister to include a specific requirement for the OFS to consult the UKRI and other bodies before granting degree-awarding powers. That, we think, would be a major step towards ensuring that decisions are effective and appropriate.

Amendment 59 suggests that one way of ensuring that the OFS and UKRI work together would be to establish a joint committee consisting of representatives of both organisations and requiring them to produce an annual report on the health of the higher education sector. They would have to report on, for instance, post-graduate training, research funding, shared facilities, skills development, and the strength of the sector. The amendment is intended to obtain—even at this late stage—a bit more information from the Minister about how he envisages the two organisations working together, and, in particular, how he will ensure that there is holistic oversight. That issue arose again and again in Committee. There was widespread concern, expressed in our amendments, that the split into two organisations would lose some of what HEFCE had provided for the sector. This amendment suggests just one way in which the two could be made to work together more effectively; there are others.

The Minister has provided us—rather late in the day—with framework documents that help to establish how the Government envisage collaboration between the organisations, and I thank him for that. I found it interesting reading. I hope that the Minister appreciates that I read the document immediately. It sets out a number of things that the OFS and UKRI may do. It says, for example, that the OFS and UKRI may co-operate with one another in exercising any of their functions and that the OFS may provide information to the UKRI. I just reiterate the point—why not just say “must” or “shall” where appropriate, and then we are all absolutely clear that those two organisations have to work together in a particular way?

I want to emphasise one thing about the amendment. At the end of it, it says that the UKRI and the OFS should have to publish a report on “measures taken to act in the public interest.” I am not going to go through again all the things we would expect to see from two organisations working in the public interest, but it would be helpful to have some understanding from the Minister about how the UKRI and the OFS are going to comment and report on the public interest as expressed by institutions and the work that they are carrying out.

On amendment (a) to Government amendment 17, the Minister is right that clause 104 says that the social sciences should be covered by the term “sciences” and arts by the term “humanities”. I tabled amendment (a) so that I could ask why, as only a few additional words would have to be added, “social sciences” cannot be added to the provision. We will all remember that arts is covered by humanities and social sciences by sciences because we are considering the Bill, but once the list is out there will be a danger of both the arts and social
sciences falling out of everyone’s memory. I make a plea to the Minister: may we have the words “arts” and “social sciences” added to the provision?

Roger Mullin: I hope not to detain the House for terribly long, but I would like to make several points. The Minister said in relation to our amendment 55, “The Secretary of State would not agree to the varying of money”. That strikes me as the nub of the problem. Although the Minister is someone who I know to be honourable, absolutely committed to the university sector and assiduous in his work—he has listened to us, hence the modest changes he has made, which are welcome—he will not be there forever and in future we may get someone with much less stable characteristics, like his brother, for example. Can you imagine the havoc that could be wreaked if his brother were to replace him? Therefore, we need to ensure that some of the requirements are enshrined in statute.

When we look at the needs of the different Administrations, we see that there is a great difference between the needs of the economies in Wales, in Northern Ireland and in Scotland and the needs in England, particularly the south of England. I have had the great pleasure of working in Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University at different times, as well as in many Scottish universities and a few in England. The differences can be profound.

Take one of the universities in Scotland—the University of the Highlands and Islands, a multi-campus university that has grown out of the college sector and has research interests that are not shared by any other university in the UK. The same is true of Ulster University and, I am sure, although it is many years since I was there, Bangor University. There is a great variation is research interest. More than that, there is a profound difference economically, to which they have to respond. Their interests diverge in many ways. We only need to look at the debate about exiting the EU in Scotland, where 62% voted to stay. We and others are working hard to have as close a relationship as possible with the EU and all that that would bring. Look at the debate taking place in other parts of the UK, where precisely the opposite view is being taken. That will have profound economic consequences that need to be reflected, and they will not be unless there is proper consultation with the devolved bodies.

The Minister talked about bringing together, which I would welcome, research, innovation, the academic community and the business community and all that that involves. In the vast majority of cases, I would agree with him, but let me put in a word of caution. Some years ago, when I was chair of the joint departmental research ethics committee at the University of Stirling, we were faced with a situation where research programmes into smoking were being challenged by business, which was trying to get access through legal means to the original data that the academics had used, so that the tobacco companies could twist them for their own interests. Therefore, it is not always the case that there is a coincidence between academic and business interests. That is another reason why there needs to be much greater co-operation. The devolved Government in Scotland would have been much more sensitive to that matter than any other part of the UK.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that Queen’s University Belfast—I must declare an interest; I graduated there—has a particular interest in precision medicine and has been trying to get funding from Innovate UK to pursue a particular project, but it is in direct competition with a university in Britain? However, Queen’s has a particular expertise in that area.

Roger Mullin: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention.

I was not aware of that, but she raises a situation where surely it would make sense for there to be co-operation and co-ordination to understand the different economic and medical interests that exist.

I appeal to the Government: it is not too late to think and to improve the Bill. I ask the Minister to think about those points again.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): As my hon. Friend has mentioned, many people working in higher education in Scotland are very worried about these reforms and I do not blame them. The Brexit mess is already causing tremendous uncertainty over future research funding and international collaboration. We need to make certain that changes to governance do not put even more blocks on the road.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) said, the Scottish Affairs Committee recently had the privilege of taking evidence from Sir Tim O’Shea, the Principal of the University of Edinburgh. He was clear about the probable damage that Brexit would do to universities in Scotland and in other parts of the UK if a deal were not reached similar to the deal that the Prime Minister floated for the City of London. The Scottish research industry secured some €217 million from Horizon 2020 up to February 2016. That is 11.6% of total UK funding. Access to that funding will be lost unless agreement is reached between the UK and the EU, and that will necessitate the UK putting the money into the research pot in the first place.

Of perhaps more direct concern for the business in front of us, however, and a major concern about these reforms in Scotland, is that research councils will be sucked up into the new UKRI along with Research England, meaning the research funding pot for the UK could be too closely entwined with England’s funding council. We need clear lines and full transparency between UKRI and Research England. Scotland’s universities currently perform very well in attracting funding from research councils for grants, studentships and fellowships; we cannot allow the system to be skewed to their disadvantage, and we certainly look forward to seeing the Government guidance on this.

We also need more than lip service to be paid to consulting devolved Administrations. The Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council need input into those decisions, as do the Welsh and Northern Ireland Administrations, so that their voices and priorities are not drowned out.

The Scottish research industry has different priorities from the rest of the UK, and there is a concern that this will be missed from a UK-wide research body. For example, Scottish institutions have been pioneers in research collaborations since the first research pools were formed in 2004. These are often in smaller, less research-intensive institutions, and there is a worry that the new criteria could leave such smaller pockets of excellence locked out of funding. In light of this, Government amendment 35 simply does not go far...
enough in assuaging the very real concerns that have been voiced long and loud by the Scottish higher education sector. To only “have regard to the desirability of the members including at least one person with relevant experience in relation to at least one of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland” is simply not good enough. That is hardly a cast-iron assurance that the new structure will not affect our research priorities or damage our research funding.

These changes will affect Scotland. We will be keeping a close eye on their effects, and we can be sure Scottish universities will become far clearer in their national and international branding.

One final point: one likely consequence of the Bill, in its current state at least, is that Scottish universities will become far clearer in their national and international branding.

8.30 pm

John Pugh: I do not propose to press my new clause to a vote.
Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 14

“Post Study Work Visa: evaluation

(1A) Within six months of this Act coming into force, UKRI must commission an independent evaluation of the matters under subsection (1B) and shall lay the report before the House of Commons.

(1B) The evaluation under subsection (1A) must assess—

(a) the effect of the absence of post study work visas for persons graduating from higher education institutions in the United Kingdom on—
   (i) the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the higher education sector, and
   (ii) the UK economy, and
(b) how post study work visa arrangements might operate in the UK, including an estimate of their effect on—
   (i) the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the higher education sector, and
   (ii) the UK economy.’’

This new clause would require UKRI to commission research on the effects of the absence of arrangements for post study work visas and assess how such arrangements could operate in the UK and their effect on the higher education sector and the UK economy.—(Carol Monaghan.)

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 211, Noes 280.

Division No. 89] [8.31 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Chwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, An
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Ferrier, Margaret
Fiellio, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, rh Mark
Heburn, Mr Stephen
Heron, Lady
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kyle, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Maclaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGarry, Natalie
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McMahon, Jim
Meears, Ian
Monaghan, Carol
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Rimmer, Marie
Tami, Mark
Tewlis, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomson, Michelle
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twig, Stephen
Vaz, Valerie
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eliidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hylwel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Zeichner, Daniel

Gamier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Mr Julian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Merrcier, Johnny
Merrimian, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philip, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Quin, Jeremy
Quine, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robinson, Gavin
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Shidmore, Chris
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian

Tellers for the Ayes:
Deidre Brock and
Mike Weir

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alec
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo

Tellers for the Ayes:
Deidre Brock and
Mike Weir

Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clevery, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Dudbridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Mr Edward
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Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
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Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philip, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Quin, Jeremy
Quine, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robinson, Gavin
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Shidmore, Chris
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Clause 2

GENERAL DUTIES

Amendment made: 1, page 2, line 28, at end insert—

“( ) Guidance framed by reference to a particular course of study must not guide the OfS to perform a function in a way which prohibits or requires the provision of a particular course of study.”—(Joseph Johnson.)

This amendment prevents guidance given by the Secretary of State, which is framed by reference to a particular course of study, guiding the OfS to perform a function in a way which prohibits or requires the provision of a particular course. Amendments 12 and 13 place corresponding restrictions on the Secretary of State’s power to impose terms and conditions of a grant to the OfS under clause 67, or to give directions under clause 70, which are framed by reference to a particular course.

Clause 9

Mandatory transparency condition for certain providers

Amendments made: 2, page 6, leave out lines 10 to 13.

This amendment is consequential on amendment 3.

Amendment 3, page 6, line 18, at end insert—

“( ) The information which the OfS may request in relation to the numbers mentioned in subsection (2) includes those numbers by reference to one or more of the following—

(a) the gender of the individuals to which they relate;
(b) their ethnicity;
(c) their socio-economic background.”—(Joseph Johnson.)

This amendment ensures that a registered higher education provider may be required by the OfS to provide and publish information in relation to the number of offers given and accepted, and the number of students who complete their courses (in addition to the applications received) by reference to the gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background of the individuals concerned.

Clause 13

Other initial and ongoing registration conditions

Amendment made: 4, page 8, line 17, after “plan”, insert “and to publish it”.—(Joseph Johnson.)

This amendment makes clear that the OfS may impose a registration condition requiring a provider to publish a student protection plan.

Clause 25

Rating the quality of, and the standards applied to, higher education

Amendment proposed: 47, page 16, line 23, at end insert—

“(7) No arrangements for a scheme shall be made under subsection (1) unless a draft of the scheme has been laid before and approved by a resolution of both Houses of Parliament.”—(Gordon Marsden.)

This amendment and amendment 46 would ensure TEF measures were subject to scrutiny by, and approval of, both Houses of Parliament.
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Clause 27

POWER OF DESIGNATED BODY TO CHARGE FEES

Amendments made: 5, page 17, line 7, at end insert—

“(za) charge an institution a fee for any activity undertaken, or service provided, by the body in the performance by it of functions under section 23(1) (power to assess quality and standards) in relation to the institution,”

Clause 27(2) enables a body designated to perform the assessment functions of the OfS under clause 23 to charge a fee for activities undertaken or services provided by the body in the performance by it of functions under clause 23(2). This amendment and amendment 7 extend that power to include functions under clause 23(1) too.

Amendment 6, page 17, line 9, leave out from “body” to end of line 12 and insert

“in the performance by it of functions under section 23(2)(a) (duty to assess to determine if initial registration condition relating to quality or standards is met) in relation to the institution, and”.

This amendment clarifies the drafting of clause 27(2)(a) to make clear that the power is to charge a fee for activities undertaken or services provided by the designated body in the performance by it of functions under clause 23(2)(a) in relation to an institution regardless of whether the assessment in question of the institution is being carried out by the body.

Amendment 7, page 17, line 17, at end insert—

“(c) the OfS is assured that the provider is able to maintain

functions under section 23(2) and of its general functions .”

This amendment and amendment 7 extend that power to include functions under clause 23(1) too. This amendment removes some unnecessary wording from clause 23(1).

Amendment 8, page 17, line 18, leave out “or provider”.

This amendment removes some unnecessary wording from clause 27(3).

Amendment 9, page 17, line 23, leave out paragraph (b).

This amendment removes some unnecessary wording from clause 27(3) - having set out in that provision how the fees may be calculated, it is implicit that they may not be calculated by reference to functions other than those mentioned. That is consistent with clause 27(5).

Amendment 10, page 17, line 27, leave out “the functions” and insert “its functions”.

This amendment and amendment 11 make clear that the limit on fees imposed by clause 27(4) and (6) includes costs incurred by the body in the performance by it of all of its functions under clause 23(2)(a) or (b) (as the case may be) and not just the functions under those provisions in relation to which the fee was charged.

Amendment 11, page 17, line 35, leave out “the functions” and insert “its functions”. — (Joseph Johnson.)

See the explanatory statement for amendment 10.

Clause 40

AUTHORISATION TO GRANT DEGREES ETC

Amendment proposed: 40, page 23, line 22, at end insert—

“(c) the OfS is assured that the provider is able to maintain the required standards of a UK degree for the duration of the authorisation; and

(d) the OfS is assured that the provider operates in students’ and the public interests.” — (Gordon Marsden.)

This amendment requires the OfS to be assured about the maintenance of standards and about students’ and the public interest before issuing authorisation to grant degrees.

Question put, That the amendment be made.
**The House divided: Ayes 212, Noes 281.**

**Division No. 91**  
*[8.55 pm]*

### AYES

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### NOES

| Abbott, Ms Diane | Adams, Nigel |
| Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina | Afriyie, Adam |
| Alexander, Heidi | Aldous, Peter |
| Ali, Rushanara | Allan, Lucy |
| Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena | Allen, Heidi |
| Ashworth, Jonathan | Allan, Lucy |
| Bailey, Mr Adrian | Aldous, Peter |
| Bardell, Hannah | Almon, Lucy |
| Bennett, rh Hilary | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Berger, Luciana | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Betts, Mr Clive | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Blackman-Kristy | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Blenkinsop, Tom | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Blomfield, Paul | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Boswell, Philip | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Brabin, Tracy | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Brennan, Kevin | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Brock, Deidre | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Brown, Lyn | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Brown, rh Mr Nicholas | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Bryant, Chris | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Buck, Ms Karen | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Burgon, Richard | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Butler, Dawn | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Caudby, Ruth | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Cameron, Dr Lisa | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Campbell, rh Mr Alan | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Chapman, Douglas | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Chapman, Jenny | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Clwyd, rh Ann | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Coffey, Ann | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Cooper, Julie | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Cooper, Rosie | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Cooper, rh Yvette | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Coyle, Neil | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Cruasby, Mr David | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Creasy, Stella | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
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| Cryer, John | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Cummings, Judith | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Cunningham, Alex | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Cunningham, Mr Jim | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Dakin, Nic | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Danczuk, Simon | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| David, Wayne | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Day, Martyn | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| De Piero, Gloria | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Donaldson, Stuart Blair | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Doughty, Stephen | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Dowd, Jim | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Dugher, Michael | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Durkan, Mark | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Eagle, Ms Angela | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Eagle, Maria | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Efford, Clive | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Ellman, Mrs Louise | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Elmore, Chris | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Evans, Chris | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Farrerly, Paul | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Fawcett, Margaret | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Field, Robert | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Fletcher, Colleen | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Flint, rh Caroline | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |
| Flynn, Paul | Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena |

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
Vicky Foxcroft and Jeff Smith

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
Shuker, Mr Martin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Starmer, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Styger, Graham
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomson, Michelle
Thornberry, Emily
Timm, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twiggs, Stephen
Vaz, Valerie
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Corri
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Caims, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartilage, James
Cash, Sir William
Caufield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleare, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Proceedings interrupted (Order, 19 July.)

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

Clause 67

GRANTS FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE

Amendment made: 12, page 41, line 41, at end insert—

“( ) Terms and conditions under subsection (1) framed by reference to a particular course of study must not require the OfS to perform a function in a way which prohibits or requires the provision of a particular course of study.”—(Joseph Johnson.)

See the explanatory statement for amendment 1.

Clause 70

SECRETARY OF STATE’S POWER TO GIVE DIRECTIONS

Amendment made: 13, page 44, line 8, at end insert—

“( ) Directions under subsection (1) framed by reference to a particular course of study must not direct the OfS to perform a function in a way which prohibits or requires the provision of a particular course of study.”—(Joseph Johnson.)

See the explanatory statement for amendment 1.

Question accordingly negatived.

9.6 pm
Clause 79

POWER TO MAKE ALTERNATIVE PAYMENTS

Amendments made: 14, page 50, line 23, leave out “Secretary of State’s opinion” and insert “opinion of the person making the regulations concerned”.

This amendment reflects the fact that the Welsh Ministers will have the function of making regulations for alternative payments in relation to Wales.

Amendment 15, page 50, line 34, leave out “(and (f))” and insert “(to (h))”.

This amendment provides that the Secretary of State has the function of making regulations for alternative payments in relation to Wales.

Amendment 16, page 50, line 37, leave out subsection (10).—(Joseph Johnson.)

This amendment leaves out an unnecessary provision.

Clause 86

UK RESEARCH AND INNOVATION FUNCTIONS

Amendments made: 17, page 55, line 3, at end insert—

“( ) The functions conferred by subsection (1)(a) to (e) include, in particular, power to encourage and support the provision of postgraduate training in science, technology, humanities and new ideas.”—(Joseph Johnson.)

This amendment makes clear that the functions of UKRI under clause 86(1)(a) to (e) include the power to encourage and support the provision of postgraduate training in science, technology, humanities and new ideas.

Clause 95

SECRETARY OF STATE’S POWER TO GIVE DIRECTIONS TO UKRI

Amendment proposed: 56, page 59, line 45, at end insert—

“(6) In giving direction to UKRI, the Secretary of State must act in the best interests of all constituent parts of the United Kingdom and, before giving such direction, must consult on research and innovation policies and their priorities with the following—

(a) the Scottish Government,
(b) the Welsh Government, and
(c) the Northern Ireland Executive.

(7) Before giving any direction to UKRI under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must seek agreement to the terms of that direction from—

(a) the Scottish Government,
(b) the Welsh Government, and
(c) the Northern Ireland Executive.”—(Carol Monaghan.)

This amendment would place a duty on the Secretary of State such that before giving directions to the UKRI in regards to research priorities, the Secretary of State must consult the devolved administrations.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 217, Noes 275.

Division No. 92] [9.6 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Chwyd, rh Ann
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Coyle, Neil
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**Tellers for the Ayes:**

*Deidre Brock and Mike Weir*

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The Office for Students

Amendments made: 21, page 69, line 37, at end insert—

“( ) But at least one of the ordinary members must have experience of representing or promoting the interests of individual students, or students generally, on higher education courses provided by higher education providers.”

This amendment requires that at least one of the ordinary members of the OfS has experience of representing or promoting the interests of students in higher education.

Amendment 22, page 71, line 2, leave out “,” allowances and expenses”.

This amendment removes an unnecessary reference in paragraph 6(1) of Schedule 1 to allowances and expenses for members of the OfS as they are covered in paragraph 6(2).

Amendment 23, page 71, line 18, leave out “,” allowances and expenses”.

This amendment is consequential on amendment 24.

Amendment 24, page 71, line 20, at end insert—

“( ) The OfS may pay, or make provision for paying, to or in respect of a person who has been an employee of the OfS, such sums as the OfS may determine with the approval of the Secretary of State in respect of allowances or expenses.”

This amendment makes the duty to pay allowances and expenses to OfS’s employees consistent with the power to pay such allowances and expenses to former employees inserted by amendment 25.

Amendment 25, page 71, line 20, at end insert—

“( ) The OfS may pay, or make provision for paying—

(a) to or in respect of a person who is or has been an employee of the OfS, such sums as the OfS may determine with the approval of the Secretary of State in respect of pensions or gratuities, and

(b) to or in respect of a person who has been an employee of the OfS, such sums as the OfS may determine with the approval of the Secretary of State in respect of allowances or expenses.”—(Joseph Johnson.)

This amendment makes clear that the OfS has power, subject to approval by the Secretary of State, to make pension provision for its employees consistent with the power to pay pension provision for its employees and former employees other than under the Superannuation Act 1972 (as provided for in paragraph 7(4) of Schedule 1), to pay them gratuities and to pay former employees allowances or expenses.

The power in relation to non-civil service pensions is intended to be used in relation to staff transferring to the OfS.

Schedule 4

Assessing higher education: designated body

Amendments made: 26, page 79, line 6, leave out paragraph 1.

See explanatory statement for amendment 28.

Amendment 27, page 79, line 13, leave out from beginning to “consult” in line 14 and insert “The OfS may”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 28.

Amendment 28, page 79, line 31, leave out subparagraphs (4) and (5) and insert—

Recommendation

2A (1) This paragraph applies where the OfS has consulted in accordance with paragraph 2.

(2) The OfS must consider whether there is a body that is suitable to perform the assessment functions.

(3) If the OfS considers that there is only one body that is suitable to perform the assessment functions, the OfS must recommend that body to be designated to perform those functions.
This amendment is consequential on amendments 30 and 32.

(4) If the OfS considers that there is more than one body that is suitable to perform the assessment functions, the OfS must recommend the most appropriate body to be designated to perform those functions.

(5) 'The most appropriate body' means, out of those bodies, the body whose designation the OfS considers would be most appropriate for securing the effective assessment of the quality of, and the standards applied to, higher education provided by English higher education providers.

(6) If the OfS considers that there is no body that is suitable to perform the assessment functions, the OfS may not recommend a body to be designated to perform those functions.

(7) The OfS must—

(a) notify the Secretary of State of its recommendation or that no recommendation is made, and

(b) publish that notification.

This amendment and amendments 26 and 27 make changes to clarify when and how the OfS may recommend to the Secretary of State that a body is suitable to be designated to perform the assessment functions. The new paragraph 2A replaces paragraphs 1 and 2(4) and (5) of Schedule 4.

Amendment 29, page 79, line 37, leave out “paragraphs 1 and 2” and insert “paragraph 2A”.—(Joseph Johnson.)

This amendment is consequential on amendments 26 and 28.

Schedule 6

ENGLISH HIGHER EDUCATION INFORMATION: DESIGNATED BODY

Amendments made: 30, page 88, line 22, leave out paragraph 1.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 32.

Amendment 31, page 88, line 27, leave out from beginning to “consult” in line 28 and insert “The OfS may”. See the explanatory statement for amendment 32.

Amendment 32, page 89, line 5, leave out sub-paragraphs (4) and (5) and insert—

"Recommendation

2A (1) This paragraph applies where the OfS has consulted in accordance with paragraph 2.

(2) The OfS must consider whether there is a body that is suitable to be designated under this Schedule.

(3) If the OfS considers that there is only one body that is suitable to be designated under this Schedule, the OfS must recommend the designation of that body under this Schedule.

(4) If the OfS considers that there is more than one body that is suitable to be designated under this Schedule, the OfS must recommend the designation under this Schedule of whichever one of those bodies it considers appropriate.

(5) If the OfS considers that there is no body that is suitable to be designated under this Schedule, the OfS may not recommend the designation of a body under this Schedule.

(6) The OfS must—

(a) notify the Secretary of State of its recommendation or that no recommendation is made, and

(b) publish that notification.

This amendment and amendments 30 and 31 make changes to clarify when and how the OfS may recommend to the Secretary of State that a body should be designated under Schedule 6. The new paragraph 2A replaces paragraphs 1 and 2(4) and (5) of Schedule 6.

Amendment 33, page 89, line 11, leave out “paragraphs 1 and 2” and insert “paragraph 2A”. This amendment is consequential on amendments 30 and 32.

Amendment 34, page 89, line 14, after “body”, insert “for the purposes of section 59”.—(Joseph Johnson.)

This amendment is consequential on amendment 30.

Schedule 9

UNITED KINGDOM RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

Amendment made: 35, page 98, line 39, at end insert—

"( ) The Secretary of State must, in appointing the members of UKRI, have regard to the desirability of the members including at least one person with relevant experience in relation to at least one of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

( ) 'Relevant experience' means experience of one or more of the following—

(a) research into science, technology, humanities or new ideas;

(b) the development or exploitation of science, technology, new ideas or advancements in humanities;

(c) industrial, commercial or financial matters or the practice of any profession."—(Joseph Johnson.)

This amendment requires the Secretary of State, when appointing members of UKRI, to have regard to the desirability of at least one of the members having relevant experience in relation to at least one of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. “Relevant experience” is defined in the amendment.

Mr Speaker: Our consideration having been completed, I will now suspend the House for no more than five minutes in order to make a decision about certification. The Division bells will be rung two minutes before the House resumes. Following my certification, the Government will table the appropriate consent motions. Copies of the consent motions will be available shortly in the Vote Office and will be distributed by the Doorkeepers.

9.17 pm

Sitting suspended.

9.22 pm

On resuming—

Mr Speaker: I can now inform the House of my decision about certification. For the purposes of Standing Order No. 83L(2), I have certified clause 81 of the Higher Education and Research Bill as relating exclusively to England and Wales and within devolved legislative competence; and clause 56 and schedule 5 as relating exclusively to England and within devolved legislative competence. Under paragraphs (4) and (5) of Standing Order No. 83L, I have also certified the following amendments as relating exclusively to England: amendments 109, and 243 to 245 made in Public Bill Committee to clause 80 of the Bill as introduced (Bill 4), now clause 81 of the Bill as amended in the Public Bill Committee (Bill 78). Copies of my certificate are available in the Vote Office.

Under Standing Order No. 83M, consent motions are therefore required for the Bill to proceed. Does the Minister intend to move the consent motions?

Joseph Johnson indicated assent.

The House forthwith resolved itself into the Legislative Grand Committee (England and Wales) (Standing Order No. 83M).
The Bill will also create a level playing field, making it easier for new providers to enter, but only if they can demonstrate the potential to deliver high-quality provision. New universities will drive more diversity and innovation and more choice for students; elicit competitive pressure to drive up quality; and provide employers with more of the skills our economy needs. Nowhere has this been better demonstrated than by the announcement last month that Sir James Dyson, one of this country’s greatest inventors, is creating a new Dyson Institute of Technology. Dyson intends to take advantage of our planned reforms to give high-quality institutions a direct route to degree-awarding powers and university status in their own right. It will equip students and future employees with the skills that will be vital to the growth and productivity of our economy.

We have seen recently that new providers, such as the Dyson Institute, can be recognised as some of the most respected within the sector. The University of Buckingham was ranked first for teaching quality in The Times Good University Guide for 2015-16, while the University of Law, which became a university only in 2012, was joint first for overall student satisfaction in this year’s national student survey.

Our reforms to our research system, which draw on the Nurse review, have also been widely welcomed. As Venki Ramakrishnan, president of the Royal Society, recently commented in Nature:

“UK Research and Innovation...will boost cooperation among the research councils; allow a more flexible, interdisciplinary approach to global challenges; and position research at the heart of a new industrial strategy”,

just as Sir Paul Nurse envisaged in the review we are now implementing.

Those are just a few of the important aspects of our reforms, but as we arrive at the final stage of the Bill’s passage through this House, before its transfer to the other place, I want to take this opportunity to explain how the Government have listened and how the Bill has changed since it was first introduced. Our reforms place students at the heart of higher education regulation. I have always been clear that experience of representing or promoting the interests of students is a key criterion in appointing the board of the new market regulator, the Office for Students, but we heard concerns that that was not sufficient, so we have strengthened our proposals. Through amendments agreed today, we will ensure that the OFS always has a board member with experience of representing or promoting the interests of students.

We have also listened carefully to university representative bodies. Institutional autonomy has been the foundation of the success of our higher education system. Through the Bill we are fully committed to recognising the fundamental and ongoing importance of academic freedom. To that end, the Bill creates numerous and robust safeguards ensuring protection of academic freedom and institutional autonomy at all times. Today, I have clarified in the Bill our clear intention that the Government, when giving guidance or directions to the OFS, or setting conditions of grant framed by reference to particular courses of study, will not have the ability to compel the OFS to perform any of its functions in a way that prohibits or requires the provision of particular courses. Many people told me that they wanted the OFS to take more of a role in monitoring the financial sustainability
of the sector, working closely with UKRI as needed, to protect and enhance its reputation. We are enshrining that duty in law through the amendment agreed today.

The Bill is not just about reforming how we will regulate higher education institutions; we are also creating a body to strengthen the UK’s world-class capabilities in research and innovation. UKRI has a UK-wide remit. As I explained in Committee, to deliver that and our overall integrated and strategic ambitions for the new body, UKRI must have a proper understanding of the systems operating in all parts of the UK, and I am pleased we have agreed an amendment that will ensure that. We have also responded to the community’s feedback in recognising the important role that UKRI will play in supporting postgraduate training working together with the OFS.

The Government remain committed to ensuring that our higher education sector retains its international standing. The reforms in the Bill are crucial in enabling us to do so. I am grateful to the hon. Members for taking the time to scrutinise and contribute to this important Bill, and I commend it to the House.

9.34 pm

Gordon Marsden: I associate myself with the Minister’s thanks to all who have contributed to the Bill, most especially to my hon. Friends who served in such a sterling fashion on the Public Bill Committee. We have also had a huge number of responses, as the Minister said, from the university sector and indeed other sectors, which underlines the importance of getting a Bill such as this one right.

The Minister said, no doubt feeling released from the scrutiny of this House, that we were escaping a bygone era, but more than once during the previous course of the Bill and again this afternoon, I got a sense of 20th-century déjà vu in respect of a naive belief in unproven and unregulated competition. It seemed that nothing had changed since 23 June, whereas of course, everything has changed.

The aspect that we criticised most as the Bill was taken forward is that we have seen no sense of adjusting to the realities of Brexit, and no indication that it might have been sensible to have paused and reflected on what structural change, particularly regarding the new providers, might do for our higher education sector—not just in England, but across the whole of the United Kingdom.

The Government could have given pre-legislative scrutiny to this Bill; but they did not. They could have conceded, frankly, far more than they did in Committee. SNP Members as well as Labour Members put forward positive suggestions, but very few of them were taken into account. I welcome what the Minister said about students, but to be honest, I have to say to the Minister that this is a pretty poor start at this stage.

What is happening? The Government are not looking beyond Horizon 2020; they are not looking beyond the European structural and investment funding, and the £2 million that the Minister trumpeted today for the industrial strategy will not go far in dealing with the immense problems we are going to have to face out of Brexit. Too often, when the Government had the opportunity to reach out in Committee, we got civil service boilerplate.

I went back and looked at what I said on Second Reading, and to be honest, I cannot see much of a need to change what I said then. I said:

“Instead of looking at urgently needed and constructive ways of reducing the financial fees burden on our students, the Government have produced mechanisms which dodge Parliament’s ability to judge and regulate them.”

We have talked about that again today. I continued:

“Instead of strengthening and shoring up our universities and higher and further education at a most critical time, they risk seriously undermining them by obsessively pursuing a market ideology. Instead of presenting analysis in the wake of Brexit, offering relief, assurances and strategies to safeguard both research and excellence in our traditional and modern universities and the involvement of higher education in the local communities and economies that they serve, the Government have presented no answers to the urgent threats”—[Official Report, 19 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 728.]

As a result, as I indicated this afternoon, the Government have managed to alienate diverse groups of people. In the process, they have treated lightly in the Bill issues such as academic autonomy. They have missed opportunities to be forward thinking.

I have already mentioned the throwback to the 20th century in the naive way in which the Minister seemed to believe in terms such as competition. If I did not know the Minister better, I might have thought that he was a disciple of Ayn Rand and wanted to go back to the 1950s. Nowhere in the Bill are there adequate protections for students or for existing institutions. The Bill does nothing to support them in that way. In the process, as I have said, the Government have tried to do everything to avoid scrutiny of their new institutions by the House in the future. That will come back to bite them when the first of these innovations goes wrong.

We did manage to prise one thing out of the Minister in Committee. We expressed concern about rogue providers, and asked who would bear the costs of the OFS. We obtained some snapshots from a technical paper which showed that, increasingly, the costs would be covered by higher education providers, and who will provide the money for the HE providers? The students: the same people by scrapping maintenance grants and replacing them with loans which they may or may not take up, and the same Government who have moved too slowly, too feebly, to address issues of reskilling and higher education which affect people throughout their lives and which we have done our best to bring to the fore in this Bill.

The Government have done too little, too late. I would have genuinely liked to come to the House today and say that we were satisfied with what the Minister had said and with the changes that he had made, but I am afraid that we cannot be satisfied at this stage. The Government have left an enormous number of question marks for the other place, which must carry out due diligence. I believe that the other place will do that, but the Bill, as it stands, represents a lost opportunity. It has failed in its overarching aims for social mobility, and that is why, with regret, we cannot support it and will vote against Third Reading tonight.

9.42 pm

Carol Monaghan: Let me begin by associating myself with what was said by the Minister and the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) in thanking
those who were involved in the preparation of the Bill, and all the stakeholders who have provided input for the Bill and supplied excellent briefings throughout its passage.

Despite the raciness of the Bill, we still have concerns about many aspects of it, some of which affect Scotland directly. Although Scottish higher education providers will not be bound to participate in the teaching excellence framework, it is feared that Scottish universities that do not participate will be disadvantaged when it comes to attracting international students, who are a crucial source

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making very clear why so much of the Bill is important to our constituents in Scotland, and not least to the University of Glasgow, which is in my constituency. Does she share my concern about the fact that what we witnessed a few moments ago in the Grand Legislative Committee procedure makes a mockery of the scrutiny that ought to be given to clauses that affect England and Wales in particular? Does she also agree that if there is an answer to the West Lothian question, the current “English votes for English laws” procedures certainly are not it?

Carol Monaghan: I am not sure who those procedures served, but I cannot imagine that they served the people of England particularly well.

The establishment of UKRI without a proper devolved voice—a voice that would understand the distinct nature of Scotland’s research landscape—could lead to a lack of consideration among the decision-making bodies of the research councils and Innovate UK of Government priorities and research needs in Scotland and other devolved nations. We welcome the Government’s movement on that in their amendment, but it simply does not go far enough or offer the guarantee we sought.

Scotland is already disadvantaged in terms of infrastructure spend for research—it currently attracts only about 5% of UK spending. Therefore, to prevent further leakage of funding or continued disparities, the firewall between the HEFCE and the rest of the UKRI must be in place. That would ensure not only that funding followed excellence but that the vibrant research community in all devolved nations continued to flourish.

Like the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), SNP Members have concerns and are not able to support the Bill’s passage tonight.

9.45 pm

Dr Blackman-Woods: I rise to echo some of the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) from the Front Bench. We can agree with some of the Bill. I do not think any Labour Member has a problem in principle with putting a teaching excellence framework in place. We think that it is a necessary corrective for many of our institutions to ensure that teaching gets the same level of applause as research currently does. However, even though we are on Third Reading, we do not have enough information about how the TEF will work in practice and whether it will measure teaching quality, or use proxy measures. We know that the metrics still have to be sorted. From now on, we will have to rely on the other place to scrutinise that matter and the issue of how the traffic light system will come into operation and whether it will be used in any way for the recruitment of students, particularly international students.

Other issues remain unresolved relating to the quality of new entrants, what they will do and the services they will provide to students in addition to their degree course. There are issues to be resolved about how UKRI and the OFS will provide holistic oversight to the sector and work together. There are issues about how higher education relates to the needs of part-time and mature students. There are a number of unanswered questions, which Members in the other place will have to examine in more detail, as they will student finance and the increasing demands that are being imposed in that regard. As my hon. Friend said, another issue is how all this is going to make sense to universities in the context of Brexit. Therefore, we are handing over to the other place quite a list of challenges, and I wish it well in further scrutinising the Bill.

Question put, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The House divided: Ayes 279, Noes 214.

Division No. 93] [9.48 pm

**AYES**

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Tellers for the Ayes:
Jackie Doyle-Price and
Mark Spencer

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ahmed-Shiekh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Coffee, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie

Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warman, Matt
Warhton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Cooper, ry Yvette
Crausby, Neil
Crausby, Mr David
Creasay, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
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Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Ferrier, Margaret
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Fiell, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fozard, Yvonne
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Goddiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevin
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kyle, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGarry, Natalie
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Monaghan, Carol
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O'Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamar, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Perkins, Toby
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Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
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Smith, Angela
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Smyth, Karin
Starmer, Keir
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Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alisson
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomson, Michelle
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Vaz, Valerie
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Corri
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Wright, Mr lain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Jeff Smith

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

CAPITAL GAINS TAX

That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (Turkmenistan) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 14 September, be approved.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

Question agreed to.

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS

Ordered.

That Oliver Colvile be discharged from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and Bob Stewart be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

PROCEDURE

Ordered,

That Edward Argar, Simon Hoare and Mr Alan Mak be discharged from the Procedure Committee and Mr Christopher Chope, James Duddridge and Huw Merriman be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

WELSH AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Gerald Jones be discharged from the Welsh Affairs Committee and Paul Flynn be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)
Shale Wealth Fund

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

10 pm Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): Thank you for granting me this debate, Mr Speaker. I begin by welcoming the Government’s recent consultation on their shale wealth fund, to which I want to draw attention. It is only right that this House should have an open, constructive debate about this new Government-created fund and how it might be used most effectively. This may be the first debate about the new fund, but I hope it is not the last. Perhaps the Minister will confirm in her response whether the Treasury will be publishing submissions to the consultation. The fund is a new concept and exchanging the information and ideas that were submitted can only be good for policy making, so if the Minister is able to, I encourage her to make them available online.

I should perhaps say what this debate is not about. I have not secured this chance to bring the Minister to the House to debate the whys and wherefores of fracking. My views are well known from my time as Labour’s shadow Energy Secretary in the previous Parliament. With appropriate environmental regulations in place, shale gas has a role to play in the UK’s energy mix. It could assist the UK’s transition to renewables, replacing coal with gas, reducing dependency on imported gas, some of which is fracked, and reducing the UK’s carbon emissions. The Government could have gone further on the regulation, but that is for another day.

If shale gas exploration is proceeding, communities should have a fund for their use. Communities in my constituency of Don Valley have tolerated quarrying, but they have benefited from such funds, too. The fracking industry has agreed two forms of community benefit: a one-off payment of £100,000 per well; and a share of revenue from each well—currently set at 1%. Each should give communities dedicated funds for the lifetime of the project. In addition, local authorities will be able to keep 100% of the business rates that they collect from shale gas sites, which is the case with renewable developments.

This evening I want to advance the conversation about the best way of spending the revenues that the Government receive in the form of nationally determined taxes, levies and duties. Specifically, I want to discuss the proposal for an initial 10% of tax revenues to be use. I am talking about the principles for such a fund and about how we can ensure that it is not frittered away across Government on different schemes so that, at the end of the day, we cannot really see the power of good that it has provided for the nation.

As I said, the Norwegian wealth fund was quite amazing in how it was put together. First, the Norwegian Government said that they could draw down only 4% of the fund each year to spend, but March this year was the first time that they drew down 4%, and that is despite the fact that the fund was worth $890 billion. Secondly, they invested for the long term. The oil fund is Norway’s pension fund. We do not know exactly how much the shale wealth fund will generate, but it is forecast to receive £1 billion over 25 years, which is a considerable sum to put to good use, and it may be more.

To create a defined wealth fund is a start. The Government’s intention is that it should be a fund that is clearly separate from the general revenue pot. A further lesson would be to follow the Norwegian example and use the fund for a specific purpose. I am talking about one that everyone could see the point of—a big picture idea, with an impact that can be clearly seen.

Norway looked forward to a day when it no longer depended on oil. We could look forward to a day when we are not dependent on fossil fuels by reducing our long-term energy use. Energy efficiency in this country is at a crossroads, as existing programmes end or decline. As shadow Energy Secretary, I raised serious concerns about the coalition Government’s flagship proposal, the green deal. We were sceptical about how it would work. It lasted two years before it was scrapped.

As I said, it would be helpful if we could ring fence the fund, but I am aware that it is not an immediate win. We are some years from receiving significant taxable profits on shale. However, I cannot help but look at our neighbours in Norway and think how different things might have been had we also protected our North sea oil and gas revenue. This fund will never equate to the scale of such revenue, which has never been less than £2 billion a year since the 1970s and reached over £12 billion in one year during the past decade. Successive Governments poured that revenue into the general taxation pot and simply use it to fund general public spending. By contrast, Norway created a sovereign wealth fund that is now so significant that the income it generates for the nation outstrips the revenue from oil production, but it also has some interesting rules.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Given the reserves of shale gas that are believed to exist in the United Kingdom, does the right hon. Lady think that the wealth fund could be a massive boost to the economy, not just for a short period, but for a very long time?

Caroline Flint: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. From what I understand of the places where shale gas could be recovered, it is an open question as to how much could be received in revenue. There may be difficulties in getting the gas out of the ground: it might be under the ground, but we might not be able to recover it all. It is an open question. At the moment, it is too early to know just how much could be gained. Now is the time to think about the principles for such a fund and about how we can ensure that it is not frittered away across Government on different schemes so that, at the end of the day, we cannot really see the power of good that it has provided for the nation.

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I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee and we recently revisited the coalition Government’s household efficiency schemes. The Department of Energy and Climate Change’s financial model depended on large numbers of households taking out a green deal loan. The Government projected around 3.5 million green deals, yet a tiny 14,000 households signed up. That was bad policy making and, sadly, it wasted taxpayers’ money.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Prime Minister has indicated that 10% of tax revenue could be used for communities, which could amount to up to £10 million per eligible community. Does the right hon. Lady think that new infrastructure, skills training and long-term job opportunity could benefit each and every community?

Caroline Flint: Absolutely. The great thing about energy efficiency is that it has a multiplier effect. It not only makes our homes warmer and reduces bills, but creates jobs and encourages innovation, too. Although it will be a national fund, the delivery should be at a local level, and the leadership should be held regionally within our communities across the UK.

One bad scheme such as the green deal does not mean that we should give up. With the green deal gone, and the levy soon to exist solely to tackle fuel poverty, we need to be asking serious questions about how to move forward on energy efficiency. We know, because the Competition and Markets Authority told us, that 70% of bill payers are paying over the odds for their energy and even if the latest Ofgem measures are introduced, they will reduce bills for only a few. It is very likely that, even by 2020, we will still be talking about energy bills that are as high, if not higher, than they were in 2010. I am sure the Minister would agree that the cheapest energy is the energy that we do not use. A shale wealth fund could provide an opportunity to enhance a large-scale retrofit of the UK’s housing stock, protecting households from future energy price rises. The fund should not be the only programme for energy efficiency, but it would provide a new means beyond passporting the cost to the general bill payer.

For a moment, let us consider the future if we do not make energy efficiency a priority. Quite rightly, the UK has ambitious and legally binding emissions targets, and we shall have to meet those targets, with 80% of the UK built environment still existing in 2050. The UK building stock is a long way from the low-energy housing stock that the UK will need, and the challenge is still huge. The Government’s own figures for 2015 show that, overall, their largest energy efficiency scheme, ECO, installed one or more measures in around 5% of homes. Some 320,000 homes had cavity wall insulation installed, 230,000 had new loft insulation, and 50,000 had solid wall insulation fitted. Yet of the 620,000 green deal assessments, 89% of those homes were rated as D, E, F or G. There is a long, long way to go.

There is a huge job that needs to be done, and for whatever reason—poorly directed funding or lack of profitability—the hard-to-treat properties have been substantially ignored. Many of the easiest measures have been undertaken first. Now Britain needs to finish the job. An energy efficiency dedicated shale wealth fund could be a hugely positive step, and I am not alone in suggesting this. Neil Marshall, chief executive of the National Insulation Association, commented:

“There are still some 5 million cavity walls, 7 million solid walls and 7 million lofts that need insulating and therefore we welcome this proposal. Insulating these homes will combat fuel poverty and climate change as well as reducing energy bills and creating jobs.”

The association rightly identifies the fact that many homes have yet to be adequately insulated, including 95% of homes with solid walls.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Most of my constituency is covered by exploration licences for shale, so I have done a lot of research, visited Pennsylvania and set up an all-party parliamentary group on the subject. Does the right hon. Lady accept that the greatest impact of shale gas exploration is above the ground and consists of traffic movements, noise and light pollution? As a consequence, does she agree that some of the financial benefits should go directly to some of the householders who bear the brunt of those difficulties?

Caroline Flint: I entirely agree. Some of those problems come down to planning. As in any other planning arrangements, there should be mitigation by any developer of any undue impacts caused in the community. It is important to emphasise that not every place that is the subject of an application will get through, because of the drawbacks that the hon. Gentleman outlines. There are many different ways that compensation could be found from shale gas development, whether through the planning process, the £100,000 per well, 1% of revenues to local communities, or the shale wealth fund, which I believe has a particular role to play in addressing a massive problem in this country—the lack of energy efficiency.

IGas has decided to focus its community fund awards this year on local renewable energy generation and long-term conservation. In its submission, INEOS argued:

“The Government may wish to consider allocating a portion of funding towards energy efficiency initiatives or developing renewable technologies. This will also help to debunk the myth that it is an either/or between gas and renewables.”

Let us remember that INEOS is one of the firms that has had to import shale gas from the USA to meet its current needs.

Lancashire County Council argues in its submission that as part of a devolution deal the shale wealth fund in Lancashire “could be focused on green and renewable technologies and also ensuring that ordinary families in the county can help reduce their energy costs through energy efficiency measures in the home.”

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has secured this debate, as it is extremely important. The topic is being discussed to some extent in Lancashire, and it is certainly being discussed among MPs. In my constituency 40% of properties have category 1 hazards—cold and damp—and we have had to import shale gas from the Bowland basin sits underneath it, as it does under the rest of Lancashire. Is it not imperative that we examine the problems, and is it not to the Government’s shame that they have abandoned housing regeneration programmes in the north that retrofitted many of those hard-to-treat properties?

Caroline Flint: It is certainly demoralising that in the coalition Government five years were wasted advancing methods to tackle the tricky problem of energy efficiency. I would not claim for a minute that all the schemes
before that were perfect, but I know that the decent homes programme did a huge amount to bring our social housing stock up to a better standard, and that some of the work that we were doing through the Warm Front programme and other schemes was making an impact. Unfortunately, we wasted five years not learning from what worked and what did not work, and we ended up with something that did not work. We have lost time and we need to get back on track.

It is important to understand that there does not have to be a top-down approach. The past decade or more of energy efficiency programmes have generally shown that national targets need local delivery. Energy companies found that they could deliver their programmes more quickly and reach more households if they had a trusted local partner, such as a local council, acting as the face of the project.

Local authorities have lots of the data needed to create the heat maps, and they are well placed to pull together the records of the elderly and the vulnerable and the lists of the most inefficient properties. When they can see a street where 80% of properties are eligible and 20% are not, they can fill the gap to make sure that we do not leave streets with some properties done and some not done, with all the rage that follows in our communities.

Nor should we underestimate the significance for local economies. Home insulation is a skilled job, requiring high standards. These jobs are delivered locally. There are ready-made training providers to skill up apprentices. This is an ideal opportunity for tradespeople to retrain or to adapt a small business to provide this service. These are jobs for people in every town in Britain, with local investment producing jobs in every local economy—for installers, supply chains and British manufacturers. This fund can help to stimulate growth, jobs and innovation. With the fund’s principles and priorities set nationally, with regional co-ordination and leadership, and with local delivery, our communities can benefit in a more profound way, beyond compensation grants.

At Treasury questions, I recently asked the Chancellor for his views about a shale wealth fund providing for energy efficiency. He said:

“We have a serious challenge on this country’s energy capacity over the next 20 years, and we are going to have to invest eye-wateringly large sums of money—perhaps £100 billion—just to ensure that the lights stay on. Of course it makes sense to look at ways of reducing demand for energy through energy conservation measures.”—[Official Report, 25 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 140.]

The Minister knows I will never shirk from holding the Government to account. I will continue to press for bill payers to get fairer energy prices, for shale gas to be produced responsibly and for communities to benefit from local funds. We may disagree from time to time, but I have worked with her before—not least to change the law on tax transparency. I will not allow party advantage to prevent the sharing of good ideas or the possibility of finding consensus to meet a problem or find a solution. This debate, and the Government’s consultation, may be such an occasion. Let the shale wealth fund become a warm Britain fund: a fund that is a friend to those households who have yet to see the benefits of energy efficiency; a fund that foresees a low-carbon Britain and contributes to that goal; a fund that creates jobs in every community, uniting politicians and the public for the common good—a fund that truly leaves a legacy.

10.17 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): I thank the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) for bringing this debate to the House and for a typically thoughtful and constructive speech. I also thank other hon. Members who have stayed to make their contributions on this important topic.

I should say straight away that I absolutely agree that energy efficiency is one of the best ways to reduce energy bills in the long run, so we start on a note of consensus. As the right hon. Lady will know, and as I will make clear in my remarks, the fact that the consultation closed relatively recently inevitably limits a little what I can say. However, I enjoyed her speech, and I would like to make some general comments about where we are in terms of shale and the shale wealth fund.

The Government are backing the safe development of shale gas. We have over 50 years’ experience of regulating onshore oil and gas. The UK has the experience to develop our shale gas industry while at the same time ensuring the most robust and stringent protections for our environment, too.

We believe, as I sense other Members do, that shale gas is an important step forwards in a number of respects. It is a way to secure our energy supply by using our own domestic resources, as we have heard. It also brings with it the potential for tens of thousands of new jobs across various sectors, from the oil and gas industry to construction and engineering. I was very struck when I recently chaired our oil and gas forum in the Treasury just how many jobs are created in supply chains by these industries—it was one of the most striking things to come out of that discussion.

Of course, natural gas will continue to play an important role in our energy system as we move towards a low-carbon economy. We are absolutely committed to reducing our carbon emissions by at least 80% by 2050, compared with 1990 levels. Members on both sides of the House will recognise the fundamental importance of our doing so as part of the collective—indeed, global—efforts to stop climate change in its tracks. We are the first country to propose a phase-out of unabated coal, with gas and nuclear forming the secure base of our future energy mix as we continue to develop renewables and improve energy efficiency. I could not agree more that that is a really important part of the mix.

Shale will be a new, domestic source of gas, which adds to our energy security as we make the shift from coal to reduce our carbon emissions. Gas is the cleanest fossil fuel, producing half the carbon emissions of coal when it comes to generating power. Studies have shown that the carbon footprint of our shale gas would be significantly less than coal and comparable to the liquefied natural gas we import. In short, the shale gas resources beneath Britain could contribute to our security of supply, to jobs, and to increasing tax revenue, while providing a bridge to the greener future we all support.

That is why, in the previous Parliament, we put in place the right fiscal framework to make sure that the incentives are in place for investment in shale gas. It is worth reminding the House that there is an estimated
potential cumulative investment in the region of £33 billion. As we explore our shale gas resources, we are also exploring how we can make the most of the benefits that the industry could bring to our economy. Specifically, we want to ensure that the communities and regions that host shale activity will benefit directly from doing so. By that, I mean that they should benefit beyond the boost to the local economy that one would expect them to receive in any case from the development of this new industry. The Prime Minister has been very clear on this. Local people must come first, not only in their involvement in the planning decisions that affect them, with all shale gas applications requiring a full consultation with local people, but in sharing the benefits with the areas in which the industry is developed, with a significant proportion of this expected in the north. That means that the shale industry could play an important role in the economic development of parts of the northern powerhouse, helping to drive local growth, investment and jobs even further.

Graham Jones: The autumn statement of 2015 said that the community dividend benefit of 1% is expected to rise to 10%. Are the Government going to make good, to local communities specifically, on that statement that the 1% dividend will rise significantly?

Jane Ellison: I am about to come on to the dividends for local communities and how we see that working through.

The shale wealth fund is a big part of how we are going to deliver these benefits for local areas. It will consist initially of up to 10% of all the tax revenues arising from shale gas production, all of which should be used for the benefit of the communities that host shale sites. I want to be clear on two points: first, this is new funding, not money used to replace any existing Government funding; and secondly, it will be in addition to any benefits provided by the shale industry itself, because, as Members know, the shale industry has independently committed to making payments to communities that host shale gas developments. The industry’s benefits scheme currently commits to providing £100,000 for each well site of hydraulic fracturing, as the right hon. Member for Don Valley said, as well as 1% of revenues from any site that enters into commercial production. The shale wealth fund is in addition to that. We estimate that it could provide up to £1 billion in total and each community could receive up to £10 million. We want this money to go towards leaving a positive legacy for the future of these areas. I note that the issue of legacy was also on the right hon. Lady’s mind. That is why we have sought views from the country through our consultation on how the fund should operate and ensure tangible, lasting benefits for communities and regions that host shale activity. We asked how the shale wealth fund should be delivered, and what its priorities ought to be. As I have said, the consultation closed on 26 October. We have had an excellent response from a range of individuals and organisations—from right hon. and hon. Members, including the right hon. Lady, to charities, local businesses and community groups. We are now looking carefully at the responses, and we plan to publish our response to the consultation by the end of the year. I hope the House will therefore understand that I cannot give an indication of the responses at this early stage.

On publishing the responses, it is for respondents to consider whether to do so, but we will of course provide a list of respondents at the end of the consultation document, as we always do. I would have thought that councils and LEPs would normally make public their contributions. Given the interest in the debate, I am sure many people will decide to do that.

In answer to the right hon. Lady’s query about the purpose of the shale wealth fund, the main purpose is clear. The fund is a way of ensuring that, as this country develops our shale gas resources in a safe and sustainable way, local communities and areas that hold the resources and therefore support the industry’s development should benefit directly from doing so. As I have said, this could amount to as much as £1 billion of extra funding across these regions. We believe that local people should have a say over how best to use any such funding—for example, about whether it should be used to support new job opportunities, develop or enhance community assets, be invested in skills or be invested in green energy.

Caroline Flint: I understand that the submission from Lancashire County Council talks about the investment going into renewables or energy efficiency, but may I give the Minister a little word of warning? As the MP for a constituency that has been involved with the landfill fund and the aggregates tax, I know there can sometimes be a danger that only the loudest voices get
heard. Quite a few local football teams get more strips than Manchester United because they are back every year putting into funds. Can we think bigger about the impact of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and will she bear that in mind?

**Jane Ellison:** Of course. I take this debate very seriously, and the fact that it has essentially taken place in a consensual atmosphere makes me think that there is a possibility the House can find things on which we substantially agree about how we move forward. We need to look at the responses. I am sure there will be other contributions and thoughts about how we move forward, but we just have not had the chance to look at them yet.

The right hon. Lady has made a significant contribution to the debate this evening, and she has clearly set the ball rolling in the House’s debate on a topic to which I am sure we will return. We have consulted extensively, asking how the shale wealth fund should be delivered and what it should be spent on. I look forward to reporting on the outcome of the consultation in due course. As I have said, I feel confident in saying that we will return to debate this important subject further, and I thank the right hon. Lady for kicking off the House’s debate on this issue in the way she has this evening.

*Question put and agreed to.*

10.28 pm

*House adjourned.*
The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEAL TH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

UK-US: Future Relationship

1. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What assessment has he made of prospects for the future relationship between the UK and the US? [907401]

15. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What assessment has he made of the potential effect of the result of the US election on the UK’s bilateral relationship with that country. [907416]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): Britain and America have an enduring and strong special relationship, and as the Prime Minister said during her call with President-elect Trump on 10 November, we look forward to working with his Administration to ensure the security and the prosperity of both our countries and the world in the years ahead.

Craig Tracey: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, now that a democratic process has taken place, the UK and the US need to focus on working ever more closely together on shared priorities?

Boris Johnson: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his characteristic verbal dexterity. I think he speaks for many people—many common-sensical people—in this House and in this country who want a thriving relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): What representations has the Foreign Secretary made to our American counterparts about Aleppo, where bombing this weekend has caused the last children’s hospital there to close?

Boris Johnson: As the hon. Lady knows—she has campaigned a great deal on this issue—we are working hand in glove with the United States to try to get a ceasefire in Aleppo. I last had a conversation with John Kerry on this matter very recently. Alas, it has proved impossible so far to persuade the Russians to drop their support for their Syrian client, but they have the opportunity to do just that. We need to reach out to the Russians and show that it is now up to them to demonstrate the leadership the world expects, to call for a ceasefire in Aleppo, to deliver a ceasefire in Aleppo, to let the humanitarian aid get through and to prevent a catastrophe for the people of that city over the winter months.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Although there is no vacancy, does not the Foreign Secretary think it is extremely generous of Donald Trump to suggest who should be our ambassador in the United States? In that spirit of fraternity, might he suggest that the best person to fill the vacancy for the ambassador to the United Kingdom next year would be Hillary Rodham Clinton, although I suspect the last thing she would want to do is to be associated with the incoming Administration?

Boris Johnson: Just as he has on Turkey, the Foreign Secretary has U-turned in his opinion of President-elect Trump. Given the openly racist and Islamophobic opinions expressed by some of Trump’s Cabinet nominees, does the Foreign Secretary maintain his belief that there is a lot to be positive about in the new Administration, and how does he intend to work with his new counterpart to uphold universal human rights such as racial and gender equality?

Mr Speaker: I call James Cleverly.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I was going to ask question 13. Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It is far too early for question 13. If the hon. Gentleman wants to ask a question, it should be about the relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States, but that now requires a certain dexterity and fleetness of foot from him.

13. [907414] James Cleverly: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will ask a question.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that virtue signalling, while fashionable, is no basis for a productive international working relationship?

Boris Johnson: I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend on his characteristic verbal dexterity. I think he speaks for many people—many common-sensical people—in this House and in this country who want a thriving relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

Mr Speaker: I think the right hon. Gentleman might anticipate what I was about to say, Mr Speaker. Of course, my right hon. Friend would
be a very good candidate. On the other hand, as the House knows, full well, we have a first-rate ambassador in Washington doing a very good job of relating with the present Administration and the Administration to be. There is no vacancy for that position.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): As regards ambassadors for either country, may I make a suggestion? An excellent choice for the unofficial ambassador from the United States to Britain—I emphasise the word unofficial—would be Brandon Victor Dixon, the actor who spoke out to the Vice-President-elect about American values and was criticised by the future President. Mr Dixon is the sort of person who is associated with all that is best about the United States.

Boris Johnson: Of course, Mr Brandon Dixon, of whom, I am afraid, I was hitherto unaware is perfectly at liberty to come to this country, assuming that all visa requirements are met, and to spread his message. We look forward to having a new American ambassador in due course to follow in the footsteps, if I may say so, of one of the most distinguished US ambassadors we have seen in this country in recent years, Matthew Barzun.

Mr Speaker: I would have called the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), who has a very similar question, if he were standing, but he wasn’t, so I won’t.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: He is, so I might.

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who catches the mood of the House. We have already settled that question: we have an excellent ambassador in Washington who is doing a first-rate job and there is no vacancy.

Mr Speaker: I would have called the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), who has a very similar question, if he were standing, but he wasn’t, so I won’t.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Foreign Secretary give a clear indication to the new US Administration that we value the Baltic states and their independence highly? As part of our responsibilities in NATO, will he support and encourage the new Administration to say the same things?

Boris Johnson: The right hon. Gentleman will know that that is one of our top priorities. As part of our global Britain campaign, we have an enhanced forward presence in the Baltic states and a battalion is being sent there. It is vital that we get over the message that NATO and article 5 of NATO have been the guarantor of peace and stability in our continent for the last 70 years. That is a point that is well understood in Washington, but which we will repeat.

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): I think we are all relieved that the Foreign Secretary has ruled out Mr Farage. In this post-truth world, we might have assumed that he would have been sympathetic, given that they campaigned together so remarkably on Brexit. Will the Foreign Secretary outline to the House his thinking on what he will say when he visits the United States of America about our future relations, given that we have always been the conduit between Europe and the United States of America?

Boris Johnson: My right hon. Friend asks a thoughtful and important question because, as I said to the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson), it is vital that we get our message across about the vital importance of NATO, of free trade and free enterprise, and of sticking up for the values that unite our two countries. That is the message that I know the Prime Minister will put across when she goes there, and it is certainly the message that will be delivered at all levels from the UK Government.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): In a secret telegram, printed in The Sunday Times, our ambassador "boasted that the UK is the best placed of any nation to steer the new president's foreign policy and encourage his more extreme ideas to 'evolve'.” Is the presidential edict—or tweet—to replace Sir Kim Darroch with Lord Farage a sign of the early success of that policy?

Boris Johnson: I think the right hon. Gentleman is too early with his verdicts. We will engage with the Administration-to-be at all levels; indeed, we are already doing so, and I had a very good conversation with Vice-President-elect Mike Pence. We see eye to eye on a great many matters. As I have said, there is no ambassadorial vacancy in Washington given our excellent ambassador.

Alex Salmond: In the space of the past few weeks, the Foreign Secretary has gone from not going to New York in case he is mistaken for Mr Trump to saying that Mr Trump is the opportunity for the western world, a political pirouette of which Ed Balls would be proud. Will the Foreign Secretary realise what we are dealing with in the new President of the United States, and would this country’s policy not be helped by coherence, consistency and a bit of common sense?

Boris Johnson: I think that what the world needs now is the UK to build on its relations with the United States, which, as most people in the House accept, are of fundamental importance for our security. As I have said very candidly to hon. Members, there are three central points we will be making to our friends: the vital importance of the transatlantic alliance of NATO, the importance of free trade and free enterprise, and the importance of jointly promulgating the values that unite our two countries. That is the message.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): As we meet today on the 53rd anniversary of John F Kennedy’s death, we have the prospect of a very different president about to enter the White House in a matter of weeks. Nevertheless, the Secretary of State said last week, and has said again today, that this new president is “a liberal guy” with whom he shares many values. He does not end there; we have, he tells us, “every reason to be positive”
about a Trump presidency. Will he tell us what reasons there are to be positive about the attitude of the new president to climate change?

Boris Johnson: It is vital that we are as positive as we can possibly be about the new Administration-elect. As I have said to the House before, I believe that the UK-US relationship is vital, and I think that President-elect Trump is a deal maker. The UK has led on climate change globally, and we have had outstanding success. I will be open with the House that we will be taking to the Administration-to-be the message that we believe that the issue of climate change is important; it is of importance to the United States and the world.

Emily Thornberry: The reality is that we have a new president who says that climate change is a hoax invented by the Chinese, who has repeatedly promised to scrap the Paris treaty and whose top adviser on the environment calls global warming “nothing to worry about”. There is no doubt that that is a hugely dangerous development for the future of our planet, so let me ask the Secretary of State this: when the Prime Minister goes to see the new president in January, will she have the moral backbone to tell him that he is wrong on climate change and must not scrap the Paris treaty, and will she lead the world in condemning him if he does?

Boris Johnson: I really must say to the hon. Lady that she is being premature in her hostile judgments of the Administration-elect. Any such premature verdict could be damaging to the interests of this country. It is important that we in this country use our influence, which is very considerable, to help the United States to see its responsibilities, as I am sure it will.

Refugees

2. Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What discussions he has had with his counterparts in the EU, Africa and the middle east on tackling the refugee situation in Europe and the middle east.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Ministerial colleagues and I regularly discuss migration with our European and international partners. The UK will continue to play a leading role towards securing a co-ordinated and comprehensive approach to the migration crisis that tackles the causes as well as the consequences of unmanaged migration.

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer, but what reassurance can he give me and my constituents that he and the Prime Minister are working with the international community to help resolve this terrible situation?

Sir Alan Duncan: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister gave exactly that reassurance when she set out, at the United Nations in September, three key principles to improve the international response to the mass movement of refugees and migrants: the protection in the first safe country of arrival; the right of states to maintain their borders; and a clearer distinction between refugees and economic migrants. We are pursuing this agenda vigorously with our international colleagues.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Is the Minister aware of the rising levels of violence directed towards those in refugee camps on the island of Chios, including volunteers? Is he aware that on 16 November the camp at Souda was attacked by about 60 members of the far-right group New Dawn? Boulders were thrown into containers containing refugee women and children. Following that, three volunteers, two of whom are UK citizens, were arrested by the Greek police. Can he assure me that every support will be given to UK citizens volunteering in that area to ensure that their rights are protected?

Sir Alan Duncan: The right hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly fair point. I hope that everybody in this House fully condemns any such violence. Behind that bad news, however, there is some better news. Since the EU-Turkey agreement, the number of migrants arriving on Greek islands has reduced significantly from an average of about 1,500 in February to just over 100 a day now.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I believe that my right hon. Friend visited Turkey recently. Does he agree that Turkey plays an important role in helping refugees and managing the whole process, and that our relations with Turkey will become increasingly important in this regard?

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend is right. I have been to Turkey twice and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has been there, too. The UK is committed to the successful implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement, which started in March this year. For that to work well, we need to retain good and constructive diplomatic engagement with countries, including Turkey.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Has the Minister had any pause for thought about the commitment of the UK Government and EU member states to engage and fund President Bashir’s regime, as partners in the management of migration?

Sir Alan Duncan: The answer to that is no.

Iraq and Syria: Diplomatic Assistance

3. Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): What role he plans that the UK will play in providing diplomatic assistance to help rebuild communities in Iraq and Syria.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): We will continue to support the Government of Iraq to deliver the reforms and reconciliation needed to build public trust and unite all Iraq’s communities against extremism. In Syria, we continue to work in support of a lasting settlement based on transition away from Assad, and towards a stable and peaceful future for Syria.

Brendan O’Hara: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but in light of what happened in Libya, when a failure to plan for the future plunged the country and the region into absolute chaos, will he tell me what
Boris Johnson: As the hon. Gentleman can imagine, a huge amount of work is going on now, particularly with respect to Mosul as I told the House at the previous Foreign Office questions. We announced a commitment to invest £169 million in aid towards reconciliation and bringing communities together. The House must understand, however, that fundamentally it is up to the Government of Iraq to work in a way that brings communities together, and builds trust and confidence in the people of Mosul and other parts of the country.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): What knowledge does the Foreign Secretary have of any plan for the political administration of Mosul after it is recaptured from Daesh, and what confidence does he have in any plan?

Boris Johnson: A huge body of work is being carried out at the moment, with the UN and the 68-nation coalition, to ensure that we have in place an administration that commands the confidence of all the people of Mosul. It will not be easy. The House understands perfectly well the problem—the forces set on liberating Mosul do not necessarily reflect the communities of that city. It will be a huge, huge challenge, but, as I said just now, that challenge must be met by the Government of Prime Minister Abadi and the Iraqis.

Boris Johnson: 20. [907421] Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): The United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs recently warned that medical facilities, especially trauma capacity, were being overwhelmed by civilian casualties in Mosul. What support are the UK Government offering to people trapped on the ground in that city by fighting on all sides?

Boris Johnson: As the liberating forces progress through the suburbs, we are ensuring that there are avenues out of the city and camps available for those who need to take refuge, but clearly this is a very delicate matter, and we are investing considerable sums in ensuring adequate protection.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): The Foreign Secretary rightly talks about the challenges of post-Daesh Mosul. I would like to mention on the record the excellent work that our ambassador, Frank Baker, is doing on politics beyond Daesh. Will my right hon. Friend make available to Frank and his team all the resources necessary to ensure we get the peace beyond Daesh right in Mosul?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend and I of course travelled to see Frank Baker a while ago, so we know what excellent work he does, and he has a very large team in Baghdad. It is a superb team and a real tribute to the work of the Foreign Office. As I say, they are working very hard to minimise the fallout from the liberation of Mosul and to ensure a peaceful and stable future for that city.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): What assessment his Department has made of the effect of the UK’s decision to leave the EU on its bilateral relations with (a) EU and (b) non-EU countries.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): We are committed to strengthening the UK’s bilateral relationships not just with the EU but across the world. We will deepen bilateral relationships with our natural partners, build new ones and work together to make the most of the opportunities ahead.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: At the weekend, the Prime Minister stated that she intended to update Chancellor Merkel on our Brexit preparations, and we know that the Business Secretary has already revealed the Government’s plans to Nissan and that the Foreign Secretary himself was kind enough to brief the Czech press that we were leaving the customs unions. Why does everybody know more about the Government’s plans than the elected representatives in this House, people across the United Kingdom and businesses in our constituencies that need and want to plan for the future?

Boris Johnson: The best advice I can give to the hon. Lady is that she study more closely the speeches of the Prime Minister, who has set out very clearly the fact that the UK will not be governed by EU law and that we will get the best possible deal, in trade in goods and services, for the benefit not just of this country but of the rest of the EU. Conservative Members are united behind the Prime Minister in achieving that aim.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, for many countries in the eastern part of the EU, the largest issue at the moment is not Brexit but the potential threat from a resurgent Putin-led Russia? They are extremely grateful that the UK is right at the forefront of delivering troops to support the Baltic states and Poland.

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing me, once again, to draw attention to global Britain’s role in delivering an enhanced forward presence in the Baltic states, as my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary has said. That presence is of massive importance to those countries—[Interruption.] Opposition Members are interjecting from a sedentary position. This is one of the central points that we will be making to the incoming American Administration, and I am sure it is one that they already readily accept.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I studied closely what the Prime Minister said yesterday at the CBI conference. She said: “people don’t want a cliff edge”. It is encouraging that the Government are now acknowledging that in March 2019 we risk falling back on World Trade Organisation rules and tariffs. Following the Prime Minister’s comments yesterday, will the Foreign Secretary confirm that the Government are looking at a

Leaving the EU: Bilateral Relations

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transitional deal that will give us time to negotiate a trade deal with the rest of the EU and to arrange other matters, such as security?

Boris Johnson: I do not want to accuse the hon. Lady of unnecessary pessimism, but I have no doubt whatever that this country can achieve exactly what the Prime Minister has set out, which is the best possible deal in trade in goods and services; and it will be win-win for both the UK and the EU.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that bilateral relations with non-EU countries such as America, Australia and Canada are extremely good and that those within the EU are extremely good as well, and now we have the opportunity to do a number of trade deals with all these countries? I understand that Tony Blair would like to help. Do you believe that he could have a role by banging the drum for Brand Britain around the world and accepting the fact that we are going to leave the European Union?

Mr Speaker: I believe neither that, nor the opposite.

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend raises the issue of the support of the former Prime Minister. I am tempted to say “Nec tali auxilio, nec defensoribus istis” when it comes to our campaign. My hon. Friend is completely right: there is a huge opportunity not only for a deep and comprehensive deal with our friends and partners in the EU, but to seek new free trade deals around the world, and for this country to become once again the global champion and agitator for free trade.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): In between insulting the Italian Foreign Minister last week, showing that he has no understanding of the treaty of Rome, saying that he would not pressure Turkey over the death penalty and having a major bust-up with the head of the European People’s party, the Foreign Secretary managed to make one serious announcement. He told the Czech media that Britain would retain free trade with Europe, while leaving the customs union. Is that now the Government’s proposed plan and how does the Foreign Secretary intend to achieve it?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question, but I must direct him to the answer that I have already given, which is that the Prime Minister has set out very clearly in her speeches and remarks what we hope to achieve, and I think it eminently achievable. Contrary to the impression that the hon. Gentleman sought to give, more and more of our friends and partners around the EU are seeing the merits of what is being proposed, and more and more are excited. The hon. Gentleman asked about relations, so let me tell him that relations are excellent and getting warmer—not just in the EU, but around the world.

Bangladesh

5. Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): What recent assessment has made of the strength of diplomatic and economic relations between Bangladesh and the UK.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma): The UK has strong diplomatic and economic relations with Bangladesh. We are the largest cumulative investor in the country and the largest bilateral grant donor. We also have close historical and cultural ties.

Maggie Throup: On Sunday, I attended the UK-Bangladesh catalysts of commerce and industry awards, which showcased the contribution that the Bangladeshi community makes to the economy here in Britain. As we look to strengthen our economic ties with countries outside the EU, does the Minister agree that we should continue to strengthen our trade relationships with countries such as Bangladesh?

Alok Sharma: There are half a million people of Bangladeshi heritage in the UK, and of course they make an immensely positive contribution to every aspect of British life. I agree entirely with my hon. Friend that we should be doing even more to encourage bilateral trade and investment. She will be pleased to know that we are supporting the Government of Bangladesh to improve their business climate.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): After the fatal collapse of the Rana Plaza in 2013 and recent reports indicating that structural repairs remain incomplete and that buildings still lack fire exits and fire alarms, what discussions has the Minister had with his counterparts to ensure workplace safety measures for those working in global corporations in Bangladesh?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. My colleagues in the Department for International Development are working on precisely those issues. As a Government, we take these sorts of issues very seriously.

West Bank

6. Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): What discussions he has had with his Israeli counterpart on steps being taken to maintain order in the west bank.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Responsibility for security in the west bank is shared between the Palestinian authorities and the Israeli security forces, depending on whether we are talking about areas designated A, B or C. In my discussions with the Israeli authorities, I have encouraged this area to be transferred from C to B and B to A.

Lucy Allan: Israeli and the Palestinian Authority continue to work together closely to maintain security in the west bank. Last month, however, a Palestinian Authority police-officer-turned-terrorist shot and wounded Israeli soldiers. Does the Minister agree that security co-operation is vital to maintaining stability, and will he join me in condemning the wave of attacks against Israelis that we have seen over the past year?

Mr Ellwood: I join my hon. Friend in condemning those attacks, and I would encourage President Abbas and others in the Palestinian Authority to do so as well. We should not forget that more than 30,000 Palestinian
Authority security forces are working with Israeli defence forces to provide that security, and the Israeli defence forces rely on that to ensure that the west bank is kept as safe and secure as possible.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that the best way forward for both Israel and the Palestinian people would be a revival of the middle east peace process involving direct talks between the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority, and does he agree that all efforts should be directed towards achieving that?

Mr Ellwood: I entirely concur with the right hon. Gentleman. We have done our best to bring the parties back to the table, but, as he will know, there have been a number of difficult months. We need to ensure that there are confidence-building measures, and that people do not incite violence, which takes us further away than the direction of travel that he suggests.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Has the Minister walked the streets of Hebron which Palestinians may not use? We used to call that apartheid.

Mr Ellwood: In his lucid way, my right hon. Friend outlines the challenges that we face in Israel and, indeed, the west bank. It is important for us to ensure that the security measures of which we spoke in the context of the initial question are able to build that confidence so that we can bring people back to the table. I hope this is something that the American Administration will want to lean into.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): As we approach the centenary of the Balfour declaration, we must renew our commitment to both aspects of that historic statement: the preservation of the state of Israel as a safe and stable national home for the Jewish people, but also the protection of the “civil and religious rights of…non-Jewish communities in Palestine”.

With that in mind, will the Minister make it clear today that the United Kingdom Government oppose proposals to legalise outposts in the west bank retrospectively, or to build new illegal settlements?

Mr Ellwood: We had a very frank and thorough debate about the history and context of the Balfour declaration only last week. However, the hon. Lady is right to say that the role that the settlements are playing undermines the message that is coming from Israel, and leads people to ask whether Israel is serious about a two-state solution. The longer the settlements continue to be built, the more difficult it becomes to envisage the possibility of such a solution.

Iraq

7. Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What discussions he has had with his Iraqi and other international counterparts on the political situation in Iraq.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Post-conflict states are potential incubators enabling emerging and existing groups to flourish, so it is important for the international community to work with Baghdad to ensure that the complex and diverse make-up of Iraq is fully represented. I visited the country two weeks ago to see how governance was improving, but also to underline the United Kingdom’s support.

Chris Green: Westminster Cathedral, Westminster Abbey and Bolton town hall will be lit up in red tomorrow to mark Red Wednesday, an Aid to the Church in Need initiative to highlight religious persecution in Iraq, in Syria, and around the world. Will the Minister join me in supporting Red Wednesday to raise awareness of those who are suffering injustice and risking their lives for their faith?

Mr Speaker: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that the Palace of Westminster will be lit up in red as well.

Mr Ellwood: I shall be more than delighted to join you, Mr Speaker, in welcoming and supporting that initiative.

We should not forget that the diverse make-up of Iraq, which I mentioned before, is part of its history, but so, unfortunately, is sectarian violence. After al-Qaeda was flushed out, the answer to allowing best representation in Baghdad in fact allowed Daesh to gain popularity and to dominate Fallujah, Mosul, Ramadi and other places. We must not revisit that by failing to ensure that there is full representation across the piece in Baghdad.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): What conversations have the Minister and the Foreign Secretary had with their counterparts in Iraq about a power-sharing agreement in the Mosul region, including Tal Afar, to ensure that we secure the peace after the liberation of the city and the region?

Mr Ellwood: I think the Foreign Secretary touched on this, and it was very much the focus of my attention when I visited the country last week. The way the liberation will move is that the east side of the city, on the right-hand side of the Tigris, will be liberated first, and there are plans for ward breakowns to make sure the necessary leaders come in to provide that security, improvised explosive devices are removed, the water supplies are working and the place itself safe. It will take time, and this needs to be an Iraqi-led process, but the international community, through the United Nations Development Programme, is working very hard to make sure it is a success.

West Bank

8. Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What recent representations he has made to his Israeli counterpart on the announcement by the Prime Minister of Israel of a new settlement at Shiloh in the west bank in October 2016.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): On 5 October, I issued a press statement condemning the announcement of the proposed settlement in Shiloh. In September, I met Defence Minister Lieberman and raised our concerns about settlements, and made it clear that unless they form part of a land swap anyone living there must live with the knowledge that they will
Israel-Palestine Conflict

9. Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the US Government on a UN Security Council resolution on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. [907410]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Foreign Secretary regularly discusses matters relating to the middle east peace process with the US Secretary of State. At the UN General Assembly in September, I attended the ministerial meeting with other foreign leaders, and this issue came up when I spoke to John Kerry this Sunday evening.

Helen Hayes: The US election result has created a new sense of urgency in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Will the Foreign Secretary set out what he is doing to secure a new UN resolution before 20 January, and beyond that date how the Government will be seeking to ensure that genuine progress is made towards a two-state solution and real and lasting peace for Palestinians and Israelis?

Mr Ellwood: For all the reasons I have spelled out before, there is a sense of urgency: the people of Palestine, and indeed the people of Israel, want this to happen. However, we have to wait for the new Trump Administration to embed itself, and we also make it clear that of course there is merit at the right moment in a balanced UN Security Council resolution which sets out the parameters for a workable, viable settlement leading to that two-state solution based on the clear and internationally agreed parameters, but it must command the full support of the Security Council.

17. [907418] Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Thed comments in the House make clear the anxiety felt by colleagues on all sides that the peace process should not be allowed to drift still further. The greatest danger is not to keep bringing it forward, and we must keep trying to make sure that the parties most closely involved understand that they have worse enemies than each other now in the region. That is why this time must be taken either to put forward a new resolution or to support the French initiative, but certainly not to give people the sense that somehow this can just be managed and will go away.

Mr Ellwood: My right hon. Friend is wise in what he says. We need to ensure that we grasp this opportunity. President Abbas is actually somebody we can work with, and we should remember that he will not be there forever. What will happen after him is not clear, and we need to ensure that we can work towards a two-state solution, but I want to make it clear that as things stand at the moment, the situation looks very bleak indeed.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that a resolution can be helpful only if it leads to direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians? Does he agree that it is most unhelpful that the Palestinian Authority has recently named a fourth school after Salah Khalaf, the person who masterminded the murder of 11 Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics?

Mr Ellwood: I have commented on this matter before, and I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. Lady that this is just inciting hatred and taking us away from the direction we want to go in. It is important that we should be able to get back to the table. We touch on these matters, but they are highly complicated. The role of Hamas in relation to the Palestinian Authority needs to be observed and considered. The other Arab nations can help in that regard. The difficulty is that the position that Prime Minister Netanyahu’s current coalition is working towards is also a consideration. The support of the United States is also critical. These are difficult matters, and I hope that, on the Balfour declaration anniversary next year, we will not be looking back 100 years. Instead, I hope that it will be a marker, and that we will be able to look forward to moving in a positive direction.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the central principle in the middle east peace process has to be direct talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians in order to reach a two-state solution? Does he also agree that those negotiations need to take place on the basis of no preconditions?
Mr Ellwood: I absolutely concur with my hon. Friend. However, there are some Israelis who believe that the Palestinians will never accept the Israelis’ right to live in peace in a Jewish state and that they are teaching hate and glorifying terrorists. They think that the west bank will simply be turned into Gaza. On the other side, there are Palestinians who believe that the Israeli Government will never give them the state that they are working towards. We need to bury those myths. That is not what the people of Israel or the people of Palestinian actually want.

Ebrahim Sharif

10. Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): What representations his Department has made to the Government of Bahrain on charges brought against Ebrahim Sharif for conducting an interview with Associated Press in November 2016. [907411]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I met my counterpart, the Foreign Minister Khalid al-Khalifa, this weekend, and our ambassador in Manama raised the case of Ebrahim Sharif on 16 November. We will continue to monitor the case very carefully indeed.

Margaret Ferrier: The US State Department has defended freedom of expression and explicitly called for the charges against Ebrahim Sharif to be dropped, whereas the Foreign Office has merely expressed concern. Does the Minister believe that such prevarication will convince the Foreign Office to oppose this? Does the Minister have a strategy for how we move forward?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady touches on a matter on which I feel I am developing a relationship with the incoming US Administration on their policy on article 5 of the NATO treaty.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I met my counterpart, the Foreign Minister Khalid al-Khalifa, this weekend, and our ambassador in Manama raised the case of Ebrahim Sharif on 16 November. We will continue to monitor the case very carefully indeed.

Margaret Ferrier: The US State Department has defended freedom of expression and explicitly called for the charges against Ebrahim Sharif to be dropped, whereas the Foreign Office has merely expressed concern. Does the Minister believe that such prevarication will convince the Government of Bahrain to drop those charges?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady touches on a matter on which I feel I am developing a relationship with the incoming US Administration on their policy on article 5 of the NATO treaty.

Toby Perkins: I agree with the Foreign Secretary that we should encourage all NATO allies to spend 2% of their GDP on defence, but will the Minister take this opportunity to send a message to President-elect Trump and to President Putin that article 5 is sacrosanct and not in any way conditional on our allies’ spending levels?

Sir Alan Duncan: I confirm that we strongly support the leaving in of article 5 as the bedrock of NATO and support NATO as the bedrock of European and wider defence interests.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Russians’ stationing of new ballistic missiles in Kaliningrad is curious given that it will probably unite NATO members, the United States in particular, around article 5?

Sir Alan Duncan: NATO is taking necessary and proportionate steps—balanced with dialogue—to strengthen defence and deterrents in response to Russian belligerence. At Warsaw, NATO announced an enhanced forward presence, which my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has already referenced today, in Poland and the Baltic states. The UK will lead in Estonia, providing an infantry battalion of 800 troops from May of next year.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): May I come back to article 5? The principle that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all is the cornerstone on which the alliance is built. At a time when the Baltic states are rightly concerned about Russian expansionism, that principle is now more important than ever. Will the Minister make it clear today that article 5 is an inviolable right for all NATO members, not something that is contingent on how much they spend on defence?

Sir Alan Duncan: I can repeat my having said just that. July’s NATO summit demonstrated the commitment of all allies to article 5, and I can confirm that again today.

Incoming US Administration: Iran Nuclear Agreement

14. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the incoming US Administration on their policy on the nuclear agreement with Iran.

[907415]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The Government remain committed to the nuclear deal with Iran, and we look forward to working with the new Administration in the United States to ensure that it is a success.

Gerald Jones: As the Foreign Secretary may know, people sometimes say things during election campaigns that are falsehoods or exaggerations in order to win. Can he provide any assurance that that was the case when President-elect Trump called the agreement with Iran “the worst deal ever negotiated”?

Boris Johnson: I am not going to get into a commentary on the election campaign that has just taken place in the United States. All I can say is that we in this Government...
think that there is merit in the deal. There has been a considerable increase in trade with Iran since sanctions were lifted—a 40% increase in UK trade. Deals have recently been announced by Lotus and Vodafone, so we should be positive about our engagement and keep the thing on the road.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The agreement with Iran was hard won and hugely important both to remove the threat of Iran gaining nuclear weapons and to start a process of normalising relations with Tehran. Even those who originally opposed the deal, such as Prime Minister Netanyahu, now urge President-elect Trump not to tear it up. Can I press the Secretary of State to join those calls today and make it clear that the deal must continue to be honoured by all sides?

Boris Johnson: I repeat the point that I just made. We believe in this deal. We think it is good. We are making progress. As the hon. Lady will know, we recently reopened the UK embassy in Tehran. Ambassador Nicholas Hopton is now in post and doing a very good job—although if other people want to volunteer for that post, I suppose they are always welcome to do so. He is using that opportunity to develop our relations with Tehran, which will be of increasing importance in the years ahead. That is a point that we will make to our friends in Washington and worldwide.

Topical Questions

T1. [907366] Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): My immediate priority is to build a strong relationship with the incoming US Administration with the aim of making progress on our shared goals at every level of the international agenda. Foremost among them are vanquishing Daesh, responding to the crisis in Syria and standing firm against the challenge from Russia.

Stuart Blair Donaldson: According to figures released last week, Scotland has taken over a third of the Syrian refugees in the UK to date. However, the UK Government plan to take only a third as many as Sweden by 2020. How does the Foreign Secretary explain to his counterparts the UK’s shirking of its responsibilities?

Boris Johnson: I must reject the hon. Gentleman’s assertion that this country is not doing enough to help the people of Syria or the region. As he will know, this country is the second biggest global donor to the people of Syria or the region. As he will know fine, this country is the second biggest global donor to the humanitarian crisis in that region, and we can be proud of our record in giving humanitarian support there, and in offering sanctuary and refuge here in the UK.

T2. [907367] Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Israel is often criticised for its strict control of the border with Gaza, yet Egypt has closed its border completely. Will the Minister update me on any discussions he has had with Egypt about its border with Gaza?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): This is an important point. President Sisi is very conscious of the challenges that Egypt is facing from its own extremists, and Britain is providing support on that. In the longer term, there will be plans for the border to reopen. Unfortunately, many of the tunnel systems were used to smuggle in to Hamas equipment that was being used against Israel, but the strength of the relationship between Israel and Egypt is allowing them to co-ordinate things to make sure that that is curtailed.

T4. [907369] Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It has been widely reported that the Foreign Secretary had to write to the Culture Secretary after she suggested that the UK should abandon hosting the 2023 European capital of culture. My constituency of Dundee has spent a huge amount of time and money preparing a leading bid for the title, which would bring a multi-million European boost to my city, as well as a major lift for tourism, and for social and economic development. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm whether he has had a reply to his letter? Will he today give me his personal commitment that the competition will go ahead as planned?

Boris Johnson: As I repeatedly told the House, we may be leaving the EU but we are not leaving Europe, and we are certainly not leaving the EU for a small time to come. In that time, we are fully paid-up members and it is my view that we should take part to the full, including in such cultural co-operation as the hon. Gentleman describes—and we will do so. We will also continue to take part in such European cultural ventures beyond our exit from the EU.

T3. [907368] Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary believe that a radical free marketeer, admirer of Mrs Thatcher, opponent of Maastricht, Catholic, social conservative cannot be an entirely bad egg? So will he give his felicitations to François Fillon for his progress so far in the presidential elections—after all, he is a great anglophile—and in doing so underline that our priority must be good relations with our nearest and dearest ally?

Mr Speaker: Until the hon. Gentleman named the name, I thought he was about to make a job application.

Boris Johnson: It is wonderful to hear of a senior French politician, who is married to a British wife—[Interruption.] A Welsh wife, indeed. I hesitate to blight Monsieur Fillon’s chances by offering him my congratulations or my support at this stage.

T5. [907370] Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Bedouin village in the Negev of Umm al-Hiran was due to be demolished today, despite the Bedouin having lived there since they were wrongly displaced from their own land in 1956. That contrasts with the expansion of settlements in the west bank. I worked in Gaza 25 years ago, at the time of the Oslo accord. A quarter of a century on, what is the Minister doing to get us back on track?

Mr Ellwood: May I just confirm whether this is a Bedouin camp that is inside green-line Israel—

Dr Whitford indicated assent.
Mr Ellwood: It is. The rules are different, depending on whether or not Bedouin camps are in the west bank or in Israel proper. Nevertheless, the necessary support measures must be given to those people if they are going to be moved. I visited a Bedouin camp the last time I was there, and I will be looking at this particular announcement and making a statement on this later today.

T6. [907371] James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Following the Foreign Secretary’s recent visit to the western Balkans, what assessment has he made of the UK role in providing stability to that area?

Boris Johnson: As hon. Members will know, the UK played a crucial role in bringing an end to the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. As my hon. Friend knows well, there are people across that region who look to us for encouragement and support, and we will be hosting a western Balkans summit here in London in 2018 to try to encourage further stability and confidence building in that region.

T7. [907372] Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): There are few things more patriotic than paying our taxes, but the Foreign Office governs a network of tax havens that shield some individuals and some companies from paying their fair share. Will the Foreign Secretary set a deadline for when UK-governed jurisdictions have at least to have the same transparency as here in the UK?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma): As the hon. Gentleman will know, this Government have done an enormous amount in tackling tax evasion, and, as a result, have collected enormous amounts of funds. Ultimately, these matters are for the Treasury, and I am sure that he will have the opportunity to put those questions at Treasury questions.

T9. [907374] Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Despite the fantastic efforts of campaigns such as the Great Big Rhinos project run by Paignton zoo, the decline in endangered species across the world is alarming, particularly in the African elephant and the rhino. Given the need for a more co-ordinated international effort to tackle this decline, can the Minister confirm the outcome of the recent Hanoi conference and what action the UK Government are taking in response?

Boris Johnson: As my hon. Friend will know, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has been taking the lead in Hanoi in urging the international community to take tougher measures against elephant and rhino poachers. The figures are heartbreaking. In the late 1990s, there were 1.2 million elephants in the world. In Africa, the figure is now down to 300,000. In fact, it has gone down 120,000 since 2010. It is a catastrophic loss for Africa and for the world, and the UK is leading the fightback. We will be holding a summit on the conservation of endangered wildlife in London in the next couple of years.

T8. [907373] Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The Prime Minister will attend the Gulf Cooperation Council leaders’ summit next month as a guest of honour. Does she intend to use the opportunity to push for greater information-sharing with the UK from Saudi-led coalition operations in Yemen so that UK defence personnel are able to form a complete understanding of the coalition’s regard for international humanitarian law?

Boris Johnson: We are very honoured that our Prime Minister is the first female Prime Minister to be invited to attend the GCC in the Gulf. It emphasises the very strong relations that we have with that area. This Government are doing everything they can to satisfy themselves of the compliance of Gulf countries, notably of Saudi Arabia, with the principles of international humanitarian law.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Following the decision of the Indian Government to withdraw the 500 and 1,000 rupee notes, what efforts has the Minister made to ensure that British citizens of Indian descent are able to exchange their money?

Alok Sharma: As my hon. Friend will know, it is for the Indian Government and the Reserve Bank of India to define what is Indian legal tender. However, I can say that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has updated its travel advice, advising British nationals travelling to India how to act in this matter, and we advise those nationals to monitor the situation closely.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What is the Foreign Secretary doing to secure the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe?

Boris Johnson: I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that the Foreign Office is in regular contact with the Iranian Government at all levels. The matter has been raised by the Prime Minister with President Rouhani, and by me with Foreign Minister Zarif. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) has only recently had meetings on that very subject. The matter is of the utmost priority for this Government, and we are doing our level best to resolve it.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Talks on the future of Cyprus have broken down without agreement. As one of the guarantor powers, can the Minister advise what the Government will do to try to influence the situation and to enable the talks to continue?

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): It is an exaggeration to say that the talks have totally broken down, but they have stalled for the moment, and we are giving every possible support that we can to enable the talks to continue in the hope that they can yet reach a successful conclusion for the reunification of the island.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Will the Minister assure us that the UK will continue to assist in the gathering of evidence for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria, so that, eventually, those responsible for these terrible atrocities will be brought to book?

Boris Johnson: I can reassure the right hon. Lady, who I know has campaigned on this issue for many years, that the initiative that we started in September at
the UN General Assembly with the Belgians and other countries continues to work well. We are gathering the evidence that we need, and I am confident that in due course we will bring Daesh operatives to justice.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): All countries of the EU, with the exception of the United Kingdom, have resumed direct flights to Sharm el-Sheikh, which are so vital to the Egyptian economy. What more do the Egyptian Government have to do to persuade the Government to resume direct flights?

Boris Johnson: This has been a very difficult matter. As the House will know, the Egyptian Government are strongly desirous of our resuming flights to Sharm el-Sheikh. Unfortunately, we are not yet able to do so. Perhaps the best I can say is that consultations and work are still going on between our two Governments and between our security services to give the UK Government the reassurance that they need.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): In South Africa, black people were not able to vote, all political opposition was outlawed, and different races could not even get married. In Israel, there is freedom of movement, assembly and speech, all governmental institutions are integrated, and all citizens can vote, so is it not a disgrace and an insult to the middle east’s only democracy and to the black people who suffered under apartheid to hear Israel described as that, as we have heard a former Minister do this afternoon?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman makes two separate points, and we need to consider both distinctively. I will be visiting South Africa in the new year and I will be looking at some of the election processes that take place. We are supportive of both countries, but in the case of Israel, it is a democratic country in a very tough neighbourhood and Britain stands by our friendship. We are an ally of Israel and long may that continue.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What discussions have the Government had with their counterparts about the very dangerous political crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo?

Mr Ellwood: I visited the DRC during the summer, and I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done in that regard. As in other parts of Africa, there is a president who does not want to honour the constitution and wants to stay on longer. We request that he recognises the constitution and stands back. We need the electoral commission to complete its work so that there is an updated electoral register and fresh elections can take place. We hope that happens soon.

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): My constituent, Helen Veevers, faces allegations in Kenya that she conspired to poison her father. She is concerned that she could be the victim of police corruption in that country. Can the Minister reassure me that the Foreign Office is making representations and will keep a close eye on the situation?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that this is a very delicate case indeed. We are providing consular support. I do not believe it is in anyone’s best interests for us to expand any further on the details. I would be more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman directly after Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions to say what more is happening.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues, but demand today has been exceptionally high. We must now move on.
Organ Donors (Leave)

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

12.38 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend Part 8 of the Employment Rights Act 1996 to make provision about leave for persons donating body organs for transplant; and for connected purposes.

I start by sending my thanks and, I am sure, the thanks of the whole House to the nurses and medical staff who make up the NHS Blood and Transplant service and the staff who run the NHS organ donation register. It is a relatively small team in the grand scheme of things, but it is thanks to their effort and their utter brilliance that thousands of lives are saved each year which may otherwise have been lost, and it is thanks to their ingenuity and dedication that last year organ donations in the UK reached a record high. The difference they are making to families whose loved ones have been given a new chance at life often goes unsaid.

I would also like to take this opportunity to note the work of hon. Members, including the hon. Members for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) and for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies), who have put the issue of organ donation firmly on the parliamentary agenda in recent years.

Organ donation is improving year on year, in part due to small changes such as the option for someone to sign up when they renew their driving licence. Last year alone, that method saw an extra half a million people register to become potentially life-saving donors. These are small changes that are making a huge difference. However, as the NHS Blood and Transplant service has said, there is an awful lot of work to be done not only to raise consent figures—currently at 62%, despite evidence suggesting that over 90% of the public would give their organs in death—but to encourage families to have that difficult conversation about what they would do if the unthinkable happened.

Family refusal after the death of a loved one is, sadly, the single biggest barrier to organ donation. Of course, that method saw an extra half a million people register to become potentially life-saving donors. These are small changes that are making a huge difference. However, as the NHS Blood and Transplant service has said, there is an awful lot of work to be done not only to raise consent figures—currently at 62%, despite evidence suggesting that over 90% of the public would give their organs in death—but to encourage families to have that difficult conversation about what they would do if the unthinkable happened.

Family refusal after the death of a loved one is, sadly, the single biggest barrier to organ donation. Of course, it is completely understandable and natural that, in the aftermath of a life-changing loss, all that people want to do is to preserve what is left behind, but if 80% of families consented 1,000 more lives a year could be saved and 1,000 more families kept together. So I would like to take this opportunity gently to urge families to make that difficult decision, want to save a life. That is why my Bill will guarantee living organ donors the right to paid time off to allow them to recover, safe and that their job will be waiting for them when they return. An employee will not be checking their phone, worried they may get a call off the boss, or rushing back to work because they are worried they should be there. Instead, they can have the time off that they need to get better and that they so deserve for having saved a life.

The Bill will also guarantee that employees’ terms and conditions and their rights are the same on their return as when they left. In an age where workers feel increasingly insecure in their jobs, and where, at the sharp end of the economy, unscrupulous employment practices are rife, these legal guarantees could make the difference between donating or not. We are already chronically short of donors, and we should be clearing every conceivable barrier put in the way of these potential life savers. I am delighted that major businesses such as my own former employer, Aviva, and the DIY retailer, Wickes, back my call. It is fantastic that a cross-party group of MPs, including the Chair of the Health Committee, is supporting it as well.

Each donation is an astonishing story of bravery in its own right and a life-changing moment for the individuals and families who benefit from that generosity. As work gets increasingly precarious, employees must rely on the heart-breaking gap. Last year alone, over 1,000 of them donated part of their liver or a kidney, and many more donated their bone marrow.

The criteria for organ donors mean many are often of working age and in work. It hardly needs saying, but giving an organ is an enormous commitment, and if someone is an employee, the time needed off work may give them pause for thought. The NHS advises that living donors can expect to need up to 12 weeks’ recovery time. This will vary from person to person, and depending on what job they do, but the point is that this is a very serious commitment for any would-be donor.

People have to weigh up whether they can afford to take that time off if their boss insists they take it unpaid and if they have to wait for any compensation to come through from the relevant NHS trust. They have to weigh up whether they can make the commitment to be out of work for that length of time. They are also always worrying in case their position or their terms and conditions are not quite the same on their return as when they left. That uncertainty is unacceptable. It is putting barriers in the path of people becoming life-saving donors. Currently, the law has nothing to say.

The issue was brought to my attention by a man who told me he had donated bone marrow to an anonymous blood cancer patient. He was allowed just three days off work—unpaid—to cover the time in hospital. He felt pressured to return, and he was accused of “making himself sick” by his employer. That is just one example, but it tells us of the pressures faced by workers who may want to donate.

Any and all barriers standing in the way of living donors must be dismantled. The lack of legal employment protections, which is holding back these potential life-savers, is significant, and it can be easily corrected by Government.

That is why my Bill will guarantee living organ donors the right to paid time off to allow them to recover, safe in the knowledge that they will not be financially penalised and that their job will be waiting for them when they return. An employee will not be checking their phone, worried they may get a call off the boss, or rushing back to work because they are worried they should be there. Instead, they can have the time off that they need to get better and that they so deserve for having saved a life.

The Bill will also guarantee that employees’ terms and conditions and their rights are the same on their return as when they left. In an age where workers feel increasingly insecure in their jobs, and where, at the sharp end of the economy, unscrupulous employment practices are rife, these legal guarantees could make the difference between donating or not. We are already chronically short of donors, and we should be clearing every conceivable barrier put in the way of these potential life savers. I am delighted that major businesses such as my own former employer, Aviva, and the DIY retailer, Wickes, back my call. It is fantastic that a cross-party group of MPs, including the Chair of the Health Committee, is supporting it as well.

Each donation is an astonishing story of bravery in its own right and a life-changing moment for the individuals and families who benefit from that generosity. As work gets increasingly precarious, employees must rely on the
protections in law that guarantee their rights. These guarantees will not only bring peace of mind but help to increase the number of living donors from 1,000 and bridge the gap between availability and need. Crucially, this will send a clear signal from Government, and from this House, that if you are prepared to give an organ to save a life, the law will back you every step of the way.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Louise Haigh, Steve McCabe, Will Quince, Jim Shannon, Catherine West, Ms Margaret Ritchie and Dr Sarah Wollaston present the Bill.

Louise Haigh accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 20 January 2017 and to be printed (Bill 96).

Opposition Day

[13th Allotted Day]

Education and Social Mobility

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Opposition day motion on education and social mobility. I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister. I should advise the House that a very substantial number of Back Benchers have applied to speak — no fewer than 28, if memory serves. Realistically, I imagine, the debate will not run beyond 4 pm or, at the latest, 4.30 pm. Of course there is no time limit on Front-Bench speeches. Front Benchers tend to take significant numbers of interventions, perfectly properly, and that is favoured by the House, but I am sure that those on both Front Benches will wish to tailor their contributions in the light of what I have said.

12.47 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House believes that every child throughout the UK must be given the opportunity to reach their full potential; further believes that there is no evidence that additional academic selection in the school system will improve social mobility; and calls on the Government to instead concentrate on providing the best education possible for all children.

Thank you, Mr Speaker. I hope to be brief but substantive in my comments. I start by thanking the emergency services across the UK who helped many of our constituents during the floods yesterday, particularly my constituents and businesses across Tameside and Oldham.

It should be the duty of all Governments to provide the best education for every child. Today we call on the whole House to show that it shares this commitment. Only last Wednesday, we heard that Britain has a “deep social mobility problem”; that for this generation of young people, in particular, it is getting worse, not better; and that this is the result of an unfair education system, a two-tier labour market, an imbalanced economy, and an unaffordable housing market. That is not an accusation from the Opposition, but the conclusion of the Government’s own Social Mobility Commission. The commission made many recommendations on how we can offer the best start in life for every child—but, crucially, new academic selection was not one of them.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Will the hon. Lady inform the House of precisely how many grammar schools she visited as shadow Education Secretary before deciding to oppose the policy in the Green Paper and lay this motion?

Angela Rayner: As a parent, as a school governor, and as a Member who used to represent trade union members, I have visited many grammar schools. My contribution to this debate will be based on fact and evidence. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will look at the facts and evidence and vote accordingly. In fact, the Social Mobility Commission offered a clear recommendation to abandon any plans for further academic selection. It did so because it knows that social mobility
is facing a crisis and that further academic selection is simply not the answer; in fact, it will only entrench the problem.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Could the hon. Lady explain why it is right for my constituents to be able to go to a grammar school in Birmingham but not to be able to go to a grammar school in Brierley Hill, because there is no existing provision there?

Angela Rayner: In my contribution, I hope to explain exactly why we need to move away from selection and towards inclusion in our education system.

The conclusions of the Social Mobility Commission will find much support in this House, not just among Opposition Members but, I hope, among Government Members as well. We still have not heard from the Prime Minister whether any of the recommendations will be adopted.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Before we have to listen to the sixth-form debating points from Conservative Members, does my hon. Friend agree that what they ought to do is to set out the evidence for this policy? They should tell us where these schools will be, how many of them there will be, how much the policy will cost, how these schools will select their pupils, where the resources will come from, what the pupils will learn and how the schools will differ from existing ones.

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. There are clearly many questions to be answered about the evidence for such a policy.

I want to give the Education Secretary the chance to end this uncertainty in our school system. Can she tell us which of the commission’s recommendations she will be accepting, and whether the Government have rejected the recommendation on schools, in particular? The challenges that we face as a country go much further than this one misguided policy.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Last year in Ashfield 66% of children from disadvantaged backgrounds did not get five A* to C GCSEs. We are the 13th lowest constituency at sending 18-year-olds to higher education. That is the real scandal, is it not—not the grammar school proposals?

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for her absolutely splendid intervention, because we know that increasing selection is not the answer to the crisis that is facing our school system.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): Is it not a fact that the demand for grammar schools is coming from wealthy parents who are seeing private education become more and more priced out of their reach, with fees of more than £21,000 a year? It is a fact that there are four times more children from privately paid prep schools getting into grammar schools than there are kids from state schools. Surely we should not let people get an elite education on the cheap, paid for by the taxpayer.

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. The report by the Social Mobility Commission that came out last week stated that the people who were finding it hardest to progress were not just the most disadvantaged, but those earning around £22,000 a year. Those are the hard-working families—the people who are just getting by—that this Prime Minister pledged to support on the steps of 10 Downing Street. I want to find common cause with Members from all parts of the House and all parties in making Britain a country in which every child gets an excellent education and the best start in life.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): When the hon. Lady goes to watch one of our best sports teams, does she think that it is a problem that its members were selected and given an elite education?

Angela Rayner: The right hon. Gentleman knows that this is a completely different issue. I say to him, as I say to all hon. Members from across the House, “Follow the evidence.”

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Talking of excellence in sport, does my hon. Friend agree that we should celebrate the fact that Mo Farah, who grew up and went to a state school in my constituency, has succeeded on the world stage? The school that he attended is now suffering from cuts, which mean that it is referring more than 40% of its pupils for mental health support services.

Mr Speaker: He is also a staunch Arsenal fan, which makes him an even greater man.

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. We need to make sure that every child, regardless of their background, makes the best progress in life. We know that selection is not the way forward.

Several hon. Members rose—

Angela Rayner: I am going to make some progress before I take any more interventions.

I want to find common cause, and I know that many Government Members agree with me that expanding academic selection is hardly the best way to ensure that every child makes the best progress. Members of all parties know that all the evidence tells us that providing an excellent education starts at the earliest point. Access to childcare and early years education is absolutely vital, not just in helping children, but in helping every family to fulfil its potential. Indeed, by the time they would take the 11-plus, children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are already, on average, 10 months behind. The evidence shows that investment in early years is the best way to close the attainment gap between the most disadvantaged children and their affluent peers.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree with David Cameron, who said:

“There is a kind of hopelessness about the demand to bring back grammars on the assumption that this country will only ever be able to offer a decent education to a select few?”

Angela Rayner: I find myself agreeing with the former Prime Minister, who was elected to make those contributions to the debate. That was the platform and the manifesto on which the Conservative Government stood, which they are currently rejecting.
I know from personal experience, as will parents from across this Chamber, the incredible impact that childcare can have, not just on children and their education, but on entire families. Leaving school at 16, with no qualifications and a newborn son, Labour’s Sure Start centres helped me to learn to be a better parent to my son. I know that I would not be speaking in this House today without those programmes, and that they have helped to offer my son the opportunities I never had growing up.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): What would the hon. Lady say to parents in my constituency and in the rest of Croydon—where there are no grammar schools—who have to travel for miles and miles to an adjacent grammar school in either Sutton or Bromley? She is seeking to deny those parents choice, is she not?

Angela Rayner: I am seeking to ensure that every child has the best opportunities in life and a great start. I do not want the hon. Gentleman’s constituents to have to travel miles away from his constituency; I want them to have absolutely the best education possible, and selection does not provide that for every child.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an outstanding opening speech. Does she agree that in this debate the point about choice is really a non-starter? The choice lies not with the parents, but with the school. The school gets to choose the kids; the parents do not get to choose the school. Invariably, the school chooses the children on their financial and social wellbeing rather than on anything else.

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I pay tribute to her for the outstanding work that she did when she was on the Front Bench.

Several hon. Members rose—

Angela Rayner: I am going to make some more progress.

The Social Mobility Commission talked about treadmill families, who are running fast but are stuck in the same place, and who are working hard but do not have anything to show for it at the end of the week. Childcare and early years intervention will do far more to address those problems than would a focus on new academic selection at age 11. Yet we have seen the closure of more than 800 Sure Start centres since 2010, the loss of around 45,000 childcare places and the closure of 1,000 childcare providers in the last five years.

There are similar challenges facing our existing schools. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that our schools are facing the first real-term cuts to their budgets in nearly two decades, just as demand for school places is growing. We already know the consequences: more staff leaving, more schools in disrepair and more courses being cut. The Department for Education has missed its teacher training targets for four years in a row, while more experienced teachers are leaving the profession in record numbers and half a million pupils are being taught in super-sized classes. It should be our mission to provide an excellent education for all children, and we know what is needed to provide that: high-quality early years education, and the best heads and teachers teaching the right curriculum to manageable classes in decent school buildings, with high standards and good behaviour.

Let me say to the Education Secretary and all Government Members that if they take serious action to make the changes our education system needs, I will be the first to support them, because education policy should not be about ideological dogma, but about looking at all the evidence and pursuing policies that will improve the lives of all children.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that the academy programme has delivered considerable success? Will she give it her unequivocal support, and will she condemn the members of the National Union of Teachers who picketed the Kimberley School in my constituency when it had the temerity to break free of the local authority and establish an excellent academy?

Angela Rayner: Education—I hope we can agree on this—is not about the vehicle, but about the drivers. Focusing on the vehicle does not deal with the fundamental issues of collaboration, leadership and good teaching in our school system.

Several hon. Members rose—

Angela Rayner: I will make some more progress.

The purpose of today’s debate is to send a message that Members from all parties are committed to an evidence-based approach to education policy, not to pursuing the failed policy of academic selection. We know that such a policy is not the answer to Britain’s social mobility crisis, and the Government knew that, too, until very recently. Indeed, the former leader of the Conservative Party—the one who won an election—had explicitly promised not to do so: only just gone, but so quickly forgotten. Why has that pledge been ripped up by the new Prime Minister? The Education Secretary has said it is to help solve Britain’s social mobility crisis, but the evidence for that is scant. I will not recite this point at length, but that was conclusively demonstrated in the recent Back-Bench business debate, which focused precisely on the evidence, secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), the Chair of the Education Committee.

Several hon. Members rose—

Angela Rayner: I am not going to take interventions on that point. I will make some progress.

We know that those from disadvantaged backgrounds are far less likely to get into selective schools, even if they are just as bright as their better-off peers, and we know that even if they do get in, the impact on their attainment is minimal at best. It is not just Labour Members who know it; dozens of the Education Secretary’s own Back Benchers know it. The greatest concerns are about the mistaken priorities revealed by this policy.

Several hon. Members rose—
Angela Rayner: I want to make some progress, because I will wrap up shortly.

In the consultation document launched in November, the Government have already pledged £50 million to help existing grammar schools to expand. The same Green Paper made a series of substantial, uncosted pledges to schools that want to become grammars or to academy chains that want to open them. Now, just this weekend, Government sources briefed The Sunday Times that there will be “tens of millions” more to help grammar schools to expand.

The idea that this is the way in which the Government should spend taxpayers’ money is simply baffling. When nurseries across the country are facing closure because the Government will not deliver the investment needed to deliver on their manifesto pledge to provide 30 hours of free childcare a week and our schools are facing deeper cuts in their budgets than at any time since the 1970s, why is this money being taken away from them?

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an outstanding speech. Have we not seen the problem with Tory education thinking this afternoon? Government Members think that some types of schools are better than others and that some children deserve better opportunities than others. That is what is so entirely wrong with what they are arguing today.

Angela Rayner: Do you know what? That is the real rub: that is the difference between Labour Members and Government Members. We believe that teachers are invaluable in making sure that our schools are the best they can possibly be, rather than focusing on the vehicle in which those teachers and drivers take forward that mission.

We know that Members across this House agree that this is not the way we should spend school budgets. Members in the devolved nations will want to know the implications for their own school budgets, too. I know that many Government Members share the view of Labour Members that education is the key to social mobility, and that for all our differences on policy, they would not want the Government to waste the Department for Education’s budget on an ineffective vanity project. That must be the key test of every spending commitment made by the Secretary of State.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will the hon. Lady provide some clarification? We have heard loud and clear her position on grammar schools, but is it also her position that the Government should close all the grammar schools that already exist?

Angela Rayner: Again, I reiterate my point that Members on both sides of the House have the absolute responsibility to make sure that the policies they introduce in this House for the education of all our children are in their best interests and are evidence-based. This must be the key test of every spending commitment made by the Secretary of State: will this money be spent on something that we know will improve the lives of children across this country, whatever their background? That is the point of our motion, and I urge all Members on both sides of the House to ensure that our collective endeavour is always for the best education for every child.

1.6 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from ‘potential;’ to end and add

shares the strong commitment of this Government to promoting and improving social mobility and building a country that works for everyone; notes that there are now more than 1.4 million pupils in England attending good or outstanding schools than in 2010; and welcomes the opportunity afforded by the Schools that Work for Everyone consultation to seek the widest possible range of views on how the Government can build upon these successes and awaits the outcome of the current consultation.’.

Social mobility matters hugely to this Government and, of course, to Members across this House. It is easy for us to say that where someone starts should not dictate where they finish, but the greatest challenge we all face is that, in reality, that still makes a difference, as it has done for generations. As last week’s Social Mobility Commission’s report tells us, just 3% of children on free school meals gain five good GCSEs; they are 29% less likely to take two or more of the facilitating A-levels that will help to keep their options open; and they are 34% more likely to drop out of post-16 education altogether. It is therefore no surprise that they are 19% less likely to go to university, and 47% less likely to attend a top Russell Group institution.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Given the excellent case the Secretary of State is laying out, how can those statistics be changed by grammar schools when currently only 3% of kids on free school meals go to grammar schools?

Justine Greening: I will come on to that point, but as we already have grammar schools, it is quite right for us as a Government to set out the case for how we make sure that they play their full role in driving social mobility.

I have set out a number of facts about the prospects of too many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in our country. None of these facts should be acceptable to us. They certainly are not acceptable to me or this Government. I believe that social mobility matters for several key reasons. First, it matters for individuals. I believe that the innate desire of people to do well is one of the most powerful forces for change in our country, and social mobility is about our country working with the grain of human nature. Secondly, social mobility matters for communities. Fundamentally, feeling that we all have an equal shot at success—having equal opportunity—is the glue that binds us together. Lastly, social mobility matters for our economy. Investing in people is a core part of how we raise productivity. Yes, we need to build roads and railways, but we are determined to build up people, too.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): How can the Government claim to be the party of social mobility when 800 children’s centres have closed and 29 nursery schools have closed in the past year alone? That is letting down a whole generation of two, three and four-year-old kids, because if they fall behind at that age, they will never catch up.

Justine Greening: Of course early years education matters. We are investing in not only improved but more childcare for parents around the country—for working
parents, in particular—because we think that having a strong start is absolutely vital. As I was saying, this is about improving not just the prospects of individuals and communities, but the prospects of our country and its economy, and we have to build our country’s economy by building our people.

Justine Greening: Of course, this is not about additional secondary modern schools or a return to a binary system. The reforms over the last six years have given children and parents a more diverse offer and set of choices in education than ever before. It is now time to see how grammar schools can play a stronger role in our education system in the 21st century.

Lucy Powell: The Secretary of State is citing much of the evidence from last week’s Social Mobility Commission report about the challenge our country faces. Why will she not adopt in full the recommendations of that report on how to tackle those inequalities, rather than cherry-picking the little bits that she wants to bring to the House?

Justine Greening: The report, quite rightly, set out that we need a much longer-term programme of social reform. Alan Milburn talked about a 10-year programme. It also pointed to our focus on improving attainment in schools. The bottom line is that we will not make significant progress on social mobility until we focus on the areas of common ground, rather than the Opposition spending their entire time focusing on areas where they do not agree.

Several hon. Members rose—

Justine Greening: Let me make some progress.

I was setting out why the Government believe that driving social mobility matters so much. In reality, as challenging as it is for our country, no country in the world has managed to crack the issue of social mobility. That is because it is highly complex, many factors feed into it and improving social mobility is, as the Social Mobility Commission says, a long-term issue that needs a long-term approach, not to be treated like a political football for short-term political gain. If we are to make a difference, we must see social mobility as a generational challenge that we must tackle together on behalf of the next generation.

The difference may be that for us, fundamentally, social mobility is an agenda of levelling up opportunity for those who do not have it—something that, I hope, we can all agree is the right thing to do. Education is, of course, at the heart of how we do that.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): On that point, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the support that is provided by the pupil premium. That £2.5 billion really has helped to narrow the gap in attainment.

Justine Greening: I am grateful for that intervention. Not only is that spending protected for the course of this Parliament, but we are working through the education endowment fund to ensure that we understand how that investment can have the biggest impact for disadvantaged children. I went to see a grammar school last week that has a high proportion of children who are eligible for free school meals and the pupil premium. We looked at what it is doing to improve the attainment of those young people.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): To help build a consensus around our education policy, perhaps the Secretary of State could give us one piece of evidence that suggests that grammar schools would improve educational outcomes and social mobility for the most disadvantaged.

Justine Greening: We know that the education gap between children on free school meals who go to grammars and their better-off counterparts is closed during the course of their education. We know that disadvantaged children who go to grammars have a better chance of getting into university, including Russell Group universities, and that is because their attainment improves.

Education is at the heart of how we drive social mobility in our country, which is why the Government have had a programme of such radical reform over the past six years. The academies and free schools programme, which I noticed the shadow Secretary of State was not willing to support, has given schools the freedom to run themselves in the best interests of their children and local communities. The introduction of the EBacc has given more children access to a core curriculum to make sure that they keep their options open, not closed, as they make decisions about their future. Thanks to the hard work of teachers all over the country, 1.4 million more children are being taught in schools that are good or outstanding than in 2010. That means that 1.4 million more children are getting access to an education that will allow them to make the most of their talents.

Of course, this starts with early years education. Children must arrive at school ready and able to learn if they are to take full advantage of the education on offer, which is why we are introducing 30 hours of free childcare for the working parents of three and four-year-olds. It is also why we are looking at how we can improve the quality of the early years workforce even further. Teachers are crucial in improving attainment outcomes for our young people, which is why we are reforming initial teacher training.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): What does my right hon. Friend think about the independent study by ResPublica, commissioned by Knowsley Council, which concluded that in the second most deprived borough in the country, a grammar school would provide a much-needed incentive and raise the standards of education?

Justine Greening: I have seen that report. It shows that when people look at the evidence and are prepared to step away from political ideology, they see the reality that grammars can have a transformational impact in some of the most deprived communities in which we want to see the biggest changes.

Andy Burnham: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Justine Greening: No, I will make some progress because I have given way to a lot of Members.
As I was saying, we want to improve teacher training. We have therefore started the teaching and leadership innovation fund so that the most challenged schools can build more capacity to have excellent teachers and leaders.

It is vital that the standards and quality of our technical education in this country mirror the excellence that we have been embedding in the academic routes. We have focused on academic routes, so it is time for us to focus similarly on improving technical education for young people. We will work hard to put technical and further education on a level footing with the academic route that other young people already take. Through the Technical and Further Education Bill, we are slimming down the system of qualifications and putting employers in the driving seat regarding how they are designed and delivered so that there are a smaller number of routes that are much easier to understand and lead directly to career pathways for young people.

We have also focused on apprenticeships so that young people get direct work experience as they learn. We plan to create 3 million new apprenticeships by 2020 and, for the first time, British business is investing through the apprenticeship levy to make sure that those apprenticeships are of a high quality. Yesterday, we had the Third Reading of the Higher Education and Research Bill, which will put in place a new teaching framework to drive up teaching quality, to make university outcomes more transparent than ever and, through the planned Office for Students, to promote equality of opportunity throughout our universities.

We have to recognise that one of the biggest challenges faced by the education system is the growing need for more good school places. Despite the progress that we have made, too many children still do not have a place at a good school. There are 1.2 million children in schools that Ofsted says are not good enough. That was why we published the “Schools that work for everyone” consultation, which asks important open questions about how we can use the educational expertise that exists in our country’s independent schools, faith schools, universities and selective schools. We cannot afford to leave a single stone unturned as we drive up opportunity.

**Andy Burnham:** The Secretary of State rightly spoke about building a consensus across the House on education policy, but I put it to her that that will be more likely to happen if the Government stick to their mandate on education. Will she read out the precise section of the Conservative party manifesto from the last election that gives her a mandate to lift the bar on the creation of new grammar schools?

**Justine Greening:** We talked about excellent school places and expanding the very best schools in our country, including grammar schools. I just do not think it is viable for the Labour party to say that it does not like the grammars that we have, but to be equivocal about whether it is still its policy to shut those grammars. I will give way to the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) if she wants to confirm the position. There is a gaping hole in the official Opposition’s policy on grammars. I do not think that it is tenable in a country that has grammars and selection for the Opposition to say they do not like that situation, but that they do not want us to take any steps whatever to see how we can deliver more strongly on social mobility through the schools already in place.

**David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con):** My right hon. Friend will surely be aware that we have had 18 years of Labour policies in Wales and, as a result, have lower education standards according to PISA, the OECD and Labour’s former education Minister in Wales. Does my right hon. Friend think we should take any notice whatever of what Labour has to say about education?

**Justine Greening:** No, I do not. The legacy of 13 years of Labour was disastrous for our youngest people, not just because of grade inflation, which gave millions of young people the sense that they had achieved grades although they were not at the level they needed to be, but—dare I say it—because under the previous Labour Government, youth unemployment went up by nearly 50%. If opportunity is about anything, it surely starts with the dignity of being able to have a job and a career.

Last week I was at Handsworth Grammar School, where around 25% of pupils are eligible for the deprivation element of the pupil premium. Those young people talked to me about how much they value the education they are getting. One student, who is planning to go to Oxford—[Interruption.] I am not sure precisely what that young man would say about the chattering from Opposition Members, but I think he would be extremely dismayed to hear the school that is giving him a transformational opportunity being talked down. His family had arrived in this country just two generations before. His grandparents arrived with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Within two generations of that, he is hoping to be able to go to Oxford. He talked to me about what the chance to go to a grammar school has meant for him, his family and his future prospects. It is levelling up, and that is what we want to do.

I hope that we all agree that the social mobility agenda is about more young people having opportunities and aiming higher, like that gentleman, not fewer. Asking in our consultation how we can make grammars more open to disadvantaged children is exactly what we should be doing.

**Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con):** My right hon. Friend is speaking powerfully about the opportunities that grammar schools provide to children from very ordinary backgrounds. Does she agree that it is a real tragedy that we have not invested more in grammar schools? The existing ones in my constituency are under massive pressure from the children of parents living around my constituency, which restricts the number of places available for children in Rugby.

**Justine Greening:** My hon. Friend is right. It is simply untenable to say to parents who want more choice, and to children who otherwise would have a place in such schools, that they cannot have it. That is simply wrong. We should at least allow local communities to decide. It is not tenable to take the approach of simply saying to parents, “No, you can’t have them; we know better.” or of saying to a child, “You got the grades to be able to go, but you are not allowed to because we have decided.”

**Several hon. Members rose—**
Justine Greening: Let me make some more progress, as lots of Members on both sides of the House want to contribute to this important debate.

In the consultation we are asking how we can make grammars more open to disadvantaged children and ensure that the excellence that exists in grammar schools can play a stronger role in school improvement throughout the system, as that is also part of what we should be doing. We are also asking how, as has been seen elsewhere, grammars can play a role in lifting the schools around them and doing a stronger job. Many already work extremely hard to do that, and we want it to become the norm.

As we have just heard, selective and grammar schools are often hugely over-subscribed, so consulting on how we respond to that demand from parents and pupils is exactly what we should be doing. We cannot simply say that those parents and students are wrong. It is time to look at how we can use grammar schools to open up more opportunities to more people.

Grammars close the attainment gap between pupils from deprived backgrounds and their more advantaged peers. For the top-performing 25% of primary pupils, the gap in results for pupils on free school meals in grammar schools is significantly smaller than that in non-selective schools. Children in grammars on free school meals are twice as likely to get five good GCSE grades, and so twice as likely to secure a place at and to attend one of the top Russell Group universities, as their wealthier peers who attend comprehensives.

We will not fix the challenges of social mobility and opportunity by complaining; we have to take practical action. That is why at the very least we need to give local communities the choice. That is exactly what our consultation proposes and asks about. We have improved and are improving our school system and standards. Those communities that want to keep the status quo of those schools are able to do so. There is much more to do, alongside the consultation, to ensure that every child has the education that they need and deserve.

We must recognise that some challenges that we face inside schools also require solutions outside schools. That is why I have announced the first six opportunity areas for parts of the country where social mobility is really stalling, but young people have huge potential that we want to unlock. We need to make sure that that happens.

Tom Pursglove: As a comprehensive-educated lad from Wellingborough, it is music to my ears to hear that the Government are committed not just to the academic but to the technical side of things, as that is so important. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is also important to recognise in our education policy that different things work in different areas?

Justine Greening: That is quite right. The first six opportunity areas we picked are very different places—some coastal, some more rural and some more urban. That is because we recognise that those communities each face different challenges—sometimes slightly different; sometimes significantly so—in raising attainment. We know that we need to work not only inside schools with teachers and the headteachers leading those schools, but outside schools. We will have better careers advice and mentoring. We will work with the CBI, for example, and the Federation of Small Businesses on opportunities for work experience, traineeships and apprenticeships.

Wes Streeting: I am delighted that the Secretary of State has given way on that specific point because under the previous Labour Government the London Challenge achieved something very similar by doing exactly what she has described, alongside initiatives such as the education maintenance allowance, grants for the poorest students, a huge transformation of funding for teaching and school buildings, and freedoms for schools and teachers. Is she sure she has nothing to learn from that Government?

Justine Greening: I certainly do not think so in relation to the outcomes achieved for young people who left the education system having all too often taken exams that suffered from grade inflation and—crucially, as we see from the report by Alison Wolf—having taken qualifications that employers simply did not value, but that those people had often been told to do because that was an easier route for the institution that they were in. There is lots to learn from that Labour Government, but clearly it is what not to do, rather than what to do.

Seema Malhotra rose—

Justine Greening: I will try to make some progress and finally conclude.

Opportunity areas are not simply about addressing the need for more good school places in all parts of the country. We want them to be in the vanguard of helping us to ensure that we learn how best to drive social mobility in very different places, to spread what works throughout England. Under this Government, further and higher education, schools and apprenticeships have been put back into one Department—the Department for Education. That means that we have never had a better chance to make sure that education, and opportunity as a whole, work to drive social mobility throughout our country.

Improving social mobility is our country’s greatest generational challenge. Its complexity means that change will not happen overnight—as I have said, no country has cracked how to drive great social mobility—but making the best possible success of Brexit, as this Government and this party are committed to doing, is why social mobility matters, and why education is at the heart of that agenda. In the end, it will be people who lift this great country of ours, which is why we have to make ours a country that works for everyone. The Prime Minister set out her intention and the intention of the Government. Now it is time for the House to do the same so that we can get on with ensuring that the education system becomes the driver of social mobility that it really can be. Young people get only one shot at their education, so we urgently need to get this right. That requires all of us to be prepared to work together so that, if at all possible, we can build a cross-party consensus on how we get it right.

1.30 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I begin by declaring an interest: I was a physics teacher and spent 20 years working in the comprehensive sector.
My father sat, and failed, the 11-plus exam. He ended up in the local secondary, St Roch’s, in an inner-city area of Glasgow. Pupils at St Roch’s were not expected to achieve. School was simply a holding area until they were old enough to enter the workforce. My dad set out on the path that was laid in front of him. Most of his classmates went on to work in the shipyards, but he went on to work in the Glasgow parks department, where he remained for over 40 years. He has some good memories, but work was simply something he did to provide for his family. There was no element of choice: you were grateful you had the job, and he was grateful.

By the time my siblings and I went to school, grammars had been completely abolished in Scotland. We also attended the local secondary, but now it was comprehensive and there were no preconceived ideas or restrictions placed upon us. My father watched with pride as one by one his five children went on to university—possible, of course, because we paid no fees and were awarded maintenance grants.

By coincidence, early in my career I taught in my father’s old school. It was, however, transformed. By now, St Roch’s was a comprehensive and a much happier place. The walls were a celebration of past pupils’ achievements—some academic, some business and some vocational—but the real difference was the expectation of achievement. Every young person entering the school was seen as a human being with potential and every young person felt the weight of that expectation. The real problem with selective education is not that we end young people felt the weight of that expectation. The real problem with selective education is not that we end up with good schools and poorer schools, and not that one set of teachers works harder than another; it is that whole swathes of our young people will be labelled—wrongly, of course—as having failed. With that, social mobility falls.

It might be argued that for those who have the intellectual maturity, or whose parents can pay for the tuition to pass the 11-plus exams, grammar schools offer a more sheltered experience, but the Government should be concerned with every single child. With grammar schools on the horizon, that is simply not the case.

Andy Burnham: Does the hon. Lady agree that the major flaw in the Secretary of State’s speech was that she could not bring herself to acknowledge that if she pursues this policy it will lead to the creation of more secondary modern schools? That is the truth that Government Members will not face up to.

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely. I actually think there was another flaw in the Secretary of State’s speech. Listening to her speaking in such glowing terms about grammar schools, I wondered why we do not just make every school a grammar. That would solve the problem.

Many secondary schools choose to set their pupils according to academic ability. However, the educational evidence for the benefits of setting is scant. Certainly when pupils are working on the same curricular content, the evidence is clear: mixed ability classes are far more successful in raising attainment. The most able pupils succeed in whatever class they are in. The least able pupils do a bit better in mixed ability. The massive advantage, however, is for the swathes of average attainers who, within a mixed ability class, have no ceiling placed on their ambitions. In fact, when the Government use one of their buzzwords, “aspiration”, it is indeed this large group of middle pupils who embody and can embrace that idea. Conversely, when decisions based on ability have been imposed on pupils, it sends out strong signals about what that particular group is expected to achieve. In other words, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rolling this out on a much larger scale, as is being considered with the return to grammar schools, means that we have young people who have had decisions made on their future attainment before they even have a chance to attain.

The damage that that does cannot be underestimated. To be told at age 11 that you are not good enough is an incredibly difficult thing to overcome. Despite the best efforts of teachers, that labelling is a blow to confidence and self-esteem that can remain throughout a person’s life.

Chris Philp: Given what the hon. Lady has just said, will she join me in welcoming the Green Paper’s proposal to allow for transfers into and out of selective schools at ages 14 and 16, as well as 11?

Carol Monaghan: I would welcome very little of the Green Paper. I do not agree with selective schooling.

Mr Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): Does the hon. Lady think that eligibility to stay on at either a college or a sixth form based on the level of qualifications at GCSE should therefore also be abolished?

Carol Monaghan: I am not sure I understand the hon. Gentleman’s question. Students should be able to stay on in school as long as the school fits their requirements, and as long as the school is able to offer them something. That might not be what he asked, but I will move on.

I have received correspondence not from my constituents but from people living in England. They have shared their concerns about grammar schools. I will read out a section of a letter I received from a gentleman in England:

“As an 11+ failure…The sense of failure is still with me…so much so I find it hard in this letter to admit I went to a Secondary Modern School. Nearly all of my fellow pupils…came from poorer or deprived backgrounds—I cannot think of one who came from a well-off background. As children, we accepted our lot and it was made clear to us that our choices of work were closed off to us; we were in the rubbish bin…”

It is well known that young people’s thinking skills develop at different rates. Some at aged 11 will have advanced cognitive abilities. For others, it takes several more years for their thinking skills to mature. A number of years ago, I taught a young boy who had come from the primary school at age 11 with extremely poor literacy and numeracy skills. As time went on, however, he showed some talent for science. Despite all the original expectations placed upon him—not by teachers, but probably by the young boy himself—he managed to scrape by in his national exams and went on to university. He went on to achieve a degree in chemistry and then a
PhD. He now travels the world as a chemical engineer. That is social mobility and it was achieved in a comprehensive school. That boy would not have come close to passing an 11-plus exam. I completely oppose selective education, which, thankfully, will not be introduced in Scotland.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Is there not a tendency in this debate to send out a message that anybody who has gone to a secondary modern is failing? I went to a secondary modern school, as did the hon. Lady’s father, so I know how tough it can be, but we can succeed. Moreover, it is not a question of success or failure; it is about making the alternative schools as good as the grammar schools.

**Carol Monaghan**: I am extremely glad that the hon. Gentleman succeeded and made his way, but not every young person has the strength of character that he is displaying, so for many young people it causes major issues.

**Huw Merriman**: I made no point about whether I had succeeded or otherwise—many could argue, given I am here, that I have not succeeded—but we are in danger of going back to the past and seeing this as a question of either success or failure, when in fact it is possible to have a mix of schools and still see those who do not go to grammar schools thriving in successful schools. We should not talk that down in this House.

**Carol Monaghan**: We have swathes of teachers battling the labelling of these young people and working flat out to overcome the prejudices against them. It is not right that the Government should make life more difficult for them by continuing and, in fact, extending selective education.

I have a letter from a young person from High Wycombe. He writes:

“I currently attend a grammar school in High Wycombe... At the age of 10 I was put under a ridiculous amount of stress and felt at a disadvantage going into the 11+ as my family could only afford a fortnight of private tuition... The system makes 70% of kids feel second best”.

The social mobility agenda in Scotland is quite different. We are considering what positive steps we can take to increase social mobility, including the provision of 30 hours of early learning for all children, regardless of their parents’ work status. We also have the attainment fund, which I believe my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) will mention in his speech, and which has been used to target the attainment gap that exists in some areas.

**John Redwood**: Will the hon. Lady apologise to the excellent pupils and teachers in the comprehensives in my area who achieve great things alongside grammars, which can also recruit from my local area? She should not run those people down; they are doing a great job.

**Carol Monaghan**: As someone who attended and has taught in a comprehensive school, I think that these teachers and young people are doing some of the best jobs in the country—possibly far better than some in other situations.

There are some things that the Scottish Government have not done. They have not cut the education maintenance allowance, which allows young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to remain at school and achieve to their full potential, and maintenance grants are still available for our young people going to university. I want to give an example of something else that has succeeded in increasing social mobility. In Glasgow, there are areas of serious deprivation, and schools in these areas might have only one or two pupils planning on sitting the highest level of qualifications in Scotland—the advanced higher. It is unreasonable, or uneconomic, to run the course for one or two pupils, so these pupils—a group of 20 or 30 students—now come to Caledonian University, funded by the Scottish Government, the university and Glasgow City Council, to experience life on a university campus and to achieve their advanced higher qualifications. That is social mobility.

We support the Opposition motion. Social mobility definitely has to be increased, but grammar schools and austerity are not the way to do it. We have to start looking at what positive steps we can take.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker**: Order. On account of the level of demand, there is a requirement for the imposition of a time limit. We will begin with a six-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

1.44 pm

**Nicky Morgan** (Loughborough) (Con): All Members can agree that a first-class education is the greatest investment we as a country can make in our next generation. I have no doubt about the Secretary of State’s commitment to increasing social mobility, having heard her speak around the Cabinet table over the past few years. I think we can also all agree that post-Brexit it is more important than ever that all our young people leave education well skilled and well educated, particularly if we are to have a new immigration policy in the next few years.

We want excellent education everywhere. As I said at our party conference a couple of years ago, that “everywhere” is fundamental. What is missing from the Green Paper is that sense of a strong and consistent whole system. That might be because it only talks about schools, rather than some of the other issues facing our education system, such as the quality of teaching and the need for more great teachers and for announcements on fairer funding. That said, I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State talking about her commitment to the EBacc.

I should also recognise the Secretary of State’s announcements on opportunity areas. In the White Paper published earlier this year, we identified areas—the achieving excellence areas—that really needed attention, and last week the Social Mobility Commission picked that up. We have heard already about the ResPublica report on Knowsley commissioned by the Knowsley education commission, to which we should pay tribute for recognising the entrenched educational under-performance in its own area and the need to ensure that children and families have choice when it comes to schools.
For me, there are two tests for new schools policies. First, do they specifically tackle areas of underperformance? Secondly—this is at the heart of the debate on selection—is every child being offered an academic, knowledge-rich curriculum? I know that that knowledge-rich curriculum is also of fundamental importance to the Minister for School Standards.

We have to acknowledge that the Government’s Green Paper sets out the dangers of change in selective schools. Paragraph 4 on page 21 states:

“while those children that attend selective schools enjoy a far greater chance of academic success, there is some evidence that children who attend non-selective schools in selective areas may not fare as well academically – both compared to local selective schools and comprehensives in non-selective areas.”

The Education Policy Institute published a report in September. It wrote:

“Analysis of educational performance across OECD countries has concluded that a higher proportion of academically selective schools is not associated with better performance of a school system overall, according to results in the international PISA tests taken by pupils at age 15 in 2012.”

I would like to hear more from the Minister about the evidence the Government are relying on in making the proposals in the Green Paper.

We talk about being a one nation Government, so our focus has to be on tackling those areas of the country where school underperformance is still entrenched, where families do not have a choice, where there are no good or outstanding schools and where the opportunity to travel outside the borough boundaries just does not exist. If the Government seriously believe that having more selective schools will raise standards across the board, they would have proposed introducing those schools only in pilot areas where there was underperformance, but the Green Paper talks about local demand being a driver. What if those areas most in need of higher standards opt out of having new schools? Given the inherent problems in the proposals, the Green Paper has to talk about mitigating measures.

My other concern is that the proposals will distract the Department and the Government from the issues really facing our education system. Let me again mention fair funding, which I know colleagues of all parties, and particularly on the Conservative side, take incredibly seriously as an issue that has to be sorted out.

The second test is whether we think all children can benefit from an excellent, academic, knowledge-rich curriculum, which I think is what our future workforce requires, and we would do that by focusing on the 0 to 4 age group and ensuring that more children arrive in reception classes ready to learn, with the language and social skills that they need.

Andy Burnham: I am listening carefully to what the right hon. Lady is saying. Does she agree with me that this policy is a distraction, and that if we wanted to make the biggest difference to education in our country, we would do that by focusing on the 0 to 4 age group and ensuring that more children arrive in reception classes ready to learn, with the language and social skills that they need?

Nicky Morgan: The right hon. Gentleman is right in the sense that early education is, of course, critically important. One of the issues surrounding more selection is that the attainment gap is already wide by the time children get to the age of 11, and often even before they have reached primary school. The right hon. Gentleman has been a Secretary of State, and he knows that Departments can do more than one thing, so we can focus on early years at the same time as focusing on making sure that every child has an excellent academic education.

As I was saying, true social mobility requires every child to be given the same opportunity, and it is not for other people to make judgments about what children are entitled to. I will always remember my visit to a primary school in Lancashire, whose headteacher informed me that the children in her previous school, a city centre school, were only ever going to be assessed as “requires improvement”. If children are being written off by some even before they have reached the age of 11, that tells me that there is a problem and that it needs to be tackled first.

I will be honest: when it comes to knowing how to vote, I have struggled with both the motion and the amendment before us today. What is being proposed in the Green Paper was not in our manifesto. I really hope that Ministers will listen to the responses to the consultation and to what Members of all parties say today. Let me suggest that if the Government are determined to take forward these proposals, they must set out how the proposals will lift standards in the underperforming areas, and they must start with those underperforming areas.

1.52 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan). She and I have had many times in the past, but I agree with much of what she has just outlined, and I hope that her successor is listening carefully to what she had to say. We do not have long so I shall try to canter through some of the issues as best I can.

Before we get into the meat of the debate, it is important to clarify what we all mean by social mobility. Too often in this debate, we talk about plucking the lucky few from the most disadvantaged to the very top, but that is not what the policy on social mobility needs to address. It is about economic and social progress for the many, not just for the lucky few. It is about making the distance between the rungs on the ladder shorter and pulling up the bottom rung altogether.

The challenges that we face in order to achieve that are, as many have said, deep seated and manifold, but they are particularly important in the world of work of today and tomorrow. Automation and digitalisation and the hollowing out of the low-skilled and many skilled jobs will mean that, for example, by 2022 there will be 9 million low-skilled people going after 4 million jobs, with a 3 million shortfall to fill the 15 million high-skilled jobs that will be available in that economy of the future. Those are the big challenges that our country faces today. The educational landscape needs to address those challenges, not hark back to the challenges of the ’50s and ’60s and the very different economy that obtained then by comparison with today. We thus need a coherent, whole and big bold strategy for tackling social mobility and narrowing the gap in educational disadvantage. As successive Governments have sought
to do that, they have found that it is about dealing with the long tail of under-achievement—not, as this Government seem hell-bent on doing, creating an even more elite education for the already elite.

I see the Secretary of State shaking her head, so let me tell her that the Government could start by adopting in full the recommendations of her own Social Mobility Commission report, published just last week. If she did, she would get widespread cross-party support. There are three key areas set out in that report. I fully agree with them, and they have already been mentioned.

The first is about quality in the early years. I am afraid that when it comes to the early years, we are yet again seeing the Government not understand the policy question that they are being asked. Yes, they are putting more money into childcare—something that I very much welcome—but there are two reasons for investing in the early years: the first is to enable parents to get back into the labour market, and the second is to narrow the educational attainment gap that already exists for many by the age of five. To narrow that gap, we must have an absolute focus on quality, which must be available for the most disadvantaged children, not just for a few. The Government could be spending their money much more wisely in this area by driving up quality across the board.

We need a clear agenda as we go forwards, but I am afraid that many things have been going backwards under this Government. We need more support for parents through the Sure Start programme. We need quality provision most of all in the most disadvantaged areas, as we see with our maintained nursery schools and many classes in primary school, which are all under threat as a result of the new funding formula. We are seeing a levelling down, not a levelling up when it comes to quality in the early years. We could use the early years pupil premium much better. I say to the Secretary of State that she should leverage the extra money she is putting in to ensure that quality is at the heart of her strategy. All we hear about are working families and childcare, but that is not what the social mobility debate is about.

We need a pool of talented teachers everywhere, as we saw in the London Challenge, which was a fantastic achievement of the last Government. We need to see it rolled out to places such as Knowsley and the 10 most disadvantaged areas across the country—but that is not what is happening. Grammar schools will exacerbate the problems of getting quality teachers in the areas that need them most.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady not notice the irony in mentioning Knowsley, where the Labour council’s own report said that the introduction of grammar schools would be transformative, especially for the working-class boys who were under-achieving?

Lucy Powell: That was not a recommendation that the council took on board. What we need is to get the quality teachers into the right areas. We know what works—we know it worked in London—and we need to see the London Challenge rolled out to the 10 worst areas where we know that most disadvantaged children are not getting the schooling they need. There is much more we can do in the post-16 area as well, as the Social Mobility Commission also said.

Let me deal finally with grammar schools. Let us quickly remind ourselves of the evidence. The OECD found that selective countries do less well than those that are non-selective. In England, the highest attainment gaps are in selective boroughs, yet the highest performing local authorities are comprehensive. In Kent, 27% of free school meal children get five A to C grades, whereas in London it is 45%. The tiny number of free school meal children who attend grammar schools is not comparable with the tens of thousands of free school meal children elsewhere. There are just 3,000 of them.

David Willetts described grammar schools as “an arms race of private tuition for rich parents”.

The inequalities that we have described get greater and greater in this system. That is why the chief inspector of schools, the Fair Education Alliance, the Social Mobility Commission, the Education Policy Institute, the Sutton Trust, the headteachers’ unions, all the heads in Surrey, Ruth Davidson and many Conservative Members are all opposed to the reintroduction of grammar schools. If the Secretary of State wants proper cross-party agreement on driving up social mobility, she should take forward her own Government’s report every step of the way and agree with its recommendations on grammar schools. If she did, she would get a consensus in this House.

1.59 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): There is a happy consensus well hidden in this debate. All parties in the House believe that education is of huge importance, and we all want the best possible education for every child in our country. We also accept that the state has the main obligation, because most children will need state finance and state support to secure that great education.

I pay tribute to Ministers for the fact that 1.4 million children are now being educated in good and outstanding schools. There is proof that work by successive Ministers, and, more important, by an army of heads and other teachers in state schools, is delivering better education throughout the country. However, there is still much more to do, and I hope that all the Labour Members who are so critical of current educational achievement in their own areas will work positively with their schools and local education authorities to try to achieve that better performance.

I was pleased to hear the shadow Secretary of State say that she wanted to look at the evidence, but she rather spoilt that by revealing that, although she has made grammar schools her “big thing” and tabled this motion, she has not actually visited any grammar schools since taking on the job. I think that it would have been a courtesy to the grammar schools that she is attacking to visit one or two of them before mounting her challenge today.

The Opposition’s argument is that selection is wrong because we may not select all the talented people at the age of choice, and that it is therefore unfair to give the advantage to those who are selected. Again, however, there is huge humbug on the Opposition Benches. When I asked the shadow Secretary of State whether she was upset by the fact that our elite sportspeople are usually selected at quite a young age for special training and special education, and that they are expected to achieve to a much higher level than the average and are given training and made to do extra work in order to do so, she did not seem to be at all upset.
Andy Burnham: That is a completely useless analogy. Education is about life. It is about the skills that people need to get through life—the basic literacy and numeracy. Sport is not about the entirety of life. That is why education is different, and that is why it is wrong for any child to be labelled second class at the age of 11.

John Redwood: The right hon. Gentleman simply does not understand. If a young person from a poor background becomes a top footballer, that is a transformational event in their life, and good luck to them. Why do the Opposition not understand that exactly the same applies to art, ballet and music? We take the children who we think are going to be the most talented musicians, at quite a young age, and we give them elite special training so that they can play to the highest standards in the world.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman has mentioned football. The fact is that 13% of our national football team went to private schools, which is twice the national percentage of children who go to private schools. Does the right hon. Gentleman think that that might account for the achievements of children who go to private schools. Does he not recognise that that is precisely the problem that we are discussing today? We are missing out on talent as a result of too narrow a focus.

John Redwood: I do not think that we will get a better school if we write off any whole category of school. No one should write off any whole category of school. That is exactly the same arguments apply to art, ballet and music. We take the children who we think are going to be the most talented musicians, at quite a young age, and we give them elite special training so that they can play to the highest standards in the world.

The Opposition must understand that we are not trying to create a series of schools for failures. We want to have great schools for everyone. We believe that selecting some pupils on the basis of academic ability and giving them elite academic training can make sense for them, but it does not write off the other schools.

Ian Austin: I am not at all opposed to giving the brightest pupils an elite education. That is not why I am worried about grammar schools. I am worried about grammar schools because they do not solve the central problems that our education system faces. Michael Wilshaw has said that we have “a mediocre education system”. When it comes to the vast majority of pupils, we are falling behind in international competitors. In a modern economy in which the innovation sector is creating jobs at 30 times the rate of the rest of the economy, we need to exploit the talents of all our young people. That is why I am worried about grammar schools.

John Redwood: I opened my speech with exactly that comment. I think that that is common ground. However, selecting some people who are good at football or good at academic subjects does not prevent us from providing a good education for everyone else. If we want to have more Nobel prize winners in the future, we should bear in mind that they are likely to be attending the great universities in our country. Do we not want to feed those great universities with the best possible talent from our schooling system, and should not those talented people have been given an education that stretches them and takes them further along the road to great work before they reach the universities? The most successful people at university have often had an extremely good education beforehand. They are self-starters, and understand the importance of that.

Lucy Powell: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John Redwood: I do not have time, and many other Members wish to speak.

We need to get the maximum number of talented pupils through at the highest possible level, so that they can achieve even greater things at the elite universities.

That brings me to my next problem with the Opposition’s arguments: they completely ignore the fee-paying schools. Some fee-paying schools in our country achieve enormous success academically. They have a double privilege, because they select bright pupils who also have rich family backgrounds. When the two are put together, the combination is explosively successful.

I do not begrudge people a great education if they come from a rich background. I did not come from a rich background myself, but I am grateful for the fact that those people can have a great education, and it is even better that they pay for it themselves as well as paying their taxes. I am not jealous. It must be a great problem to be against all kinds of elite education when we have those great schools with their double advantage. However, a grammar school gives people who are bright but did not come from a rich background an opportunity...
to compete better against the phenomenally successful elite schools in the public sector. As was rightly pointed out by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), some of our public schools dominate not only academically but in the sporting world and in other worlds as well, which shows that their combination of resource and selection is very powerful. Surely we need more centres of excellence to which people can gain access without having rich parents.

I find it deeply disappointing that Opposition Front Benchers, having called a debate on this important subject, cannot confirm or deny that they wish to abolish the grammar schools that we have. I have one little tip for the Opposition. I was in opposition for all too many years, and I remember how difficult it was, but, as a shadow spokesman, I always found it helpful to work out my party’s position before challenging the Government on theirs. I needed to make sure that my party’s position on the topic for which I was responsible was sensible and also likely to be popular. I think that the Opposition have failed both tests today. It sounds as if the shadow Secretary of State wants to abolish the grammar schools, but does not have the courage to say so.

Let me issue a plea to the House. I ask Members to get behind the excellent grammar schools that we have, and to get behind the excellent comprehensives that we have. I ask them to understand that where comprehensives and grammars coexist, the comprehensives can do very well, and can achieve great things with their pupils. We do not have enough great schools, so let us not cripple those that we have. I certainly do not want to live in a world in which one has to be rich to go to an elite academy.

2.9 pm

**Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab):**

Today’s debate is about how to ensure that every child, no matter what their background, is able to make the most of their life. As the world changes and the labour market changes, that becomes more important than ever.

Good education is the best possible route to opportunity. It is the liberator from circumstance, the opener of minds, the means by which children can change the course of their lives. Its value and power is not only for individuals; it is for the country as a whole. A well-educated country is a country better equipped to succeed in the modern world. It is not just about 11 players; it is about tens of millions of people. A country that neglects education does itself harm. It not only cuts off opportunity for individuals and leaves talent undiscovered and unnourished; it also disarms itself in the mission to make our country the best it can possibly be—so the stakes could not be higher.

There has been some progress. Last week’s Social Mobility Commission report pointed out that disadvantaged young people are 30% more likely to go to university now than many years ago, but despite this progress we still have a long way to go before we can say we have succeeded in our mission. Too many children still do not get the life chances they expect. Too many children are still held back by lack of ambition, and by the view that their background dictates that they could never make it. Too much discussion about the issue begins with the awful defeatist phrase, “These kids.” I believe these kids can achieve anything; I believe that children from any background can achieve as much as those from a better-off background given the chance and the platform. When that does not happen, we have lives unfulfilled, jobs which people cannot take up, resentment at feeling closed off from how the world is changing, and a country which is not making the most of its people.

It need not be like that; we have the power to change it, and in some cases people are already doing so. In my constituency, Holy Trinity primary school, Bilston, ranks among the top 10% of primary schools in England for work with disadvantaged children and is rated outstanding. Its Ofsted report speaks of a school where:

“School leaders and governors are relentlessly focused on securing the very best for their pupils”,

and where,

“from the moment they start in the nursery, children achieve exceptionally well, and this continues throughout the school.”

and all of this is done in a school where the percentage of pupils receiving the pupil premium is twice the national average and where about half the pupils are white British and half a diverse mix of other cultures.

Holy Trinity achieves this because of the fantastic leadership of its head teacher, Carroll McNally, great stewardship from its governors and a refusal to accept anything other than excellence in everything it does. It is an island of excellence, and we have other islands of excellence too, but for all pupils to achieve an excellent education we do not just need islands of excellence; we need a system of excellence, where the kind of performance we see at Holy Trinity and other schools like it runs right through the whole school system.

Do we have that? I am afraid we do not. In July of this year west midlands MPs received a letter from the regional director of Ofsted about the condition of secondary schools in the black country. It expressed concerns about “low standards and weaknesses” in the quality of provision for secondary-aged pupils in all four black country boroughs. The letter said pupils’ achievement by the age of 16 is poor in comparison with pupils elsewhere in the west midlands and nationally; secondary schools are too often failing to build on the success of pupils in primary schools; the gap between the GCSE attainment of disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers is wide; and not enough has been done to address these failings over the years. I am pleased to say Wolverhampton has been improving fast, and is the fourth most improved authority in the country, but that is from a low base and there is still a long way to go.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), who has convened a meeting between those country MPs and the regional director for a few weeks’ time, and I hope this letter is a rallying call for everyone concerned with local education and everyone in a position of leadership to ask what we can do to improve the picture and create a system of excellence, not just islands of excellence.

We cannot be satisfied with the status quo; we ought to be passionate about changing it. The easiest thing in the world in politics is to be a megaphone for anger, but real leadership is not just about amplifying disaffection; it is about giving people a chance, not a grievance.
An extension of grammar schools will not do that, but an improvement in all-ability schools for all children has a real chance of doing so.

Mr Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): I am pleased to follow the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden); I agreed with nearly everything he said until his last line.

I am particularly grateful for having the opportunity to speak in this debate given the inability of the shadow Secretary of State to answer the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) as to whether a future Labour Government would close existing grammar schools, which is a matter of immense importance to me and my constituents, and those of the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), who is sitting next to the shadow Secretary of State on the Opposition Front Bench. I hope we will have an answer to that important question before the end of this debate.

Fundamentally this debate is about social mobility, of course, but it is also about who we believe should make choices in our society: do we believe the men in Whitehall and we in this House should be directing what is available for our constituents, or should we be listening to what they want? Wherever we have selection in our country—my constituents in the borough of Trafford are perhaps the best performing in the country—that system is immensely popular with parents. It is hard to find significant numbers of people who would like to change it because it works so well.

Sammy Wilson: Northern Ireland has nearly a quarter of the grammar schools in the whole of the United Kingdom, and its academic results are the best of all the areas in the United Kingdom. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that reinforces his argument?

Mr Brady: I am delighted the hon. Gentleman raised that, and if I have time I will return to some of the excellent results from Northern Ireland later in my remarks.

There are those in this House who think that it is all right to have a choice of school or type of school for those who can afford to pay fees for it, and there are those who think that it is all right to have a choice of school for those who can afford to buy a house in an expensive catchment area. It is instructive to look at the results of that approach. In the borough of Trafford, which has excellent state education, only 5.2% of pupils go to independent schools; for Manchester the figure is 6.7%, and for Stockport it is 10.1%. However, although we are told that in London state education has been revolutionised, in Camden 29.8% of pupils go to independent schools. We should open up opportunity to people regardless of their ability to pay, and that is exactly what we do in those areas that offer selection in the state sector.

Trafford is outstanding not just because of its seven grammar schools, but because of the outstanding quality of its high schools. The persistent myth from the 1950s and '60s that if we have grammar schools, we have sink schools is an utter nonsense and should be rejected. Knowsley and the report produced for it have been mentioned, including by my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), the former Secretary of State. What has not been mentioned is that one of the so-called secondary modern schools in my constituency—we call them high schools—Ashton-on-Mersey, which spawned The Dean Trust, a very good, effective multi-academy trust, is so good that it has been brought into Knowsley, which was looking for excellence from outside the authority. It is to the high schools in Trafford that people turn, which gives the lie to the nonsense about low attainment in such schools.

We should also reflect on some of the damning evidence about the degree of social segregation elsewhere in the system. The record of the last Labour Government was mentioned earlier. In 2010 the Sutton Trust looked at the 100 most socially selective schools in the country, and 91 of them were comprehensives, selecting by catchment—by postcode, and therefore the ability to buy a house in the catchment area.

Nicky Morgan: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who I know is a passionate advocate of grammar schools based on the experience of his constituency. One issue that has not been raised in the debate so far is that of ethnic segregation. Will he acknowledge that white British pupils make up 70.9% of all secondary-age pupils but only 65.9% of secondary-age pupils in selective schools? One of the arguments being made is that white working-class boys would benefit from more selection. Does he agree that that is not necessarily the case?

Mr Brady: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. Actually, those numbers are rising fast. An answer to a written parliamentary question that I tabled recently provided evidence that every single ethnic minority group, including white British, performs better in partially selective areas than in comprehensive areas and better still in wholly selective areas than in partially selective areas.

Lucy Powell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Brady: I cannot, because I have used up my time for interventions.

If we look at A-level results, we see that eight of the top 10 local authorities are selective or partially selective. In Trafford, 35.8% achieve top A-level grades. GCSE results show that the national average for those achieving five or more GCSEs including maths at grades A* to C is 52.8%. However, seven of the 10 top-achieving authorities are selective or part-selective. I am not talking about grammar schools; I am talking about whole local education authority areas. This year in Trafford, 70.8% of pupils will get five or more A* to C grade GCSEs, with 75% getting those grades in subjects including English and maths.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): What about primary schools?

Mr Brady: I will come to primary schools in a moment.

In Trafford, the participation level in higher education is 72%, and if we look at those going to the top third of higher education institutions, we see that nine of the top 10 authorities involved are selective or part-selective. When we look at students going to Russell Group
universities, we see that seven of the top 10 authorities involved are selective or part-selective. As the hon. Gentleman will know, Trafford is the only authority in the top 20 to be located in the north or the midlands. Opposition Members who represent constituencies in the north or the Midlands and who want to see more opportunities for their constituents would be wise to pay close attention to that statistic. He mentioned primary schools. The culture of aspiration runs deep in Trafford, and nine of the top 250 primary schools published in the Parent Power list in The Sunday Times are in Trafford. The second one in the list is Park Road Primary School in my constituency, which I am obviously delighted to be able to congratulate on its achievement.

The hon. Member for East Antrim ( Sammy Wilson ) asked about Northern Ireland, whose education system has been wholly selective for a very long time. If we look at the performance of the most effective selective systems there, we see that the percentage of children eligible for free school meals who achieve five or more A* to C grades at GCSE is 70%, compared with 45.6% for England. Northern Ireland’s figure is dramatically better. The figure for those in England achieving those grades in subjects including English and maths is 33%, as against 45% in Northern Ireland.

We need to look at how we can expand real choice, and expand the number of good schools of all sorts, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough said. We can no longer tolerate a situation where people are allowed a choice of good schools that can transform life chances only if they are rich enough to pay the fees or to buy a house in the catchment area of one of the top comprehensive schools.

2.23 pm

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Brady). I am also pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) initiated this important debate. She made an excellent speech. I am sure that the whole House will agree that education cannot exist in a vacuum. It broadens horizons and opens doors, and it should be accessible to all. There is nothing more inspiring or transformative than people increasing their knowledge, realising their potential and changing their life circumstances. I owe my grandmother a debt of gratitude for pushing me to do well at night school and giving me a lifelong love of reading. Education later in life gave me the opportunities that changed my life, and I want others to have those same chances.

However, the Government’s Social Mobility Commission’s “State of the Nation” report shows that the engine is spluttering rather than firing on all cylinders. It concludes:

“The rungs on the social mobility ladder are growing further apart.”

Those words should be a call for action, yet the Government appear to offer only words. The action that we need should not be to fall back on the failed prescriptions of the past, such as trying to revive grammar schools. We need a future-facing overhaul to bridge the gap between education and employment. The traditional world of work is rapidly changing, but much of our curriculum hopelessly lags behind the pace of change.

If education is to be a powerhouse of social mobility, it needs to work in tandem with the demands of the modern economy. The Government seem to recognise that fact only in fits and starts. They launched a half-baked “year of code” initiative, which rightly drew a great deal of criticism, not least because its executive director did not even know how to code. Advisers were quitting, saying that they wanted nothing to do with it, and the Government have gone scurrying back to their comfort zone of 1950s Britain where privileged children learned Latin and grammar schools were the great hope. That is where we are now, and it is just not good enough. There is a wealth of evidence to highlight how ill prepared we are. An “Unleashing Entrepreneurs” study by OnePoll reveals that a lack of digital skills—or “digital poverty”—is causing the failure of far too many UK start-ups. But it is not just vital tech skills that we are failing to equip our children with. Failure to meet engineering skills demand is costing the United Kingdom £27 billion a year, according to Engineering UK.

The gap between the new world of work and education continues to widen. We need to start narrowing the gap between education and employers. A survey by the Gatsby Foundation found that in only 40% of schools did a young person have an encounter with an employer at least once a year from year 7 onwards. We can do better than that, and Labour—the party of work—recognises that education cannot exist in a vacuum. Unless education adapts to the changing employment landscape, we will be setting our children up to fail. With recent research by Oxford University and Deloitte suggesting that 850,000 public sector jobs could be lost to automation by 2030, it is clear that we should be preparing now for a brave new world. Let us hope that the Chancellor is able to rise to this challenge in the autumn statement and kick-start a vision of social mobility. If the Government do not act, those who are just about managing now—the JAMs—will soon become the LOTs: those who are left on the scrapheap.

If any vision of social mobility is to have a chance of putting down roots and being seen as credible, Parliament will need to start being seen as a proper, living example of social mobility. We have seen the reaction in America to the Clintons and the Bushes as the American dream of social mobility has withered away. People want their Governments to get real and to create a genuine stakeholder society where everyone has a chance to get on. In Britain, they want the British promise that hard work will be rewarded to mean something again. That is now the challenge for this Government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but the time limit on Back-Bench speeches must now be reduced to five minutes with immediate effect.

2.29 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): It is a particular pleasure for me to speak in this debate, having attended a south London grammar school myself. I can say from personal experience that I would not be here were it not for that grammar school, so I feel an obligation to other youngsters growing up in south London who are from ordinary backgrounds such as mine to speak up when the opportunity arises.
I echo many of the things said by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Brady), in particular by highlighting the terrible unfairness in the system. The only way to be sure of an outstanding education is often to pay for it, either by going private, or by buying a much more expensive house in the catchment area of a good school. It is a disgrace that the only way to be certain of an academically elite education today is by paying for it.

I want to respond to a question that the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), my colleague on the Treasury Committee, posed to the Secretary of State. He asked for evidence that children from ordinary backgrounds do better in grammar schools. He asked for one piece of evidence, but I will give him two. First, in areas where at least 10% of pupils are selected, the GCSE grades of free school meal kids are seven notches better than those of equivalent children in non-selective schools. That is a seven-grade boost. Secondly, white male children—I think the previous Secretary of State mentioned them—who go to grammar schools have a 30% higher chance of going to university than those who do not.

Parents and teachers following this debate will have heard a Government Member say that the only way to guarantee an excellent education is to pay for it. The hon. Gentleman is rubbing us out of our excellent education system. The fact of the matter is that, yes, we should be enabling choice. By the way, no Government Member is suggesting a return to the system under the Education Act 1944. No one is proposing the reintroduction of secondary moderns. We already have many different kinds of academies and free schools, and grammar schools have a place in that diverse system along with other types of school. Parents can then exercise choice over which school works for them. It is clear that when free school meal children go to grammar schools, they do significantly better than if they do not.

Lucy Powell: Parents and teachers following this debate will have heard a Government Member say that the only way to guarantee an excellent education is to pay for it. The hon. Gentleman is rubbing us out of our excellent education system. The fact of the matter is that, yes, many parents want to select their children’s education socially, but if we flip the issue and look at the situation for free school meal children, the hon. Gentleman will find that progress in the comprehensive system massively exceeds that in the private sector.

Chris Philp: It is clear in my area of Croydon that parents who want a particular kind of academic education have to travel out of the borough to either Bromley or Sutton because the kind of education that they want for their children is not available. That leads me on to my next point about parental choice. If parents want a particular kind of education for their children, it is not for this House to deny them that choice on ideological grounds. We should be enabling choice.

By the way, no Government Member is suggesting a return to the system under the Education Act 1944. No one is proposing the reintroduction of secondary moderns. We propose a diverse system with a whole range of schools with different specialisms. We already have many different kinds of academies and free schools, and grammar schools have a place in that diverse system along with other types of school. Parents can then exercise choice over which school works for them. It is clear that when free school meal children go to grammar schools, they do significantly better than if they do not.

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my Treasury Committee colleague for giving way. Part of the explanation for his last point is that, given the very nature of academic selection, the higher-attaining pupils from the poorest backgrounds attend those schools. The evidence base as a whole shows that if a pupil from a deprived background goes to a grammar school, they are less likely to do as well as their better-off counterparts, and the impact on the system as a whole is not positive. That is why every leading educational expert says that this is a bad policy.

Chris Philp: I refer my Treasury Committee colleague to the Education Policy Institute report that was published in September—it is quite recent, so perhaps he has not had a chance to read it—that found that the seven-grade advantage adjusts for prior academic attainment. Therefore, with the same level of attainment, a child on free school meals does better in a grammar school than they would if they went to a non-grammar school.

I have heard two objections to grammar schools from Opposition Members. There are two reasonable objections that one might make, so it is only fair to acknowledge them and try to respond. The first objection is that only 3% of grammar school pupils are on free school meals, whereas the figure for the population as a whole is 13%. It is reasonable for Members on both sides of the House to draw attention to that deficiency and to question it, but my answer to that challenge is that, by being inventive and creative, it is possible to increase that percentage radically. There is a fantastic example from the Schools of King Edward VI in Birmingham, which has increased its free school meal intake from 3% or 4% up to more than 20%, which is above the national average. That has been achieved through a series of innovative measures, including active outreach to primary schools in deprived areas; free help with tests for children from deprived families—one problem is that middle-class parents pay for coaching for their children—and bursaries for parents who are worried about the costs of uniforms, musical instruments or extra travel. By doing those things, the group has transformed its free school meal intake.

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend will be aware of the evidence given by Rebecca Allen of Datalab to the Education Committee that shows the negative impact on other grammar schools in that local area: they have lost more of their free school meal children. I think he needs to argue for an increase in the overall number of free school meal children if he wants his policies to work.

Chris Philp: I am arguing that grammar schools should do outreach, like those in the King Edward VI group, and ensure that the figure increases from 3% so that children from deprived backgrounds can get in and genuinely do well, which is not happening as much as it should. Wallington County Grammar School in my next-door borough of Sutton uses a slightly lower test threshold for free school meal children and has dramatically increased its intake from that group. I was happy to read on page 25 of the Green Paper that a number of the things that have worked in schools such as Wallington and those in the King Edward VI group will be conditions when existing grammar schools expand or new grammar schools open. By attaching those conditions, the Government will address the reasonable concerns that have been raised by Members on both sides of the House.

The second objection, to which the former Secretary of State just alluded, is that non-selective schools do worse in selective areas because the selective schools have in some way creamed off the best pupils. There is no clear evidence for that. There are reports from both...
sides giving both points of view. In 2008, the Sutton Trust found no such effect; another study found an extremely marginal effect. We have already heard—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We will not have sedentary interventions and the waving around of documents. It is simply not done in here.

Chris Philp: Thank you for defending me so valiantly, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West how Northern Ireland is an excellent case study of where the entire education system, not just grammar school pupils, has done well. In conclusion, with the reforms in the Green Paper, the system can work and help children from deprived backgrounds to fulfil their potential.

2.37 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important but, sadly, repetitive debate. I say that because this issue rears its head every time we have a Conservative Government. Just what is the Conservative party’s fascination with grammar schools? When it comes to social mobility, the Conservative’s response seems to be to resort to dogma. The return to grammar schools embodies retrograde thinking and a return to a system that benefits only a select few—if anyone at all. There is no evidence, no justification and no basis for the belief that selective education leads to improved social mobility. The House does not have to take my word for it; the Government’s own advisory body on social mobility, the Social Mobility Commission, says that grammar schools do not work.

Education is the single most important tool available to each and every Government to improve social mobility in this country. It is sad that this Government’s fascination with selective education means that any genuine dialogue about how we can improve social mobility is lost in the noise of Tory MPs calling for the reintroduction of grammar schools. This debate is repeated time and again with the same conclusion: grammar schools do not work. There is no easy way to improve social mobility in this country and anyone who believes otherwise is sadly deluded. Social mobility can be improved only through a tide of political will, a slate of complex interventions and, most importantly, through unwavering investment over the long term, not just in one Parliament.

I am proud that such political will existed under the previous Labour Government; what followed was funding to help all children, not just the select few who are educated in our private school system, to realise their potential. Under a Labour Government, school budgets increased year on year. Under this Government, according to forecasts by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, school budgets will fall in real terms by 8% in this Parliament. Under a Labour Government, education maintenance allowance was introduced to help children from low-income families to continue in further education, whereas under the Conservative party EMA has been scrapped, the further education sector has faced real-terms cuts of 14%, and maintenance grants in the higher education sector are set to be scrapped. That is a recipe for a social mobility disaster, undermining all the progress made in recent years to raise aspiration and improve life chances. At this time, my constituency needs more help, more investment and more long-term planning, not less.

In 2010-11, which was the last year of EMA, there were more than 8,000 recipients of it in the Bradford district. At that time, my constituency was ranked 64th nationally on the index of multiple deprivation. By 2015, however, Bradford South’s position had worsened to 41st, which points to an increase in need and suggests that even more young people would have benefited from EMA. As I have told the House before, my constituency ranks 609th out of 650 for the percentage of individuals with level 4 qualifications or above. Furthermore, when it comes to the percentage of individuals without any qualifications, Bradford South is 74th in our league tables. Having a grammar school will not change that.

The Government should take a step back, reflect on their record in government—their flawed plans and inadequate investment—and do the right thing: end their fascination with grammar schools; summon the political will to back a slate of complex interventions; and, most importantly, commit to investment over the long term.

2.41 pm

Mr Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): I welcome the debate, in which there appears to be wide agreement about the stagnant state of social mobility in the UK but less agreement on the right way to revive it. We have an elephant in the room in this debate: the deep philosophical differences between those inspired by a meritocratic vision of society and those who take the egalitarian view. That situation is perfectly healthy and respectable. Of course people who take the egalitarian view will find the idea of meritocracy very hard to reconcile with their world view. That is lurking, and some Labour Members ought to be a bit more honest about it. People hold other objections, which I also recognise. I support the meritocratic vision of fairness, not only on moral grounds but because it can, unlike the egalitarian mirage, reinforce, not paralyse, a healthy, vibrant and competitive economy which creates the jobs, wages and tax revenue for our precious public services.

I wish to discuss the evidence on selection, because there is strong evidence in favour of it—if it is done in the right way. We see that in the existing selection we have within schools; in the independent sector; at 16, when pupils want to stay on to do A-levels; and when students go to university. The motion says there is “no evidence” that selection—or any further selection—will improve social mobility, but this is clearly still a contentious issue. I am not saying it is cut and dried, but there is compelling evidence in favour of selection here: the review conducted by Sir Chris Woodhead, the former chief inspector of schools in 2009; and the evidence I heard in 2013 from Andreas Schleicher when I was serving on the Education Committee. He did not give an unequivocal view one way or another, but he did say that there was evidence that supported selection, provided admissions were done on a clear and objective basis and there were opportunities for selection later on.

The Opposition motion is therefore clearly flawed, but I accept that an expansion of grammars needs to be done in the right way, with tests that are fair and
objective, minimising the scope for coaching, and with grammars schools expanded beyond a middle-class preserve. There is a strong case for making sure that the first tranche are in urban or rural areas with high levels of deprivation and low educational standards, both to create a ladder of opportunity for bright kids from the council estate or the rural backwater, and to have a beacon of educational excellence in those schools.

There is a reasonable question as to the age at which selection should take place. I certainly agree with Schleicher and the OECD that there ought to be doors for selection at different ages, to make sure that we do not close off opportunities for late developers. It also goes without saying that this is not a zero-sum game: we can support grammars and still want to raise standards across the whole state education system, particularly for the most deprived areas. That is what we have seen happening under this Government—1.4 million more children are going to schools deemed “good” or “outstanding” than were doing so in 2010—particularly through policies such as the pupil premium, which was specifically designed to target the children in the most deprived areas and to make sure that no child was left behind.

I support the Government’s proposals, but the other note of caution I sound is that grammars are not a silver bullet; they are one piece in patiently putting together the jigsaw that will help to revive social mobility. I support the Green Paper’s proposals on harnessing the talent, creativity and innovation of the independent sector. Indeed, I would go even further, as I like the idea of the Sutton Trust’s work to open up all independent schools on a meritocratic and means-tested basis. That would massively widen their intake of youngsters from humble backgrounds.

Notwithstanding the great strides we have made on apprenticeships and vocational training, this country still has a massive hang-up with the technical route for people to make a success of themselves. Whether we are talking about vocational training or apprenticeships, we do not have the same parity of esteem as there is in countries such as France, Switzerland and Germany. I would like to see us do more on those non-graduate routes to the professions so that we create the ladders of opportunities for not only bright academic youngsters, but for bright but not necessarily bookish youngsters.

When I look at the Green Paper overall, and not just what it says about grammars, I share the inspiring ambition that the Prime Minister has set out to make Britain the great meritocracy of the world. This is only the first step, but a lot of people are talking a good game about social mobility without being willing to get behind it, will it and deliver the means to it. On the basis that this is a first step, it has my full support.

2.46 pm

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): We face two major challenges in education in Britain. First, we are rapidly falling behind other countries for basic numeracy and literacy—not just Finland and South Korea, as has been traditional, but now even Estonia, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. That is one reason why Michael Wilshaw recently told the Education Committee that we have a mediocre education system in our country. Secondly, with the innovation economy creating jobs at a much higher rate than the economy as a whole, and with jobs that require no skills or low skills disappearing at a rapid rate, we need to educate all our young people to a high standard.

However, as we have heard, last week’s Social Mobility Commission report shows that compared with children from the most advantaged areas, children from deprived areas are 27 times more likely to go to an inadequate school, more likely to drop out of education at 16, and 30% less likely to study A-levels that could get them into a top university. White working-class boys are even worse off. New research by the Sutton Trust shows that three quarters are being so badly let down that they are failing to achieve five good GCSE grades. Let us compare that with the situation for pupils from independent schools: just five public schools send more pupils to Oxbridge than 2,000 state schools—two-thirds of the entire state sector; and despite accounting for just 7% of school pupils, those from independent schools represent seven out of 10 High Court judges, more than half our leading journalists and doctors, and more than a third of MPs.

I want to see the whole country united around the mission of driving up standards and opening up opportunity for all pupils, but grammars can improve social mobility only if poor children are able to go to them. Analysis by the Education Datalab shows that poor children are much less likely to get in than their better-off peers. Poor children have already had a poorer start to their education by the age of 11, making it harder for them to get into grammar schools; but even where two children have the same scores at key stage 2, the poorer child is less likely to pass an entry exam and get into a grammar school. In fact, in areas with selective grammar schools the gap between rich and poor is greater than it is in areas without any grammar schools at all. Grammar schools also put a barrier between these pupils and some of the country’s most experienced teachers: the Education Datalab also shows that 54% of teachers at grammars have been in the profession for more than 10 years, whereas at a secondary modern just 41% have the same experience.

We should be doing the opposite. We should have better schools for every child, and we should expand the gifted and talented programme. Instead of using scarce resources on new grammar schools, we should focus on improving early years education and tackling stubborn levels of under-achievement in areas such as the black country, and areas across the midlands and the north. We should provide incentives and support to train experienced teachers, get them into schools with poorer children and help them stay in the profession. Anyone who visits a school that has been turned around or seen a dramatic improvement in results will know that it is impossible without the inspirational leadership that brilliant heads provide. We need new ways of identifying, recruiting and training a new generation of headteachers.

New grammars will not tackle the fundamental problems that our education system faces. They will not transform the quality of education for all pupils or tackle the social mobility crisis that exists in Britain. The policy would do nothing to solve our greater teacher recruitment and retention crisis. It will not help to identify, train and recruit a new generation of brilliant heads, improve early years education, which is
the key to giving every child a first-class start, or improve the status and quality of vocational education. It will do nothing about the funding crisis facing post-16 education, and the deepest cuts that the further education sector has ever seen. Those are the issues that the Government should address.

We should all agree that education is our No. 1 priority. Let us sweep aside this old party political dogma. Instead of using time, energy and resources on expensive and time-consuming structural changes for which there is absolutely no evidence, let us have a national debate about education and involve all the parties, employers, and the teaching profession. Based on the evidence, we can then work out how a modern education system should be structured and what young people need to learn for the modern economy.

2.51 pm

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): The recent state of the nation report of the Social Mobility Commission highlights the challenges that we continue to face when it comes to tackling educational inequality and improving social mobility. Thanks to the Government’s reforms since 2010, there are 1.4 million more children now attending schools that are rated “good” or “outstanding” compared with six years ago. Furthermore, £2.5 billion has been invested this year in the pupil premium, which is reducing the attainment gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their better-off peers in primary and secondary schools. I say to the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) that that is having a much bigger impact than EMA ever did or ever would have. However, there is still far more to do. Children living in the midlands or in the north have a smaller chance of attending a good school than children in the south. Just 5% of children eligible for free school meals are getting those five A grades at GCSE, while white working class boys, as we have heard many times today, are less likely to go to university.

As has been mentioned earlier, it is vital that appropriate support is targeted at children of a young age, as we know that educational inequalities start before children reach school age. Indeed, a report from the Institute for Public Policy Research earlier this year stated that children from the north are already behind their southern counterparts by the age of five. From September next year, the Government will double the current entitlement of 15 hours of free childcare a week for all three and four-years-olds in England to 30 hours—part of a record £6 billion per year investment in childcare by the end of this Parliament. The introduction of the early years pupil premium has equipped providers with the flexibility to innovate to improve the quality of early years provision for eligible children.

I shall briefly mention one incredibly important group of young people whom we must consider as part of this debate—children who are looked after in the state system. Outcomes for our looked-after children in education are poorer than their peers, and the gap gets wider as the children get older. Although trends in the educational attainment of looked-after children are generally improving, these children are still far less likely than their peers to receive good GCSE and A-level results and, indeed, tend not to go to university. When we speak about social mobility and ensuring that a child’s background should not determine how far they can go in life, it is imperative that we remain mindful of looked-after children and the sometimes unique obstacles that they face.

All this is where we are in our current system. We can all agree that despite the improvements that have been made since 2010, there is still a shortage of good school places and adequate choice for children when it comes to choosing the best education for their child.

There are two grammar schools in my local area: Crossley Heath and North Halifax Grammar School. Both schools provide an excellent education to children and have proved incredibly popular with parents across Calderdale for many years. Sadly, although they are popular with all parents, it is only those in middle-income or high-net-worth families that tend to access those schools because of the costs associated with preparation for entry—whether tuition or private school. This has been a big bugbear of mine for many years. If our local primary schools are serious about social mobility and about access to the right school place for each individual child, why do they not offer tuition to access grammar schools for those children who are capable and come from less well-off means?

It is not because the schools cannot afford to do so—we have already heard how much they get from the pupil premium—but because they oppose the principle. Indeed, to the many Opposition Members who oppose selective education on principle, I would say that this discrimination is already an inbuilt part of the comprehensive system at present. Having a ban on grammar schools already causes an inbuilt discrimination against those without monetary means. Comprehensive schools also tend to be highly selective on wealth in other areas, as good and outstanding schools are disproportionately in well-to-do areas, and that is widely acknowledged.

Unfortunately, I do not have a great deal of time left, so I will be brief. In the interests of improving education standards and increasing choice for parents, there is a case for relaxing restrictions on selective education. That proposal, alongside other initiatives, will indeed increase social mobility.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Such is the ferocity of this debate and the number of interventions, I am afraid that we are over-running and I therefore have to reduce the time limit to four minutes. I call Liz Kendall.

2.56 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Many hon. Members have already said that the Government’s plans to expand grammar schools will increase, not reduce, social division. All the evidence shows that poor children are less likely to get into grammar schools, that poor children are more likely to fall even further behind their better-off peers and that the effects can be long lasting. Our opposition to grammar schools and to the Government’s proposals does not mean that we are in any way complacent about the achievement gap between poor and better-off children at school—far from it.

Labour Members understand the complex problems that face many children and families in our most deprived areas, but that must never be used as an excuse for
tolerating failure or low expectations. We must be fearless champions of every child and always put their needs first.

Getting a great education is about more than our belief that everyone should have the chance to fulfil their potential. It must be at the heart of our response to globalisation, too. The world is changing faster than ever before. New technologies and markets emerge, and companies and jobs move, in what seems like a blink of an eye. This is opening up real opportunities for some, but it is also leaving too many people behind. Yet our response to global change cannot simply be to hold up a mirror to people’s anger and despair. That leads nowhere, and does not create a single job or opportunity. Neither should we try to kid people that we can somehow turn back the clock, because we cannot stop technological change or the huge changes we are seeing in China, India and elsewhere. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) says, we must be the champions of a chance, not of a grievance. We should not shy away from change, but instead equip people with the skills, knowledge, chances and choices in life to make change work for them.

There are three priorities on which the Government should now focus, the first of which is early years. When poor children in my constituency start school up to 19 months behind their better-off peers, they play catch-up for the rest of their lives. They struggle to get five decent GCSEs let alone go to college or university or get a decent job.

Mr McFadden: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning the early years. Does she think that, given the closures of Sure Start centres in recent years, the money devoted to this new policy would be better spent on early years intervention?

[Mr McFadden]

The Government should look at trialling a new Help to Buy scheme for teachers who agree to move to areas with struggling schools. Both of these initiatives could be paid for by reforming the existing, expensive bursary scheme.

Finally, we must transform vocational education to equip people with the skills they need to succeed in the global economy. Britain has nowhere near enough apprenticeships of high enough quality, focusing on the skills that our country really needs. Two thirds of the apprenticeships created in recent years were only at level 2 or GCSE equivalent, and three quarters of them went to people aged over 25 who were already in work. This is in stark contrast to countries such as Germany, which has much higher levels of participation and where 90% of apprenticeships are three to four-year programmes at level 3 or higher.

If the Government are serious about tackling skills shortages and helping people cope with globalisation, they need to create up to 300,000 quality apprenticeships at level 3 or higher every single year. They should focus on areas with the biggest skills gap, such as science, technology, engineering and maths, help more small firms take part with minimal bureaucracy, and ensure that young people can move from vocational to academic qualifications—and vice versa—at every stage post-16.

When I visit schools in my constituency, I see the energy, hope and enthusiasm in the children’s eyes, but I know that the cards are stacked against them before they have even begun, in a world that is now so unforgiving of people without skills. It is my job—and all our jobs—to break down the barriers to their success. Expanding grammar schools is not the answer, and will do nothing to address the very real challenges created by globalisation. The Government must think again.

3.2 pm

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I am a Conservative because I believe fiercely in aspiration. I believe, too, that it does not matter where people start in life, what their parents did or how wealthy their family is—people can achieve their dreams and improve their life through their own endeavours, dedication and an attitude of service and community. That, for me, is real compassion, and it is no more abundantly clear than in relation to the education policies and achievements of this Government and this party.

If we look at the evidence, we realise that the Opposition have no grounds to complain. When Labour left office in 2010, two in five children were leaving secondary school functionally illiterate or innumerate—two in five, in a country with some of the best schools in the world. That is unacceptable and a scandal. Employers had lost confidence in exams because of grade inflation, and kids were made to catch up when they got to university. Thanks to the bold reforms of structures and standards, progress has been made. The free schools movement has reinvigorated the teaching profession to inject innovation and allow teachers and schools to provide the standards they want in their community.
Prior to my election to Parliament, I co-founded and now chair one of the early free schools, Michaela community school, in my home town, Wembley. We are now in our third year of opening. It is a secondary school in a run-down part of London. Pupils come from a wide range of backgrounds—40% are Afro-Caribbean, more than 50% are on the pupil premium, nearly half speak English as a second language, and one in five has special educational needs. One third of pupils start at Michaela community school with a reading age below their chronological age; many have been thrown out of their previous schools. However, our philosophy of an academically rigorous curriculum, high expectations and zero tolerance of poor behaviour has proved popular with children and parents in the area. Every child is treated as though they have the potential to get to Oxbridge, even if some enter with low attainment and poor behaviour. We have children who make five years’ progress in reading in one year. That is because of our invigorated teachers, innovation in teaching and the standards that we apply.

Our teachers recently published a book about what makes Michaela excellent. I am going to read a story about one of our pupils, Korey, who joined Michaela community school last September.

"He is black, has special educational needs and lives on an estate. His mother and grandmother were desperate. His father was absent. His primary school said that he was the worst-behaved child they had ever seen. We happily invited Korey into Michaela."

We are a very inclusive school. My headmistress, Katharine Birbalsingh, explained to Korey’s mother "how the school works, why we have silent classrooms with hard-working children, learning more than anyone would have imagined possible, even more than their counterparts at private schools.”

At Michaela we have "silent and orderly corridors, and lunch halls that are free from bullying, our playground where children are able to be children. It works because we do not pander to every parental whim, making exceptions in order to 'accommodate'.”

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Does the school that my hon. Friend chairs focus on the quality of teaching, which we know is so important for high achievement in schools?

Suella Fernandes: Exactly. It is the quality of teaching that has made the difference to Korey’s life, for example. He is now one of our extraordinary successes. He has progressed in reading and numeracy and his behaviour is transformed. It is quality of teaching and high expectations that make the difference to our children.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that quality teaching need not take place within the confines of a grammar school, and that it can take place in a quality comprehensive?

Suella Fernandes: Quality teaching is what makes the difference. Empowered heads, impassioned teachers, high standards and rigour—that is what is working in our schools. That is why we have seen progress. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards because he has focused relentlessly and tirelessly on phonics, for example. Since the phonics test was introduced in 2012, we have seen thousands more children achieving the basic requirements in literacy, enabling them to enjoy reading. We have seen the introduction of the EBacc, an academically rigorous curriculum that is raising standards for thousands of children around the country. That is what makes a difference, and it is the Conservative party that is standing up and calling out low standards.

In our schools’ structures and standards, the Conservative party has made a massive difference in trying to remedy the failings of the Labour party in education. On grammar schools, Labour has got it wrong again. What parents like about grammar schools and what pupils cherish in those schools is exactly the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately)—high quality teaching, high standards, zero tolerance of bad behaviour and the cultivation of an environment where studying is valued and confidence is engendered. That is what works in schools. Why does the Labour party want to curb that and restrict a whole generation of children from accessing excellent schools, excellent teachers and innovation in our schools? The Opposition should be ashamed of themselves and they should support this policy as much as they can.

3.8 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The question that we are all trying to answer today is, “If you are talented, can you succeed in modern Britain? And why does it matter if you can’t?” We should be unashamedly selfish about social mobility. Living in a country where more people can achieve their potential means that they are more likely to do things which help us all, whether they invent new forms of energy or become doctors, entertainers or even MPs. When brains, not birth, form the basis of achievement, we all benefit. That is why it matters that social mobility is stuck in Britain. It is wasting the potential to change the world.

In my short contribution today, I want to take up the challenge posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), who spoke about the repetition in this debate, and offer the challenge that focusing on schools and education is not enough. We also have to address the divisions in access to finance and networks, which continue to hold back too many in our country. Bluntly, we have to address the fact that it is the bank of mum and dad—and all that it offers in terms of cash and connections—that increasingly makes a difference to social mobility in our modern world, and that we miss a trick if we do not think about those things.

We should make no mistake: education too often drives outcomes, and money and privilege have a big hand in that, as many Members have already set out. That is not just about academic talent; it is also about creative talent, and the same patterns are clear in acting and sport, although with the possible exception of music. Surely, however, our answer to young, bright, talented children cannot be that we think they should go on “The X Factor”—we know they have the X factor.

Instead, we have to understand the barriers they face in this post-Brexit, low-growth world, where constant, disruptive technological change means they will hold seven different jobs in their lifetime—two of which have not yet been invented. If we do not address those barriers, too many children will not get those opportunities. It is in that environment that we need to understand
[Stella Creasy]

how access to finance makes a difference. Housing has
come to dominate not just catchment areas, but families’
options for subsidising their children, whether that is
remortgaging and starting up a business or being able
to help their children go to university.

This is also about understanding how, in today’s
disruptive world, the bank of mum and dad can be the
difference in terms of taking the leap between one
career and the next. With half of all today’s students
chasing careers that will be made obsolete by technology
and automation, we cannot afford to ignore this challenge.

Where previous generations fought to ensure that
their children could advance up the career ladder, the
next generation will thrive only if it can access multiple
livelihoods. Many ladders are being taken away just as
they are being created. Our new elite will be those with
not just the money to start again, but the contacts and
the confidence to get their foot in many doors.

In the face of such uncertainty about traditional
career paths, one great hope for us should be the
entrepreneurship among our young adults. However,
what do we have to offer those young entrepreneurs?
Whether someone is educated at university or wants to
start a new business or to go into further education, the
bank of mum and dad offers not just money but contacts
and networks, in a world where access to internships
and unpaid experience all too often defines outcomes.

That is why it is time for us to think again. It is time
to ask how we can ensure that not just 50% but 100% of all
18-year-olds can take out a loan for the pathway they
want to take. It is time to ask how we can make sure
every child can access that educational work experience
or internship opportunity, not just those with the parents
who can get them in the door or who can pay for them
do that work. It is time to ask why on earth the last
Government got rid of the child trust fund and to bring
it back in time to help the next generation of children to
move forward.

Michael Young talked about a meritocracy. That is
why grammar schools are such an outmoded way of
thinking. The future will be about the many different
doors we want children to be able to walk through and
about making sure that the bank of mum and dad is
open to every single young person, not just the few.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order.
I am afraid we have to reduce the time limit to three
minutes.

3.12 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): For me, social mobility
is one of the most fundamental objectives of an education
system and a Government—it runs deep in my veins.
Last week, I had to give a tribute to my father, who
recently died of mesothelioma. Without his commitment
to my education, as somebody who, like my mother, left
school at 16, I would not have had the opportunity to
break free from a pattern of manual work, work in
service or growing plants, as he did.

Each morning when I leave my flat, I see a framed
letter from King George VI in 1943 to my great-great-aunt
Maud, who worked as a maid in Buckingham Palace.

I regard the fact that, in three generations, members of
my family can move from being maids to Members of
Parliament as a function of the social mobility that
should exist in our country. Before it is suggested that,
somehow, being a Member of Parliament is the summit
of human achievement, let me say that I certainly do
not believe that that is the case.

What I do believe is that education is about choices. I
want to address the core motivation that may exist in
the minds of those who sought this debate—that grammar
schools somehow restrict social mobility to a chosen
few, consigning children who go to non-grammars to a
future without such opportunities. It is my contention
that education is not about the type of school, but
about instilling a fundamental belief in the value of
hard work. It is about access to high-quality teaching
for all and about rigorous standards in education, whatever
the type of school. It is also about parental support and
encouragement—something we have not heard much
about today.

My father passed his 11-plus and he got some O-levels,
but whereas his parents fundamentally did not see the
point of further study, his grandsons see a very different
focus, as my sister and I try to take advantage of every
learning opportunity. So let us conceive of education
and social mobility not simply as a function of school
type. Let us value the framework that surrounds school
attendance—the teaching, resources and esteem.

I also want to challenge the notion of stigma—the
belief that, if one does not pass the 11-plus, one is
consigned to a different life trajectory. It is said by some
that such a child is labelled a failure. That is not my
experience, looking at the eight secondary schools in my
constituency.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): My
hon. Friend makes an important point about 11 not
being the cut-off point that defines a child’s future.
Does he support the proposal, which some colleagues
have referred to, that there should be multiple entry
points into any new grammar schools?

John Glen: Absolutely. I totally welcome that point. I
welcome the value that we see in university technical
colleges, studio schools, academies and the range of
other options that exist. There is a lot of mobility
between those schools and a lot of transferring to
grammar schools at sixth form.

It is wrong to suggest that we should have targets for
where children go when they leave school—a target of a
certain number going to university. We need to work
hard in the House to generate parity of esteem for
apprenticeships, higher-level apprenticeships, vocational
education and all types of higher education. We should
enable movement to these different settings at different
stages.

The fact that so many of Salisbury’s young people go
to the grammar schools for sixth form is testimony to
the enduring quality of those schools’ academic A-level
offer. However, the fact that other young people choose
the excellent free sixth form is a reflection of how it
provides for the diverse needs that grammars do not
provide for and of how grammars do not suit all children.

We need to recognise that social mobility is achieved
by embracing the broadest possible range of options, by
encouraging specialisms and diversity and by valuing
the widest context for learning for our young people.
3.17 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Social mobility is an issue for the white working class. It is an issue that we have failed to discuss in this debate. Only 32% of working-class white British students receiving free school meals achieved the GCSE benchmark last year. That is compared with 44% of mixed-race students, 55% of Bangladeshi students, 42% of black Caribbean students and 47% of Pakistani students, all of whom were also receiving free school meals. That has happened because the educational attainment of white working-class students has improved much more slowly than that of almost any other ethnic group over the last 10 years.

I could take Members of this House to the grammar schools in Sutton, next to my constituency, and I could show them classes of young first and second-generation Tamil kids on free school meals. They are there because their parents understand the importance of education. They live the immigrants’ dream, which many Members of this House have shared and benefited from. However, our own white working-class kids are not getting the benefit. The issue is so much bigger than the type of school; it is about all social inputs.

We know from the Education Committee’s report into underachievement among white working-class kids that going to a good school disproportionately benefits poor white kids. There are schools out there doing a brilliant job and changing lives. I would like to suggest that, as in so many cases, Members have a look at the Harris academy chain in south London. Last year, about 56% of white British students nationwide secured five A to C GCSEs. However, at Harris Greenwich in 2015, 60% of white British students secured those grades. Just five years ago, the school—then the Eltham Foundation—was in special measures. However, now, under the excellent leadership of a strong principal, George McMillan, it has undertaken quite an unimaginable transformation. Harris Falconwood has a staggering 73% of white British students securing those grades. Yet again, the rate of success of this school is incredible. In 2008, only 17% of students achieved these grades, but under the leadership of principal Terrie Askew, the school is now judged “outstanding” by Ofsted.

These schools should be our ideals, regardless of whether they are mainstream, grammars or academies. I am enormously grateful to Lord Harris for his involvement in the schools in my constituency, but I am also grateful to all the people who lead and teach in our schools.

There is a clear consensus in the House about the importance of pre-school education and early years education—primary school. Progress is being made in these areas, particularly in the improvement of standards in primary schools, but there is more to be done, particularly so that children arrive at reception already having good language skills, particularly in their first language, which is not always the case.

Today we are talking primarily about selection. Opposition MPs have been attacking academic selection but, oddly, not any other forms of selection. They have not countered the points made about why they are so happy about selection for sports or arts, nor made it clear where they stand on existing grammar schools. They appear to have a pretty confused policy. I stand here representing a constituency in Kent where we have excellent grammar schools that are extremely popular with parents. I urge Opposition Members to listen to parents who like those schools and try to understand why.

Significant misinformation has been put out about achievement in Kent’s education system. Children in Kent achieve above the national average in their GCSEs. The system works well. Within that system, in particular, children from low-income families, on free school meals or in receipt of the pupil premium are doing especially well in our grammar schools. That enables those children to make up the gap between themselves and other children with greater advantages.

Suella Fernandes: Can my hon. Friend inform the House how many children who go to grammar schools go on to university, or to Russell Group universities?

Helen Whately: We know that children are much more likely to go on to Russell Group universities if they have attended grammar schools.

In Kent, an increasing number of children who have received the pupil premium are attending grammar schools, so Kent is working at widening access. I really welcome the points in the Government’s Green Paper on widening access so that more children have a chance to attend excellent grammar schools. One of the critical things is whether primary school headteachers support their pupils in getting into grammar schools. For primary schools that do so, that makes a huge difference; for those that do not, that is a real disadvantage to those children. I would like more schools to emulate our best primary schools, where children are supported to go to what is the best school for them. We also have grammar schools that favour in their admissions criteria children on low incomes. They are undertaking outreach to primary schools to make sure that children who have the right academic potential to do well in grammar schools get a place and can make the most of that potential.

Finally on the experience in Kent, I want to emphasise the cases where selective and non-selective schools are working very well together as part of a trust. An excellent example of that is Valley Invicta Trust. I encourage the shadow Secretary of State to come and visit so that she can see a comprehensive school and a grammar school in one go, and see the excellent results that both those schools are getting for their pupils.

Before I conclude, I should mention the importance, underlining all this, of high-quality teaching. What academics and grammar schools are doing so well is making sure that their teachers provide excellent teaching so that all the children who go to those schools can truly succeed.

3.20 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I feel keenly the importance of every child having a chance to succeed, never more so than when I visit schools in my constituency or drop my own children off at school and see bright faces in the playground or lined up with crossed legs in assembly, full of hope and potential. The question today is how we best nurture that potential and enable every child to make the most of their talents. From pre-school, through primary and secondary school, and on to further education, every stage is an opportunity. Indeed, at every stage there is also a risk that some children may do less well, relatively, but fear of difference in results must not drive policy, as I fear it does for some Opposition Members.
3.24 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in this vital debate, which goes to the heart of how we grow prosperity and share it for all.

We live in a divided nation, and the divisions are becoming deeper and more entrenched. Children in this country should feel that they have a society and a Government who are on their side, but poverty is on the increase and social mobility has stalled. I want to share a few perspectives from my constituency—to give a dose of reality about what life is like on the ground—and call on the Government to reverse their cuts to school budgets.

The lives of thousands of young people are being blighted by family poverty, and low educational attainment often flows from that family stress. Schools that can and should be engines of opportunity and mobility are themselves struggling, and now find themselves filling the welfare gap. I pay tribute to a number of schools in my constituency that have helped to research how we can come together as a local community much more so that we support them as they struggle, particularly Cranford Community College, Springwest Academy and Reach Academy.

The Social Mobility Commission’s report last week was a grim read, stating that “Britain has a deep social mobility problem which is getting worse for an entire generation of young people”. According to the commission, those born in the 1980s are the first generation since the second world war not to start their careers with higher incomes than their parents and immediate predecessors. We also know that more than a third of our young people nationally—it is the same in Hounslow in my constituency—are leaving school without the equivalent of five good GCSEs. That is a matter of shame for us all. It is the case for 900 young people in Hounslow alone per year.

My recent conversations with headteachers about the impact of benefits changes and rising family poverty are revealing consistent themes. A picture emerges of families struggling to make ends meet and not always being able to afford food, of children arriving at school hungry, of housing stress, of overcrowding in damp conditions that hampers children’s ability to study and parents’ ability to work, and of rising family debt whereby parents have to borrow money for school uniforms and shoes. Schools try to help. One teacher has told me that they hand out money for shoes two or three times a day.

There is no getting away from the fact that Government cuts are making life harder for families and schools. The choices made by this Government and by the previous Chancellor show that there can be no greater false economy than underfunding our schools. It is time that the Government did more than give us the rhetoric—time that they understood that the reality of the choices they make are having an impact on the lives and prospects of children across this country.

3.27 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I have sat here for hours listening to one Opposition Member after another criticising Government policies and trying to offer a few policies of their own. The interesting thing is that not one of those Opposition speakers has mentioned the fact that for the past 18 years they have been implementing their policies in another corner of the United Kingdom, which I come from: Wales. On any reasonable comparison of the difference between the education systems in England and in Wales, England comes out on top, and I say that as an ex-Welsh comprehensive school pupil with three children currently going through the state system in Wales.

The comparisons are absolutely clear. Fewer teachers take time off for sickness in England than in Wales. More money is spent per head on pupils in England than in Wales. Children in England have a much better chance of getting into university, as a headline from the BBC made clear only a month or two ago: “Top grade A-level performance falls in Wales”. Pupils in England have a better chance of getting into the best universities and a better chance of getting a first-class honours degree than pupils in Wales.

Why is that? It is because in Wales Labour has followed the outdated policies that it tries to suggest that we impose in England. The Labour Government in Wales have scrapped testing. They do not like streaming or any kind of selection. They do not like classroom assessments, because they think that those assessments put teachers under pressure. They do not want to give parents the choice that my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards wants to give them in England.

No one has to take my word for that; they can look at PISA reports—the independent OECD surveys of education systems around the world, including those in the United Kingdom—which clearly show that England is doing far better than Wales. Alternatively, they can look at Estyn reports, a recent one of which showed that Wales is lagging far behind England in areas such as English language. Even if people are not convinced by those neutral reports, they can read what former Labour Education Ministers in Wales have said. Leighton Andrews said “we took our eye off the ball”, while Huw Lewis issued an apology to the learners of Wales for the Welsh Labour Government’s failed policies.

Labour Members like to promise a nation fit from cradle to grave, but as far as education is concerned, they have delivered a failure from the nursery to the bursary.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): Unsurprisingly, speaking as a fellow Welsh Member, I think that the hon. Gentleman is painting a rather bleak picture of the education system in Wales. He talks about Estyn, but does he not acknowledge that the Conservative-led county council for his own constituency was put into special measures by Estyn because of weak leadership? The quotes from Leighton Andrews and Huw Lewis are a considerable number of years out of date. Over the past five years, there have been improvements to GCSE and A-level results, and the gap has closed significantly because of underperformance in England and improved performance in Wales.

David T. C. Davies: I notice that the hon. Gentleman says that the gap has closed, but he does not say that Wales is doing any better than England. In actual fact, one of the headlines I referred to is only a couple of months old, so there are still many problems here.
In England, we have rejected the sort of left-wing, anti-selection, anti-testing, anti-choice dogma that Labour has followed since the 1960s, which is completely out of date. That is why we are delivering higher standards for pupils in England than for those in Wales. It is why Labour Members do not want to talk about their failures in Wales. It is why former Labour Education Ministers from Wales are having to apologise to their own constituents for their failures.

Members of the public know perfectly well that this Government can be trusted on the economy, on defence, on law and order, and on immigration, but there are still some people who think that Labour can be trusted more on public services. The reality is that we have put public services at the heart of our agenda, and we will continue to do so. We should loudly and proudly shout from the rooftops about the enormous successes we have delivered in education, health and other public services for the people of England.

3.31 pm

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP):
The evidence about the adverse effects of poverty on educational attainment and achievement is undeniable. My constituency has one of the highest child poverty rates in Scotland. In some parts of my constituency, one third of children are living in poverty. Data from the 10-year study “Growing Up in Scotland” show that children living in poverty are much more likely than others to face social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, to be overweight and to have multiple other problems. All those factors will have an impact on their future attainment and achievement.

Poverty ruins childhoods and reduces life chances. I am proud that the Scottish Government are focusing on closing the attainment gap and that the First Minister has made education a priority. A higher percentage of entrants to Scottish universities are from our poorest communities. The gap in academic achievement between our 20% most deprived pupils and our 20% least deprived pupils has reduced. The gap between those from the most and least deprived communities in positive school-leaver destinations is narrowing. Part of that is down to the fantastic work of many of our universities and colleges, which are working on positive routes into higher education. I pay particular tribute to Ayrshire College, Scotland’s Rural College and the University of the West of Scotland, all of which have campuses in my constituency, for the efforts that they have made to encourage and support students in the transition between further and higher education.

In Scotland, we are far from complacent on this issue. More needs to be done, and more is being done. When we see the attainment gap starting long before children get to school, it is clear we need to focus on early learning and education. While the UK Government pursue their damming and divisive obsession with grammar schools, the Scottish Government are doing everything possible to ensure that each child has access to the same opportunities, no matter what their background is.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP):
Does my hon. Friend agree that the education system in Scotland, which prioritises the ability to learn, not the ability to pay, enables more students to attend university because their tuition fees are covered by the Scottish Government, whereas the English system denies students that opportunity?

Corri Wilson: I agree 100% with what my hon. Friend says.

Our curriculum for excellence is combining academic excellence with the attitudes and skills for success, and it is giving young people the opportunity to gain vocational qualifications without being seen as second best. In Scotland, we are making progress on ensuring that every child has the ability to reach their full potential—from baby boxes to free university tuition, we are working hard to improve life chances and aid social mobility—but, ultimately, our efforts in the education system are tackling a symptom not the cause of inequality.

The Prime Minister has said that her Government are committed to fighting injustice wherever it arises. A substantial body of research shows that poverty has a devastating impact on the lives of young people across the UK. We live in a society where the rich enjoy the trappings of wealth and the poor rely on food parcels from charities. Far from fighting injustice, this Government are driving people further into poverty while offering to syphon off a few of the brightest poor kids for a place in their grammar schools and pretending that that is equality. A two-tier system is totally unacceptable.

3.35 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): In January, the ceremony to open the new £25 million Newark Academy was cancelled because the teachers were out on strike. On the same day, a window cleaner from South Leverton who came to my surgery said that he could not send his bright son to the local grammar school in Gainsborough, which is across the border in Lincolnshire, because he could not afford the £400 a year it would cost to get him there every day. This year, more than 50% of the children in my town are going to schools out of town, and they are the 50% who can afford to do so, not the 50% who might need that the most. It is no coincidence that Newark and Sherwood district is among the areas in the United Kingdom where social mobility is at its lowest.

The story of Newark secondary schools is a near-complete description of the failings of our state schools since the 1960s: the destruction of a successful grammar school, the Magnus, which had been established in 1531; the pre-emption of places at the good schools in neighbouring, better-off towns by articulate parents with the resources to work the system to their advantage and to afford the cost of travelling to them, given that such an option was not available in their own town; the flight of middle-class parents to Lincolnshire for grammar schools, for which demand was extremely high, but for which one needs £500 to £1,000 a year to bus one’s child to school; the tolerance of failure—or at least of consistent underperformance—and a great deal of complacency and hand wringing, with lines such as, “What do you expect? It’s only Newark”; and the gradual decline in aspiration and a pervasive culture of low expectations, including the kicking away of the ladder out of ignorance and poverty by neglect and complacency dressed up as egalitarian, progressive education policy.

Suella Fernandes: Does my hon. Friend agree that the culture of low expectations and the soft bigotry of a “prizes for all” culture is exactly what needs to be changed and what this Government are standing up against?
Robert Jenrick: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend.

In Newark, social inequality is not the problem, but the symptom of a real malaise. The condition of the town’s education has been allowed to reach an appalling level. Having diagnosed the problems—the lack of a choice of school, an unwillingness to intervene, and an unwillingness to embrace selection in any form, even when parents are crying out for it—there are many solutions. In my town, armed with a range of tools, we are starting to make progress under this Government, and I am convinced that we have finally turned the corner.

We intervened to remove the sponsor of the Newark Academy, which was not working, and brought in the No. 1 school in the county to run it, thanks to Conservative policy. In September 2017, we will open a new free school in Newark, of which I have the pleasure of being a governor. It will be committed to the highest standards of education, discipline and character formation, and to repatriating children from across the county whose parents have had to send them away. The diocese of Southwell and Nottingham, which runs the other school in the town—the Magnus—has now increased its commitment to driving up standards as a result of the competition and choice that we are now putting into the system. The apprenticeship levy is forcing a long-overdue conversation between the employers in the town and the schools.

The common thread that runs through all these policies is parental choice. Parents in my town want the choice to send their children to the school that suits them and their needs, rather than being told by others that only the privileged few who can afford the bus fare or the fees at a private school deserve it.

3.39 pm

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I do not want to repeat the many excellent points that Members have made. If you will excuse me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will indulge in a moment of pedantry.

The subject of the debate is “social mobility”, and that is not a one-way ticket; one can go up or down. There was a lot of social mobility during the great depression, most of it downwards, and the happiest societies are not necessarily those with the greatest levels of social mobility.

I have noticed that many people who bang on about social mobility are rather quiet on the subject of social inequality. The assumption must be that any level of social inequality is acceptable as long as there is some social mobility. I have a problem with that assumption, even if it is very comforting for those who have wealth and privilege to hang on to. It is easier to call for the wider distribution of opportunity than the wider distribution of wealth, even when there is evidence that societies without vast differences in wealth are happier. People who have read “The Spirit Level” by Richard Wilkinson will be mindful of that point.

The vast differences in wealth between individuals in modern society are growing, as we see if we examine the wage ratios between those at the top and bottom of most businesses and compare them with what they were in the ’50s, ’60s and ’70s. It is hard to believe that that is due to super talent. Regardless of this debate, we should all worry if hard work cannot result in a decent standard of living for the less talented in an affluent society—people are struggling in the gig economy, with no security and poor housing prospects, and some are living hand-to-mouth—even if there is some prospect of social mobility.

Education, however good, cannot make us all talented and cannot give us all the same life chances. I am sure the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) agrees with that. Sometimes, education is not sufficient even to improve children’s life chances. Often we need cultural changes that go beyond the child—changes in the community, parents and society. Housing, economic growth, low crime rates and local empowerment are all key determinants of mobility and social aspiration in any area. Education by itself is rarely sufficient.

That is probably why, despite the many schemes in places such as Knowsley and the many millions that are spent on education there—I think that one scheme cost £157 million—we have failed to produce improvement across the board. Yes, Knowsley is at the bottom of the league for educational achievement, but it is also second bottom for deprivation. There is a connection somewhere.

We have heard in this debate that the magic ingredient we need for Knowsley is a grammar school. Middle-class tiger parents will not cry about working-class kids, as is the case in other areas. I have heard it said that Knowsley has never had a grammar school, but that is false. It did pioneer comprehensive education, but I had the privilege of going to a grammar school in Knowsley—Prescot Grammar School. The grammar school recipe has been tried, but it did not move the dial notably.

3.42 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I am very grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me towards the end of this interesting debate.

I have noticed that there is a gaping hole at the centre of the Opposition’s case on grammar schools. If grammar schools are based on a good principle, why would Labour oppose extending them? And if they are based on a bad principle, why is it not committed to abolishing them? Surely, if it is a good idea, a cap or ban is a crazy way to proceed if we want to widen opportunity and choice. If it is a bad idea, why should we allow grammar schools to exist? Why should we allow the existing grammar schools to continue providing a bad education, if indeed they are bad schools and it is a bad principle? It cannot be the case that the number of grammar schools in this country as of 2016 should be fixed in aspic for ever more and never increase. That would be a very illogical way to proceed.

Secondly, I want to pick up on the idea of elite education. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), who I am glad is in his place, made the point that everyone in the House is happy to see elite soccer teams, musicians and gymnasts educated in private facilities, private schools and even some state schools on a selective basis, yet when it comes to a broad education, somehow it is a taboo issue.

The other issue raised was the fact that we have independent schools. Even if we abolished every single grammar school in the country, we would still have a system in which private schools could be attended by very wealthy—and often very talented—people, accentuating existing differences and inequalities.
Labour’s position is entirely incoherent. It has not given a single indication of what it wants to do with grammar schools. Does it agree with them in principle, or is it against them? If it is against them, why does it not have the courage to say publicly that it will abolish them?

The proposals in the Green Paper are actually quite mild. No one is suggesting that we go back to the 1950s or some sheep and goats, be all and end all 11-plus. Rather, we are saying that there should be diversity of provision. People should be able to access selective education not simply because they can afford to but because they have the abilities and aspiration to do so. We want a diverse system from which all children can benefit.

3.45 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I declare an interest at the start, in that my wife is a primary school teacher. I shall focus the majority of my brief contribution on education as a key social enabler.

The Scottish Government are embarking on an Administration-defining mission to close the attainment gap between the most and least affluent school pupils. Nicola Sturgeon’s Government are to allocate £750 million during the course of the Scottish parliamentary term through the Attainment Scotland fund and focus on improvement in the key areas of literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing.

That is a welcome intervention, but, in terms of education policy, most crucial in narrowing the attainment gap and realising social mobility will be the Scottish Government’s support for local authorities on teacher numbers and retention. The Scottish Government have a good record on that front. In 2006, 16,000 primary 1 children were being taught in classes of 26 or more; as of 2015, that was down to 657. That is very important for me, as a recent report highlighted that and Shotts has, in some areas, 32% of children living in poverty.

The End Child Poverty figures should shame us all and serve as a big wake-up call to North Lanarkshire Council, which failed to maintain teacher numbers last year, despite having some of the highest levels of child poverty in Scotland. I encourage the Scottish Government to keep pressing local authorities on the number of teachers and classroom assistants in employment, so as to help those areas, such as Airdrie Central ward in my constituency, that have such high child poverty ratios.

It is important for us to get it right for children as early as possible, as highlighted by Action for Children. That is why recent and planned childcare interventions up the road are so important, on top of the childcare plans outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). Every nursery in the poorest local areas will have an additional qualified teacher or childcare graduate by 2018. It was also recently announced that childcare funding will change to follow the child, a very welcome development. In another welcome development, every child born in Scotland will receive a baby box—a box of essential items to help level the playing field in the very first days of their life—starting next year.

If we are serious about improving social mobility and helping people along, however, the UK Government must do more in other areas. I hope tomorrow’s autumn statement will see greater investment in good quality affordable and social housing. We should also expect plans from the UK Government on how they hope to overturn the stagnation in average wages since 2009.

Education policy can help children out of poverty to some extent, but we cannot expect teachers to fix everything for us in this regard. The real win will come when this Government commit to addressing the causes of child poverty: low incomes, poor housing, social security cuts and insecure work.

3.48 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): To me, the conundrum seems to be how we break the grammar school system’s current status as perhaps the preserve of the middle class while at the same time not going backwards to what I would call the apartheid system that used to be in place.

I refer to that because I failed my 12-plus, as it was, and went to a secondary modern school. In my small town there were two schools, the Royal Latin School and the secondary modern, divided by one hedge. Siblings were unable to talk to each other across the hedge, because the grammar school head refused to countenance it. Pupils at the secondary modern left school at 16—they were told by their teachers that there was little point in going on to do A-levels, because why would someone like them pass A-levels? I ignored that advice and I am glad I did. I would certainly not vote for a return to a grammar school system that took us back to those days.

Equally, we have the huge problem of grammar schools being the preserve of the middle class. My constituency in East Sussex borders Kent. In my daughter’s primary school in East Sussex, a quarter of the class moved over to the grammar school, leading to a brain drain from East Sussex. Only those parents who can afford to pay the increase in house prices will see their children go to the grammar school which, while based on ability, is catchment-based. Entrance to another school is based on pure ability, so only parents who can afford the tuition, rail fare or prep school fees to have got their children to the school in the first place will be able to enjoy it. I therefore maintain that the current system does not work.

Should we stick or should we twist? I was surprised by the Opposition spokesperson’s speech. I expected the Opposition to state that the system does not work at all and that it should be abolished. If they wish to continue with the status quo, they will inadvertently support this middle class preserve. Perhaps somewhat reluctantly, I welcome the shift in the Government’s approach towards the expansion of grammar schools. The situation in relation to social mobility is so bad that something has to be done.

I spent the past couple of days reading research from the past 30 years. It is completely inconclusive on which system, comprehensive or grammar, is better. What is undeniable, however, is that our social mobility statistics are so bad that something must be done. Those on the Government Front Bench must reflect on whether creating more grammar schools, and perhaps taking us back to towns with a choice of two schools, means inadvertently moving back to a situation in which the choice is either success or failure. There must be success for all, regardless of entrance tests.
3.51 pm

**Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab):** Last week, in my capacity as the chair of the all-party group on social mobility, I attended the launch of the Social Mobility Commission’s annual report. What I heard amounted to a damning indictment of the status quo: for too long, we have been too ready to accept that those from poorer backgrounds will proportionally do worse; for too long, we have allowed privilege and connections to override ability and potential; and for too long, we have deluded ourselves that economic growth translates into increased prosperity and opportunity for all. Let us invest in our children in their early years and let us have a school system that offers opportunity for all, but let us not kid ourselves that that will be enough if we continue to have a country where access to opportunity is completely closed off to huge sections of society.

The all-party group on social mobility is currently conducting an inquiry into access to the professions. Our report is due out soon. We saw many similarities between the evidence we heard and the commission’s findings. One such area was internships. Too often, internships are not just a way to get a foot in the door but the only way to open the door at all. They have become a further compulsory step into many professions, but by their very nature they exclude many. We found that too often these placements are determined by existing connections. Be it a family or a business contact, the foot in the door is often available only to those who know someone on the other side of it.

Another area where we found the evidence remarkably consistent was in terms of the aspirations our young people have. They need role models, mentors and inspirers, people from their community who have been there and done it and who can say to them, “Yes you can be whatever you want to be.” For too many, however, that is simply not on the radar.

The evidence I heard during the inquiry persuaded me that it is simply not enough for us to encourage companies to do more. We need to develop a culture in which social mobility is on a par with protected characteristics in terms of career prospects. We rightly challenge when we see minority sections of society not getting an equal opportunity, so we should do the same here. We cannot allow the situation to continue where background is likely to be the biggest factor in determining chances of success in life.

I would like the largest companies to publish data every year on how many people they have recruited from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, and, crucially, how those people have progressed within that company. We need a commonly agreed, publicly available record of how individual companies are doing. Only then will we see the big change in attitudes we need. Among advanced nations, the UK stands alongside the United States in having low social mobility. We need only to look across the Atlantic to see where ignoring these issues over successive generations leads. We should be in no doubt that we are heading the same way. I feel it when I speak to people in my constituency—the anger, the frustration, the hopelessness—who see the lack of opportunity around them and fear the same or worse for their children. Automation and artificial intelligence are going to narrow the opportunity gap still further in the coming years. We need to act now before it is too late.

3.54 pm

**Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab):** We have had a good debate this afternoon. It is clear that the Government’s obsession with new grammar schools is simply a rehash of failed policies from the past—policies not fit for purpose in the digital age of the 21st century, as pointed out by my hon. Friends the Members for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) and for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk). As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) said, these proposals are pure dogma.

This grammar school policy shows that the Government have no answers to the challenges facing our schools. While they waste time and energy on new grammars, they have nothing to say about falling school budgets, the crisis in teacher recruitment and retention, and the lack of good school places. Instead, they would segregate our children: a first-class education for the privileged few, a second-class education for the rest. The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) gave a passionate personal testimony about her father, who failed the 11-plus, while my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) explained, in an excellent speech, that policy should be designed for the tens of millions, not the few.

**Mr Brady rose—**

**Mike Kane:** I give way to my constituency neighbour.

**Mr Brady:** Will the hon. Gentleman take this opportunity to make it clear whether a future Labour Government would scrap existing grammar schools?

**Mike Kane:** I always like to debate with my constituency neighbour, and it was great to have him visit Sale Grammar School in my constituency just the other week. I regularly go to speak to the children there. The Government are currently nationalising and privatising the system at the same time. As the hon. Gentleman will remember from the debates in the mid-1990s, we would introduce a system of subsidiarity back into our education system, so it would be up to local people to decide; we would not have a nationalised system.

**Chris Philp rose—**

**Mike Kane:** I need to make progress. [Interruption.] I have answered the question.

Ministers have provided no evidence of how extra grammar schools will increase the social mobility of our young people—an issue more pronounced in the midlands and the north, as the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) rightly pointed out. I could not agree more. Let me be clear: citing evidence about access to Russell Group universities is a complete red herring and a corrupt use of the statistics that fails to compare like with like. Let me provide some evidence instead, from the Government’s own chief inspector. Sir Michael Wilshaw has said that in Hackney the attainment gap between those eligible for free school meals and their colleagues is 14%. In Kent, which
retains a selective system—I see the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) in her place—the gap is 34%. In Kent, just 27% of pupils eligible for free school meals get five good GCSEs, compared with 45% in London.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that “those in selective areas who don’t pass the 11-plus do worse than they would have done in a comprehensive system”. Research by the Education Policy Institute has shown that, once the data are controlled for prior performance, grammar schools do not actually improve results, even for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The issue of grammar schools has divided the Conservative party. Many senior MPs have come out against the plans. The Minister is currently having to work with an ex-Minister who did not want it and now has to work with a Secretary of State who does want it but is under orders from the Prime Minister; and the former Education Secretary, who spoke eloquently, does not believe in it. My constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Brady), whom I have just debated with, needs to remember that Trafford has an excellent primary school system. I taught many of his children, I will have him know, which is why he has such good results in his constituency—and the primary system is not selective.

Turning to social mobility, my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) said that this will be the first generation since the second world war to be less well off than their parents. The Government have failed to build an education system that provides opportunity for all. Under this Government, the system is mediocre and falling behind, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) pointed out. They are increasingly obsessed with structures rather than with what matters most—the quality of education for our young people.

We have seen scandal after scandal in our multi-academy trusts, and the Government cannot get to grips with the structures they are putting in place. There is no governance—no effective governance—in the system, as the Department for Education creaks under the strain. The Government are not tackling the key challenges facing our schools system—declining budgets and chronic shortages of teachers and places. They have failed to invest in our young people at every stage of their education. Schools are facing their first real-term cuts since the ’90s. Spending on further education has been cut time and again, while student debt continues to rise.

Government education policy has amounted to nothing more than a series of roadblocks to aspiration, opportunity and social mobility. The impact of those regressive policies is clear to all but the Government themselves. When Labour left office, 71% of state school students went on to university; last year, it fell to 62%, down from 66% the previous year. We Labour Members remain fully committed to ensuring that all our young people are given the opportunity to succeed on whatever educational path they choose, and that their opportunities are based only on what they aspire to—not on what they can afford. We will be fearless champions for every child, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) pointed out.

Figures published only last week by the National Association of Head Teachers showed that for the third consecutive year there is a real problem with recruitment across all roles—from teachers to senior leaders. Overall, a very high proportion—80%—of posts were difficult to recruit, while 62% of posts were filled only with a struggle and respondents were unable to recruit at all to an average of 17% of all posts. Recruitment difficulties for the main middle leadership roles in schools are pronounced. For posts carrying a teaching and learning responsibility or special educational needs co-ordinator responsibility, only 17% of roles were filled with ease.

High housing and living costs remain a serious barrier to recruitment in London and the south-east, but the cost of living is becoming increasingly problematic nationally. There has been a 7% rise in school leaders citing this reason for the problems they face. Difficulties in recruitment this year have meant that 41% of responding schools have had to cover lessons with senior leadership staff, distracting from school improvement, while 70% have had to use supply teachers at high cost.

### John Redwood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mike Kane:** I must make more progress.

I mentioned funding earlier. According to the National Union of Teachers and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, England’s schools are experiencing, as I said, the largest real-terms funding cuts for more than a generation. In real terms, schools will lose a huge amount of money, rising to £2.5 billion by the year 2020, and 92% of schools will have their funding cut. The average cut for primary schools will be £96,500, going up to £290,000 for secondary schools. [Interjection.] The Secretary of State chunters from a sedentary position, but there is a website where she can see the figures for herself. Budgets were protected only in cash terms, rather than in real terms, meaning that the schools budget is at the mercy of rising pressures, pupil numbers and the impact of inflation. On top of the figures I have just given, schools are now worried about being further punished with the fair funding formula that the Government have yet to consult on. The Minister has refused to guarantee that no school will lose out. All this amounts to chaos and confusion.

I want to thank all those who have contributed to the debate. I have not agreed with all Members, including the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) and the hon. Members for Croydon South (Chris Philp), for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab), for Fareham (Suella Fernandes), for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). I would like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and I also wish him a happy birthday, as I am sure does the whole House.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), and from the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen). I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing the hon. Gentleman’s family all the best following the loss of his father to mesothelioma: I was sorry to hear about it. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), and from the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), who always seems effectively to run down his own country. Finally, we heard from the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) and the hon. Members for Newark (Robert Jenrick), for Southport (John Pugh), and for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng).
[Mike Kane]

We have a Government Front-Bench team that requires special measures. We have a Government who are failing on selection, failing on social mobility, failing on the recruitment and retention of teachers, failing to provide enough good school places, and letting our future generation down badly.

4.5 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): Improving social mobility has been the driving force behind our reforms of the education system over the past six years. Thanks to those reforms, and the tireless work of hundreds of thousands of teachers, there are now 1.4 million more good or outstanding school places than there were in 2010.

The Government have given greater powers to teachers and heads to deal with disruptive behaviour. We have learnt from the successful Mathematics Mastery teaching methods of the far east. We created the Education Endowment Foundation to promote the use of evidence-based teaching practice. We have rewritten the curriculum at both primary and secondary levels to raise expectations of what children can achieve, and the focus on the Ebacc has halted the drift from the important core academic subjects—a drift that was particularly marked in areas of disadvantage. We have removed more than 3,000 so-called equivalent qualifications that too many children from disadvantaged backgrounds were being misled into taking instead of GCSEs.

We have improved the quality of technical qualifications, and have promoted and increased the importance and status of apprenticeships. There have been 624,000 apprenticeship starts since May 2015. We have revolutionised the teaching of reading in primary schools. Longitudinal studies have shown that systematic synthetic phonics give children a flying start with their reading, writing and spelling, and as a result 147,000 more year 1 pupils are on track to become fluent readers this year than in 2012.

However, despite improved teaching practice and a growing number of good school places, there are still too many parents who do not have the choice of a good school place for their child. In 65 local authority districts, fewer than 50% of pupils have a good or outstanding school within 5 km of their homes. As the Prime Minister reminded us on the steps of Downing Street, “If you’re a white working-class boy, you’re less likely than anybody else in Britain to go to university.”

According to a recent Sutton Trust report, white British boys on free school meals “have now been either the lowest or second lowest performing ethnic group every year for a decade.”

It is because of that continued injustice that we are consulting on a range of measures to increase the number of good school places and serve communities that have yet to benefit fully from our education reforms. We want the education system to help build an even more meritocratic Britain, and we want to use the knowledge and expertise of this country’s world-leading universities and independent schools to benefit our school system. We want to remove the restrictive regulations that are preventing more children from going to high-quality faith schools, and we want to end the ban on the opening of new grammar schools.

As Philip Blond said when he introduced the recent ResPublica report on Knowsley, “Reintroducing grammar schools is potentially a transformative idea for working-class areas.”

We know that grammar schools are vehicles of social mobility for the pupils who attend them, almost eliminating the attainment gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers. Pupils in grammar schools make significantly more progress than similarly able pupils. Progress 8 shows an aggregate score of 0.33 for grammar schools, compared to a national average of 0. Ofsted has rated 99% of grammar school places good or better, and 82% outstanding. In a school system in which more than a million pupils are not being given the education that they need and deserve, it cannot be right to prevent the creation of more good and outstanding selective school places. As was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Bedlland and Battle (Huw Merriman), the key is to make the alternative schools just as good, and that is what we are doing.

Nevertheless, we recognise that grammar schools can do more to promote social mobility. The Social Mobility Commission has said that young people are six times less likely to go to Oxbridge if they grow up in a poor household. In the north-east, not one child on free-school meals went to Oxbridge after leaving school in 2010, yet of the state school pupils securing a place at Cambridge in 2015, 682 came from sixth-forms in comprehensive schools and 589 from grammar schools; in other words, almost as many come from the 163 grammar schools as come from all the 11-18 comprehensive schools put together. And we know that disadvantaged pupils from grammar schools are almost twice as likely to go to a top Russell Group university as those from more affluent comprehensive schools.

The Government are committed to ensuring this country works for everyone, not just a privileged few. With strict conditions applying to grammar schools, including ensuring more bright pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are admitted, we will boost social mobility in Britain. That objective was at the centre of excellent speeches by my hon. Friends the Members for Croydon South (Chris Philp), for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab), for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker), for Fareham (Suella Fernandes) and for Salisbury (John Glen)—and my condolences on the recent death of my hon. Friend’s father.

We also heard great speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng). But the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) let the cat out of the bag when she said the SNP’s view is not just against grammar schools, but against setting and streaming by ability within a school, not a view that lies within mainstream opinion, and which explains why attainment gaps have widened in Scotland.

I listened carefully to my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), just as I learned to do in the two years when she was my boss at the Department for Education, and she is right that we have to tackle underperformance wherever it exists and ensure every child is being offered an academic, knowledge-rich curriculum. I can assure my right hon. Friend that we will take on board and take seriously representations made about the policies in the consultation documents, including those relating to selective education.
My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) made the point in an intervention that it is about making the alternative schools just as good as the selective ones, a point also made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), who pointed out that grammar and comprehensive schools can coexist with both delivering a very high academic standard, as we see in his constituency.

Since 2010 more pupils have benefited from a core academic curriculum, increased numbers of pupils have a good or outstanding school place, and parents have a wider choice of the type of school for their children, but these opportunities have not yet been spread widely enough. We want to create a meritocracy where every child has access to the education that will take them as far as their talents allow. That is why our consultation document “Schools that work for everyone” is looking at every possible way to provide new good schools, particularly in areas serving the 1.25 million pupils in schools that need to improve.

I worry about those 1.25 million pupils; for them the time is now, which is why we need to do even more than we have been doing over the past six years to improve educational standards for them. I worry about the Social Mobility Commission finding that not one pupil eligible for free school meals in the north-east went to Oxbridge in 2010. I worry about the so-called missing talent—highly able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds who leave primary school with standard assessment tests results way above the average but who achieve significantly less well than similarly able but more advantaged pupils. Nationally, 78% of level 5 pupils go on to achieve the EBacc, but for level 5 pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds that figure is just 52%.

So I say to the Labour party, “You should worry too. You should be as concerned as we are. You should be looking at every option. You should be asking how we spread the excellence we see in outstanding schools to every part of the country. You should be more concerned about the education these children are receiving than the virtue-signalling that lies at the root of what the Opposition do and say.”

If Opposition Members really care, they will look at the proposals in the consultation document and take seriously the suggestions on how to eradicate inadequate school provision wherever it exists. We will take seriously the responses to that consultation. We will listen to people’s views and understand their concerns, but we will do so on the clear understanding that our joint endeavour is to promote social mobility and ensure that a child’s one chance of an education is not sacrificed on the altar of political posturing.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 263, Noes 310.

Division No. 94

[A4.14 pm]

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Question accordingly negatived.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the proposed words be there added.

Question agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to. Resolved.

That this House believes that every child throughout the UK must be given the opportunity to reach their full potential; shares the strong commitment of this Government to promoting and improving social mobility and building a country that works for everyone; notes that there are now more than 1.4 million pupils in England attending good or outstanding schools than in 2010; and welcomes the opportunity afforded by the Schools that Work for Everyone consultation to seek the widest possible range of views on how the Government can build upon these successes and awaits the outcome of the current consultation.
National Health Service Funding

[Relevant documents: Letter from the Chair and members of the Health Committee to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, dated 26 October 2016, and the Chancellor’s response, dated 8 November 2016.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I advise the House that Mr Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.29 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern that the deficit in the budgets of NHS trusts and foundation trusts in England at the end of the 2015-16 financial year was £2.45 billion; further notes that members of the Health Committee wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer about their concerns that Government assertions on NHS funding were incorrect and risked giving a false impression; and calls on the Government to use the Autumn Statement to address the underfunding of the NHS and guarantee sustainable financing of the NHS.

I begin by reminding the House that, six years ago, the then Conservative leader promised to “cut the deficit and not the NHS.”

The previous Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), told us that he would “properly fund public services” and that “investment in public services would come before tax cuts.”—[Official Report, 27 November 2006; Vol. 453, c. 837.]

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Jonathan Ashworth: Oh, go on then.

Robert Flello: My hon. Friend is most generous. He might have missed something. Did the Chancellor not say that he would wipe out the deficit by 2015?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I will be coming on to those secret plans as I develop my speech.

Then the new Prime Minister made this promise: “We will be looking to ensure that we provide the health service that is right for everyone in this country.”—[Official Report, 7 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 333.] Fine words, but it is by their deeds that they shall be known. What did we actually get? An NHS that is going through the largest financial squeeze in its history, Far from protecting the NHS through the years of this Tory Government, NHS spending will represent an average annual increase of just 0.9%—a decade of barely any increase in spending despite an ageing population with increasingly complex needs.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con) rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way in a few moments.

By 2017, NHS spending per head will level out, and, head for head, by 2018 NHS spending will be falling under this Conservative Government. Trusts ended last year in deficit for the second year running—they were £2.45 billion in deficit and they are reported to be heading for a deficit of around £670 million at the end of this financial year.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Is this the explanation for the secret plan in County Durham to cut the number of beds for frail elderly people by 20%?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I will be coming on to those secret plans as I develop my speech.

We will be spending less on the NHS as a proportion of GDP than our European neighbours such as Germany, France and the Netherlands. The NHS maintenance budgets have been repeatedly raided, with billions that had been allocated to capital routinely being switched to revenue to plug gaps.

David T. C. Davies rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way in a moment. The maintenance situation has got so bad that the NHS faces a backlog of £5 billion in repairs.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way.

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way in a moment. The former Education Secretary needs to calm down, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Public health budgets, which fund projects to tackle teenage pregnancy, excessive alcohol consumption, sexually transmitted infections and substance misuse and to provide anti-smoking interventions, will have been cut by 9.7% by the end of this Parliament. That is a completely false economy leading to greater demands on the acute sector. As my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) so brilliantly outlined last week, the adult social care budget has been slashed.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con) rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Sir Simon Burns: I am so grateful to the hon. Gentleman. The House would take him somewhat more seriously if he pointed out that, by 2019-20, the real-terms increase in spending on the health service will be £10 billion. During the last election, his party promised to increase spending in this Parliament by only a quarter of that—£2.5 billion.

Jonathan Ashworth: The right hon. Gentleman was the Minister who took the Health and Social Care Act 2012 through this Parliament, and who wasted £3 billion on an unnecessary top-down reorganisation. He should be apologising to the House, not making those comments.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: No, I want to make a bit of progress.

We are seeing unprecedented cuts to social care, which means that the number of people aged over 65 accessing publicly funded social care will fall by 26%,
UK public spending on social care is set to fall to less than 1% of GDP by the end of this Parliament.

Just yesterday, Baroness Altmann, the former Conservative pensions Minister who was appointed last year to give great fanfare by David Cameron, said that we are “sleepwalking into a crisis” and that the NHS will not be able to pick up the pieces of a “broken system”.

Sir Simon Burns

Jonathan Ashworth: I have given way to the right hon. Gentleman. [ Interruption. ] He can check Hansard tomorrow.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that when funding is cut, our hospitals seek to raise cash in other ways, such as the unacceptable level of car parking charges at our hospitals—charges which the Government promised before the last election to clamp down on?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend is running a brilliant campaign on that. I hope that when the Minister responds, he will reply to that point.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: I shall make a little progress because many other Members want to speak and I want to give them a chance.

The scale of the financial pressures engulfing the NHS are such that the chief executive of NHS Providers, Chris Hopson, said recently:

“The gap between what the NHS is being asked to deliver and the funding it has available is too big and is growing rapidly.”

The King’s Fund said, with respect to the NHS deficit, that “it signifies a health system buckling under the strain of huge financial and operational pressures.

In the most damning assessment of the Government’s handling of the NHS, the National Audit Office concluded today that financial problems in the NHS “are endemic and this is not sustainable.”

Even the former Health Secretary, Andrew Lansley, said that “in 2010 we knew we had to implement a tight budget squeeze for five years, but we never thought it would last for ten.”

David T. C. Davies: Surely the hon. Gentleman has seen the report from the Nuffield Trust on the four health systems of the United Kingdom, which shows very clearly that there is only one part of the United Kingdom that has seen a real-terms cut in NHS expenditure, and that is Wales under a Labour Government.

Jonathan Ashworth: There will be a cash injection in Wales in 2017, whereas spending per head in the English NHS will be levelling out and then falling in 2018.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): In Enfield we are short of 84 GPs going forward and we have just had a hospital crisis at the North Middlesex hospital, where there were not enough doctors for our A&E to be safe for patients, yet the only thing we hear about is the sustainability and transformation plan locally which, as far as we can see, is not only secret but about taking £22 billion out of the NHS.

Jonathan Ashworth: My right hon. Friend is right and she is a brilliant campaigner for the health service in Enfield. The points that she makes about the staffing crisis in the NHS are well made. I hope that the Secretary of State will respond to her.

Things are so bad for the Health Secretary that even the NHS chief executive told the Health Committee that “2018-19 will be the most pressured year for us…will have negative per-person NHS funding growth.”

Those were the chief executive’s words. Will the Health Secretary sit up and listen, and respond to the chief executive, or will we get what we saw in the Sunday newspapers—briefing against him? We heard that the Government are “gunning for” Mr Stevens and are going to “fix” him. I hope the Secretary of State will repudiate that briefing when he responds to the debate and distance himself from it.

The only people who do not appear to accept the need for more money for the NHS are the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State. We anticipate what the Secretary of State will tell us from the Dispatch Box. The right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns) alluded to it and I will now answer his question. The Secretary of State will not only tell us that we have a generous, munificent Conservative Government who have given the NHS the money it asked for, but persist with the fiction that the NHS is receiving an extra £10 billion. However, we all know—and I suspect that the Secretary of State knows, because he now distances himself from the figure when he does interviews—than to the Health Committee and others that this £10 billion claim is bogus. It is a claim universally derided and discredited, apart from in the drawing room of 10 Downing Street.

Michael Gove

Jonathan Ashworth: It will be a pleasure to give way to the former Education Secretary.

Michael Gove: The chief executive of the NHS, whom the hon. Gentleman has just mentioned, welcomed that additional £10 billion and said that it gives the NHS the extra headroom we need. Will the hon. Gentleman associate himself with the chief executive of the NHS in welcoming that £10 billion of extra funding?

Jonathan Ashworth: The chief executive’s comments to the Select Committee speak for themselves. Talking of repudiation, when are we going to get £350 million a week, or were the Tories typically saying one thing before the people voted and something completely different after they had had their say? That is what the ex-Education Secretary should be telling us.

Let me remind the House what the Health Committee said. I see the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) in her place, and she said:

“The continued use of the figure of £10 billion for the additional health spending up to 2020-21 is not only incorrect but risks giving a false impression that the NHS is awash with cash.”
Jonathan Ashworth:

She is sitting only a little further down from the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove). Perhaps he can have a word with her if he disagrees.

The Secretary of State hopes we do not notice that he is stretching the timeframe over which he presents this funding allocation. He hopes we do not notice that NHS spending has been redefined by the most recent spending review. He hopes we do not spot that he is cutting billions from public health budgets and other Department of Health funding streams—a £3 billion cut. But we have noticed.

Mr Jackson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: In a few moments.

We have spotted the Secretary of State’s conjuring act because we have seen this Tory trick before—robbing Peter to pay Paul. The result of this trick is cuts and underfunding, more pressures flowing through to the frontline, and, as the NAO said, “Financial stress...harming patient care”.

In all our constituencies we see ever-lengthening queues of the elderly and the sick waiting for treatment. Across the board, we see the worst performance data since records began.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt):

Nonsense.

Jonathan Ashworth: What world is the Secretary of State living in? Half a million patients have waited for four hours or more in A&E in the past three months—the worst performance for this time of year for more than a decade—and he says it is nonsense. Some 350,000 of our constituents are waiting longer than the promised timeframe over which he presents this funding allocation. The number of people waiting for 12 hours or more on trolleys has increased by over 700% since 2011-12.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman tell the House why it is that, after 12 minutes, he has yet to praise all our hard-working doctors, nurses and other health professionals? Why is he constantly talking down our great NHS, including the hospitals in Leicester?

Jonathan Ashworth: I praise the hard-working staff in the NHS every day of the week, but I rather suspect that staff in the NHS will have more sympathy with the position I am outlining than with the right hon. Lady’s position, not least when, according to surveys, 88% of NHS staff think that the NHS is under the most pressure they can remember, and 77% think that there is less access to resources, putting the quality of patient care and clinical standards at risk. That, I say to her, is what NHS staff are saying.

Mr Jackson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: Oh, okay.

Mr Jackson: Perhaps I can just allow the hon. Gentleman to break off from reading his press release. I think we are moving towards a consensus on this issue, in that we do need to integrate acute clinical care and adult social care, and I understand that. In that vein, why was it that, in 13 years, when there was significant demographic change, the Labour Government failed to bring forward a better care fund or a precept for social care?

Jonathan Ashworth: It beggars belief! We tripled investment in the NHS, and the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends voted against every penny piece. When we left office, we had the best waiting times and the highest satisfaction levels on record. That is the difference between a Labour Government and a Conservative Government on the NHS.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Can the hon. Gentleman explain, then, why the Labour Government closed the maternity and accident and emergency departments at Crawley hospital?

Jonathan Ashworth: Well, reconfigurations are always going ahead. [Interruption.] If Conservative Members are so concerned, I look forward to the hon. Gentleman campaigning against the STPs for his area, when they are published in a few weeks.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I am going to make a bit of progress, because I am aware that Members want to speak.

We have seen what the reality of six years of Tory underfunding and cuts in our NHS are all about, and there are more stealth cuts to come, which will add further pressures. For example—these are small things, but they all add up—cuts to the Care Quality Commission mean that it will increase its fees for NHS hospitals, other trusts and other providers. Some trusts will have to pay over £100,000 as a result of these cuts. Reductions in education and training tariffs will put more pressures on trusts and on the frontline. In the House the other week, we debated how cuts to community pharmacies will lead to increased demands on the NHS.

Only last week, news slipped out about the privatisation of NHS Professionals. A body that makes a profit for the NHS and ploughs that back into the NHS is going to be privatised, and that profit will presumably go to private companies.

The combination of all these cuts and privatisations, the utter failure to deal with the crisis in adult social care, and the lack of planning for an ageing population with complex needs will directly lead to greater demands on the NHS, bigger cuts, and deficits across the board. It is in this context that the NHS is also expected to find £22 billion of so-called efficiencies and to redesign services across England completely as part of the sustainability and transformation process.

Where sustainability and transformation plans are about transforming services in the interests of patient care, reversing fragmentation and ensuring more collaboration in geographical areas, we will consider them carefully. We will want to look at every single STP to see whether those plans are genuinely jointly owned, and whether they tackle the crisis in social care, guarantee better access to care for the long term, and are transparent and financially viable. What we know so far, though, is far from reassuring, because we can see from the 19 or
so STPs that have been published that the ground has shifted. It has become obvious that what began as a project to transform services for patients and build up community services is now more about closing the financial gap:

“Of course, the driving force behind STPs is the emergence in the last two financial years of substantial deficits.”

Those are not my words, but those of Andrew Lansley just a few weeks ago. The STP areas that we have seen so far have been racking up shortfalls of about £10 billion that can be filled only by cuts to hundreds of beds, closing hospitals, downgrading A&Es, downgrading maternity wings and withdrawing treatments.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that proposals to downgrade A&E in an area such as Warrington, which is surrounded by motorways as well as containing many people who suffer from health deprivation, is a recipe for disaster? If people have to travel further for emergency care, that will not improve their care in any way.

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend is extremely knowledgeable about the health service and has been campaigning vigorously on the STPs. She is completely right. We will see hospitals merged in the Merseyside area and in London, hospitals lost in Durham, and efficiencies found by changing staffing levels. In fact, the STP for Cheshire and Merseyside, the area that she represents, talks enticingly of “Exploration of a Factory Model”. Doesn’t that sound nice?

With cuts to services and rock-bottom staff morale, we have the Sports Direct approach to the NHS, with the Secretary of State playing the part of Mike Ashley. The public deserve better than this bargain basement approach. Scaling back the acute sector while not investing in the community sector simply does not work. The Prime Minister might have ruled out extra funding—

Michael Gove: I have listened with great interest to the hon. Gentleman. He has spoken eloquently of his concerns about the NHS, but has not, in the course of 18 minutes, put forward a single positive policy or explained where a single penny of additional funding would come from. He has secured the time for this debate, so would he at least put forward a positive policy for the NHS, or a suggestion as to where the money should come from?

Jonathan Ashworth: The right hon. Gentleman really does have a brass neck. We still do not know when we are going to get the £350 million from him, but next time he intervenes perhaps he will tell us.

Michael Gove: Answer the question.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab) rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I give way to my hon. Friend. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. That is enough shouting.

Rosie Cooper: Perhaps the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) would like to tell me how cutting the A&E at Southport and Ormskirk hospital and giving local community and acute services to Virgin Care can be a positive story for the NHS.

Jonathan Ashworth: This is exactly the sort of point that we are making; my hon. Friend is absolutely correct. That is why we need to look carefully at all these STPs. Of course, we do not know much about them at the moment, because all we see is glossy brochures that tell us that everything is going to be all right and not to worry. We want transparency. The Secretary of State should insist that every single STP is published and that we have the details of the cuts that will be made in our communities.

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab) rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I give way to my right hon. Friend the former Chief Whip.

Dame Rosie Winterton: Is not one of the problems with local planning the recruitment of GPs and the lack of GPs locally? Would it not help if we were to amend the Health and Social Care Act 2012 so that clinical commissioning groups and NHS England could provide directly salaried GPs instead of being prevented from doing so, as is the case at the moment? That is a practical example of something that would save money and increase the local provision of GP services.

Jonathan Ashworth: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Morale among GPs is at an all-time low. She identifies another problem that has emerged because of the 2012 Act. I hope that the Minister will respond to her important point.

Helen Jones rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to my hon. Friend, but then I will not take any more interventions.

Helen Jones: Is my hon. Friend aware that the Cheshire and Merseyside group has not only refused to publish details about the STP, but refused my Freedom of Information Act request for information about the meetings that were held on the STP and who was present at them? Does that not simply give rise to suspicion that this whole process is being driven by cuts rather than the need to improve care?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will now make a bit of progress because I know that other Members are anxious to speak.

The Chancellor should respond tomorrow to the growing body of evidence that the NHS has not been given the money that it needs. Tomorrow, we need an end to the scandal of crumbling hospitals. Tomorrow, the Chancellor must put right the Government’s greatest betrayal on adult social care. Tomorrow, the Government must deliver the long-overdue investment that our NHS needs.

Michael Gove: Where is the money coming from?
Jonathan Ashworth: What sense does it make to carry on cutting inheritance tax, capital gains tax and corporation tax, at a cost of billions to the Exchequer, while at the same time failing to fund our national health service or to give social care the money it demands? The Prime Minister lets the CBI know that she is prepared to give away billions extra in corporation tax, but she tells us that there is no more money for the NHS. The Chancellor will be prevented from acting tomorrow not by financial constraints, but by the ideological constraints that the Government have placed on themselves. It is time to give the NHS the funding that it needs. I commend the motion to the House.

4.52 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “House” to the end of the Question and add “welcomes the Government’s investment, on the back of a strong economy, of significant additional funding and resources each year for the NHS during the 2015 Parliament; notes that this settlement was frontloaded at the specific request of the NHS in NHS England’s own plan to deliver an improved and more sustainable service, the Five Year Forward View; and further notes that the NHS will receive a real terms increase in funding in each year of the Spending Review period, while the Labour Party’s Manifesto at the last election committed to only an extra £2.5 billion a year by 2020, far less than the NHS requested.”

As I did in last week’s debate on social care, I start by recognising the fantastic work done by NHS staff up and down the country. This autumn, I met a mental health nurse who told me how she had had to cope with the pressure of one of her patients throwing herself off a bridge the day after a consultation. I am sure that all Members have stories of the incredible dedication of NHS staff—not just people doing their jobs, but people putting their heart and soul into their work, staying late, going the extra mile, and sacrificing home time and holidays to be there for patients. As I did last week, I also recognise the 50,000 NHS staff from EU countries, including 26,000 low-paid staff, who do a brilliant job. Today we have heard concerns about funding, A&E—

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Hunt: I will give way in a moment, but I just want to finish this sentence, if I may.

We have heard concerns about funding, A&E performance, waiting times and morale, and I want to answer them all. There are many pressures in the NHS, but I also want to recognise some successes, because one of the things that is most damaging to morale is not giving credit where it is due.

Paul Farrelly: Can the Secretary of State explain why he has made scores of redundancies in north Staffordshire? In my 15 years as an MP, I have never seen the local NHS in such a meltdown, with a scorched-earth policy of cuts and closures, and more to come with next year’s still-secret STP. When will the Government realise that pressures on social care and the NHS are such that those services are unsustainable without decent further funding and investment?

Mr Hunt: As the hon. Gentleman knows, those things would certainly be unsustainable if we had followed the Labour party’s investment plans at the time of the previous general election. If he wants to know what is happening to staff, let me tell him that in the period I have been Health Secretary, we have got 5,000 more doctors and 10,000 more nurses. That is what happens when we have a Government who are prepared to invest in the NHS.

The shadow Health Secretary talked about A&E—he is right to say that we are not hitting the target, and we are doing something about that—but he did not tell the House that, since Labour left office, we have recruited 1,200 more doctors for A&E departments, which is a 25% increase, including a more than 50% increase for consultants. Every day, we are seeing 2,500 more people within four hours.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Hunt: I give way, with pleasure, to a junior doctor.

Dr Allin-Khan: I am a junior doctor in A&E, of which the right hon. Gentleman speaks, and I can say that morale is at an absolute all-time low. We have a recruitment and retention crisis in A&E. We are losing all the fantastic staff whom we have been able to recruit because this Government are not recognising and accepting the fantastic workforce on our A&E frontline. All the doctors are leaving.

Mr Hunt: With respect, the hon. Lady might be on the wrong side of the House, because I started my speech by recognising the brilliant work done by doctors and nurses, something that the shadow Health Secretary conspicuously failed to do. Let us look at her own hospital: since 2010, St George’s has—[Interruption.] I do not know whether she is interested in hearing my response to her intervention. Since 2010, her hospital has had 884 more nurses and 240 more doctors, and her CCG had a £10 million funding increase this year.

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for allowing me to speak again. I shall refer at length to St George’s hospital in my speech, but it is very unfair of him to bring it into this debate. It is because of this Government that St George’s hospital is operating at a £50 million deficit. It is because of this Government that we are now in special measures. It is—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. The hon. Lady is hoping to catch the eye of the Chair later in the debate. As it is, there will be a five or four-minute time limit, so Members who intervene must do so very briefly and not very frequently. If they do not do so, I am afraid that they may not be called to speak.

Mr Hunt: The shadow Health Secretary also did not talk about cancer. In 2010, we had the lowest cancer survival rates in western Europe. Since then, we have referred for cancer tests 2,200 more people every day, and 100 more people are starting cancer treatment every day. The cancer charities say that this is saving 12,000 lives a year. On mental health, he did not mention the fact that we are treating 1,400 more people every day, with record dementia diagnosis rates.

Mr Jackson: Would not Opposition Members be a little more straightforward and honest about the wider context if they admitted the demographic challenge...
that this Government face, as they would have faced? The number of over-60s will increase by 50% in the next 15 years. Should they not also admit that the private finance initiative was an appalling millstone—£64 billion—to bequeath to this Government? That has had an impact on frontline care.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. People will be astonished to hear Labour Members wasting their time talking about a privatisation of the NHS that is not happening when they were responsible for PFI, the worst possible privatisation that has done such enormous damage.

Another point that the shadow Health Secretary did not mention was the quality and safety of care in our NHS that Labour left behind. The Francis report revealed massive problems—short staffing, a culture of denial and cover-ups—and they were not just at Mid Staffs but, as we now know, at Basildon, Morecambe Bay and many other trusts. Since we have been in office we have changed that. We have put 31 hospitals into special measures, which is more than 10% of hospitals across the entire NHS, and we have recruited record numbers of doctors and nurses.

I want to tell the House about one hospital that was put into special measures. Care was unsafe at Wexham Park in Slough—so much so that fewer than half the hospital staff were prepared to recommend the care provided there to their own friends and family—but it has gone from having six of its eight clinical areas rated as requiring improvement or inadequate, to having all eight of them rated as good or outstanding. It has come out of special measures, as have 15 hospitals in total, and we should all commend the staff who have worked incredibly hard to turn around those hospitals.

Jenny Chapman: The right hon. Gentleman has the nerve to talk about the inheritance from a previous Administration, when what we inherited in 1997 was people dying on waiting lists of more than 18 months for heart operations.

Mr Hunt: I have often from this Dispatch Box been prepared to praise some of the achievements of the last Labour Government. They did bring down waiting times, but they did not focus on the quality and safety of care.

What we now know from the CQC’s new regime, which has just finished its first round of inspections, is that 56% of our hospitals are good or outstanding. One could say that it is disappointing to know that 44% of hospitals are not, but to those who would use that as a political weapon I say this: we are the only country in the world brave enough to set up an independent inspection regime, and if we want to have the safest, highest quality care, the first thing we need to know is where it is good and where we need to improve it. I thank the chief inspector of hospitals, Professor Sir Mike Richards, for his outstanding work in raising quality.

Joan Ryan: The right hon. Gentleman talks about the inspection regime, but I think I am right in saying that it was not something he and his Government introduced. The Care Quality Commission was introduced by a Labour Government, as far as I am aware. As I know from North Middlesex hospital, hospitals end up in special measures because they are underfunded and under-supported, and cannot get the doctors they need.

Mr Hunt: The right hon. Lady is right that the Care Quality Commission was set up by the last Labour Government, but it did not have independence from the Government in its inspection reports. When we legislated for that, Labour tried to vote it down. We got it through and changed the inspection system, and it is working extremely well.

I want to move on to the substance of the debate, which is about the funding of the NHS. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) on his courage—indeed, his chutzpah—in confronting the issue of funding, despite inheriting a Labour policy to cut NHS funding by £5.5 billion a year by the end of the Parliament. He is right that there has never been greater financial pressure—we have had the financial crisis in 2008, the deficits and the growth in demand from the ageing population—but he must accept that that makes it all the more extraordinary that Labour wanted to cut the NHS budget in 2010 and to cut it from the current levels in 2015. I simply say that we could, as a Government, have chosen to cut NHS funding from this year’s level by £1.3 billion, as under Labour’s plans, but we would have had to lay off 11,000 doctors or 40,000 nurses.

Andy Burnham: The problem with the Conservatives’ script is that they talk about NHS funding, but they completely neglect social care. There can be no debate about the fact they have cut social care every year for the last six years, taking support away from half a million older people, many of whom are now trapped in hospital beds. Greater Manchester says that it has a shortfall of about £80 million in social care; the figure is £1 billion nationally. Has the Secretary of State raised this issue with the Chancellor? Has he made an emergency bid for funding? Will there be more money for social care this year?

Mr Hunt: That is not the problem with our script; it is the problem with the right hon. Gentleman’s script, because as shadow Health Secretary he sanctioned a policy that would have given the NHS £1.3 billion less this year, and at the last election the then shadow Chancellor said he would give not a penny more to local authorities, whereas we are seeing social care funding go up by £600 million this year. More money is going into the NHS and the social care system under a Government who are committed to funding them both.

What is especially wrong with the argument made by the shadow Health Secretary, whom I welcome to his place for his first Opposition day debate, is his suggestion that the Government have not honoured their promises to the NHS. What did the independent commentators say at the time of last year’s spending review? Simon Stevens, whom he quoted, said “our case for the NHS has been heard and actively supported.” NHS Providers, which he quoted, said it was “a good settlement for the NHS.” The King’s Fund, which he quoted, said it was “a good settlement for the NHS.”

In fact, because of the Government’s commitment to the NHS, we are spending 10% more on it as a proportion of GDP than the OECD average—that is more than Norway, Finland, Korea, Australia and New Zealand.
Sir Simon Burns: Does my right hon. Friend agree that without that investment since 2009-10 to last year there would not have been the 1.6 million more operations within the NHS that benefit all our constituents?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend is right. I congratulate him, because he was part of the shadow Health team that persuaded the then shadow Chancellor and Leader of the Opposition that we needed to make that investment, thanks to which the NHS is doing 5,000 more operations every single day.

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend has been very gracious in taking interventions from all sides, and also in citing independent voices. Has not the independent King’s Fund also pointed out that the sustainability and transformation plans that he is overseeing are the “best hope” of securing long-term improvement for both health and care in this country? Does he agree that the Opposition should pay rather more attention to those independent experts, rather than repeating their own press releases?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend is right that just occasionally we should listen to experts—but only very occasionally. In the spirit of listening to experts, and as the Leader of the Opposition is here, I will tell my right hon. Friend something else the King’s Fund has said that he will agree with, which is that “claims of mass privatisation were and are exaggerated.” Let us not go chasing down rabbit holes.

The result of this Government’s commitment to the NHS is that real-terms spending per head has gone up by 4.6%, which is double the rate in Scotland and three times the rate in Wales. The hon. Member for Leicester South also mentioned the National Audit Office. He did not mention that the numbers quoted in the NAO report are last year’s figures. He chose not to mention this year’s numbers, which were published last week. They show that 40 fewer trusts are in deficit. Yes, a year ago, half of trusts were missing their financial plans, but now 86% are hitting those plans.

The latest figures, from Friday, show that the deficit will fall 73% from last year, and even lower than that for many commentators to fall into: the suggestion that this is a uniform problem across the NHS that it is powerless to grip without further Government intervention. The reality is that there is huge variation across the system. The deficits at good or outstanding trusts are five times less than the deficits at other trusts. If all agencies nurses are down 18% on a year ago, and for locum doctors they are down 13%. Our procurement changes are on track to save half a billion pounds. The money we raise from international visitors is up three times, from £84 million to £289 million.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is important that we focus not just on the level of spending but on where we spend the money. With long-term conditions such as diabetes, is it not essential to focus on preventive work, which in the long term will save the national health service a huge amount of money?

Mr Hunt: That is absolutely right. In all frankness, that argument could have been made from the Opposition Front Bench this afternoon, and we would be having a much better debate.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the calm and dignified way he is dealing with this debate, as compared with the Opposition. May I put in a plug for local community hospitals, not just in my constituency but right across the country, and how vital their retention is for good quality care in the future?

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend, who himself personifies calm and dignity. Community hospitals are indeed extremely important. Their role may change, but they will none the less continue to be a vital part of provision in most of our constituencies.

Helen Goodman: Since the Secretary of State thinks community hospitals are so important, will he guarantee that the Richardson in Barnard Castle will stay open?

Mr Hunt: I think the hon. Lady will be happy to know that such decisions are made not by Health Secretaries of either party but locally.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hunt: I will make some progress, but I will find time to give way to hon. Friends who I know want to come in.

I want to pick up on a particularly extraordinary comment made yesterday by the shadow Health Secretary. He said: “aggressive efficiency targets have contributed to deficits”. That is a curious thing to say, first because his own spending plans would have meant £5.5 billion more efficiencies. If he thinks our plans are aggressive, I just wonder how he would describe Labour’s approach. Secondly, I know we are all Corbynistas now, but basic economics suggests that efficiency plans do not increase deficits, but reduce deficits. That is what we need to do in the NHS, because we want the money to go to patient care.

There is another danger in the shadow Health Secretary’s argument, a trap that is very easy not just for him but for many commentators to fall into: the suggestion that this is a uniform problem across the NHS that it is powerless to grip without further Government intervention. The reality is that there is huge variation across the system. The deficits at good or outstanding trusts are five times less than the deficits at other trusts. If all trusts had the same financial performance as the good or outstanding ones, we would have a surplus of nearly half a billion pounds. Half the deficits are from just 22 trusts. We see this variation on a very specific level. For example, the amount paid for a pair of surgical gloves, which are very important to all hospitals, is £1.27 in some hospitals and just 50p in others. As for waiting lists, of 1,000 people who are waiting more than a year for their treatment, which is unacceptable, there is just one person from an outstanding trust who has been waiting that long. Some 93% are from trusts that require improvement or are inadequate. This is why we have a huge programme to support and improve those trusts and deal with the challenges they face.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): On financial management, does the Secretary of State recognise that in Labour-run Wales agency staff spend has increased...
60% in the past year? That compares with the tough measures taken in England to crack down on wasteful spending.

Mr Hunt: I do recognise that. It has been going up in Scotland as well. It is short-sighted of both Administrations not to work with us to tackle the problem; otherwise, staff living in border areas play off one system against the other.

Andy Burnham: The Secretary of State is trying to blame hospitals for the deficit, but the point is that the spend on agency staff has ballooned in England over the past six years. The reason is that the Government, and their predecessor, cut nurse training places and left hospitals in the grip of private staffing agencies. It is therefore simply not fair of the Secretary of State to stand at the Dispatch Box and blame hospitals for a problem of the Government’s making.

Mr Hunt: I am not blaming hospitals. We are supporting hospitals to deal with the problem. The root cause of the problem, set out in the Francis report, was hospitals covering up bad problems. We said no to that and said that we were going to sort it out by having more nurses on our wards. That is why, in the four years that I have been Health Secretary, we have had 10,000 more nurses on our wards.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the public are finally starting to see through the usual Labour smokescreen that is high on rhetoric and low on alternative solutions, with very patchy and poor delivery when Labour is given the chance? My right hon. Friend’s approach to the health service—a quiet delivery of change and proper funding—is what the public are looking for.

Mr Hunt: It is noticeable that the two potential solutions we have heard have been from Opposition Back Benchers—the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) and the former shadow Chief Whip, the right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton)—and not from the Opposition Front Bench. My hon. Friend makes an important point.

The shadow Health Secretary is right to hold the Government to account for the funding of the NHS and the social care system, but it is a big mistake to see through the usual Labour smokescreen that is high on rhetoric and low on alternative solutions, with very patchy and poor delivery when Labour is given the chance? My right hon. Friend’s approach to the health service—a quiet delivery of change and proper funding—is what the public are looking for.

Mr Hunt: That is exactly what we need to sort out. We have the STP process to stop people doing their own thing, instead of having a co-ordinated, well-planned strategy. If we stick with this process, embrace innovation and technology and retain a relentless focus on safety and quality of care, in this Parliament we will see a million more people accessing mental health treatment every year; 5,000 more doctors working in general practice and a transformation of services through GPs; a new four-week cancer waiting time standard that will save 30,000 lives a year; more failing hospitals turned around; the weekend effect tackled; more doctors and nurses; and an NHS staying true to the promise made to patients in 1948 that safe, high-quality care would be there for everyone, regardless of income. That is what this Conservative Government will deliver, and I urge the House to support the amendment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the SNP spokesperson, I must inform hon. Members that, including her speech, we have calculated, generously, that every speaker will have five minutes, but we will probably have to go down to four minutes at some point.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does that include five minutes for me also?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Obviously the hon. Lady has no speech limit, but the speech limit has been calculated with her mind. I am just saying that the longer someone speaks for, the less time everyone else will have.

5.17 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Okay, well that is fairly disappointing, given what I have prepared.

UK-wide, the NHS faces sustainability issues. One of the key issues is the increase in demand from an ageing population and the increasing complexity of those demands. The way to tackle that demand is through public health and social care that ensures that those people do not end up in the most expensive place. Secondly, we have a lack of staff, both nurses and doctors. The lack of training nurses has been referred to. We also face the threat of losing some of our staff from the EU. The third threat to sustainability is money, but the money is the one we can fix, because money is a decision; the others will take a decade each to fix—by training more nurses and doctors, preventing illness and finding better ways to look after an ageing population.
As I have said in the Chamber before, I welcome the idea of STPs, because they should mean a return to place-based planning and integration and a move away from fragmentation and competition. The problem is, however, that they have to be based on patient-centred care, whereas, according to what is leaking out, they are being discussed on the basis of budget-centred care. We heard in the Health Committee that the STP groups were being given a figure that they had to meet by 2021 and then were working back from that. That will never work.

If we want to decrease inefficiency and increase efficiency we need to target the inefficiencies in the system, not just take an axe to the whole thing. When hospitals or GPs run out of money and take urgent action, it will be poorly thought out and immediate-survival action. We need to look at where the fat is and at the natural inefficiencies in the system, and some of that comes down to the lack of integration. STPs are a great opportunity but an opportunity we will look back on as missed if we do not do it properly.

The Secretary of State says that there is no privatisation in the NHS, but there certainly is marketisation and outsourcing. I graduated in 1982, so I have lived through every single iteration from both sides and three Governments. In 1982, we were just skimped. Basically, the NHS got 5% of GDP and it dropped to 4.5% over the ’80s. Instead of increasing that to where it is now, what we had was constant redesign.

The first was the internal market and GP purchasing. A GP would refer to our clinic, but if I decided the patient was not surgical and I referred them to gynaecology, Surgeons and clinicians began sending the patient back to the GPs, so that they would refer them. Of course patients fell through the cracks; some never got that second referral and things were missed.

After the purchaser-provider split, we started to change the whole shape. We went from 100 health authorities to 300 primary care trusts, even though the leaders of the PCTs earned the same money as the leaders of the health authorities. People were made redundant and transitional change was hugely expensive. In the mid-2000s, we went from 300 PCTs to 150—again with redundancy and transition. As we move on, we start to see the private finance initiatives. As has been said, the NHS has paid over £60 billion for £11 billion-worth of buildings. That was not an effective thing to do.

Eventually, of course, we come to the Health and Social Care Act 2012, which got rid of the 150 PCTs and replaced them with 211 clinical commissioning groups. This is described as “putting power in the hands of the GPs”, but following a freedom of information request I know that less than 18% of CCGs have a GP majority on them. Some 47% of CCGs do not even have a clinical majority, so the idea that CCGs give power back to primary care is, I am afraid, a complete fallacy.

What we have seen, I am afraid, has come from all Governments. It was the Labour Government who took the purchaser-provider split and introduced independent treatment centres, giving them block grants. All the talk about patient choice was not really patient choice at all: the GP had to send the patient to the ITCs for their hips, because it had already been paid for. To try to counteract that, we have seen payment by results, which was the forerunner of the tariff. What that did was increase activity, so it helped with waiting lists and waiting times, but what we now have is activity that is just growing and growing. Hospitals get paid for activity, not for whether that activity is right.

In Scotland, we abandoned trusts in 2004, and we abandoned primary care trusts in 2009. Let us look at our costs book, which publishes the costs of administration. This is not just the costs of the market; it deals with all the administration of the NHS. Ours has fallen from 7.6% in 2006-07 to 6.7% in 2015-16. When it comes to the Department of Health or NHS England, no one has any idea. A piece of work was done for the Department of Health in 2005, which estimated admin costs at that time as 14%. I suggest that the current market is an awful lot more complex than it was then.

I think some things can be done around procurement. In Scotland, our national procurement gives hospitals a choice of 9,000 items. The supply chain in England has 600,000 items. It is not limiting; it is not national procurement. Our logistics division, which delivers that, will pick items per ward and deliver them all the way from a central depot to that ward. That allows us to cut some of the costs, as suggested in the Carter review.

We absolutely need to keep agency prices down. It is important to try to keep staff on a staff bank rather than get them through agencies. Why are we not asking the bigger question? Why are nurses choosing to work for an agency rather than the NHS? Is it that they earn more money? Is it flexibility? Is it family-friendliness? Would it not be better to look at how we let them work, so that they work for us rather than feeling that they have to go and work in an agency? From the point of view of job quality and job satisfaction, they would all rather be in one place than be in a different place every week.

There are things that could be done. There could be a better use of community pharmacies, and a better use of community hospitals for “step up” and “step down” services. It is crucial that we fund social care so that elderly people are looked after in their own homes. I think that STPs have potential. However, I ask the Secretary of State not to go on and on with marketisation, given that no cost-benefit analysis has ever been carried out and there is no evidence of benefit from it. The NHS could save an amount that is estimated conservatively at £5 billion a year, and that would have a significant impact on the debt.

The right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) suggested that we needed to bring solutions. I am offering the ones that I can think of from Scotland, and I recommend them to the Secretary of State.

5.25 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford).

I want to touch briefly on the importance of clear data, the current financial position, and the need to agree on a settlement for the future in this House rather than continuing to have such confrontational debates.

I can see how the £10 billion figure has been arrived at: by adding an extra year, starting from 2014-15, and by transferring budgets to NHS England. When the
Secretary of State refers to the NHS, he is actually referring to NHS England. He is not including public health. He is not, for example, including Health Education England. However, it is crucial that they are considered. As my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire said, when we talk about transferring money from public health to the NHS England budget, we are cutting off our ability to control the increase in future demand. We face significant challenges, which we will not address unless we invest in those future services.

We sometimes talk about public health as if it were not frontline care, but it is. We are talking about, for instance, services to help people with addictions and sexual health services—really important costs for the NHS. There is also the challenge of the reduction in Health Education England’s £5 billion budget, £3.5 billion of which is spent directly on the wages of health service doctors who are undergoing training, but also delivering frontline services. Cuts to Health Education England cut us off from future sustainability, because that is the budget that trains, retains and sustains our existing workforce. This is all crucial to frontline services.

The other way in which the £10 billion figure has been arrived at is by changing the baseline from which we calculate real-terms increases. I would say that it has never been more important than it is now for the public to have confidence in the data that we use. Trying to return us to talking about total health spending is not trying to be awkward; it is trying to be honest with the public. It is difficult to argue that more funding for health and social care is necessary if a £10 billion increase has been claimed. It is important that we continue to use the same consistent baselines that have been used in the past, so that the public can see what has happened to total health spending.

I welcome the front-loading of the settlement, and I welcome the fact that the NHS has been relatively protected in comparison with other departments, but the scale of the increase in demand is extraordinary. When Simon Stevens talked about welcoming the increase that had been granted, he made it clear that it was dependent on a fair settlement for social care and a radical upgrade in public health, and those two aspects are lacking.

I think that both sides are correct. I can see how the Secretary of State has arrived at the £10 billion figure, but whenever that figure is used we should also present a figure that refers to total health spending in the way in which it has always been referred to in the past. I think that would help to build the Secretary of State’s case for an increase in funding as we go forward.

Like others, I hope that we shall see an uplift for social care in the autumn statement, because the impact of social care on the NHS is now profound. There cannot be a Member in the House to whom it has not been made clear by people who come to his or her surgery that the state of the care system is in collapse and providers are in retreat. Even those who can afford to pay are finding it difficult to gain access to care.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): In my constituency there are some villages where no social care is available because none of the private providers can afford to deliver it. Does the hon. Lady, in her role as Select Committee Chair, know whether that applies in other parts of the country as well?

Dr Wollaston: We know it does, and the CQC report describes social care as being at a tipping-point; it is in a very fragile state and we owe it to all our constituents to try to come together to agree where we go from here. Many have proposed a royal commission to look at future sustainability, but we have had commissions: the Barker commission set out the options, and the House of Lords is looking at future sustainability and the range of options.

I urge colleagues across the House to try to agree, rather than having this continual confrontational debate. The best way forward would be for all parties in this House to agree that this is an enormous challenge. My personal belief is that we should stick with our current very equitable system of state funding of our NHS, look at the various options and agree between us that we need to address this. We cannot keep ducking it; we owe it to all our constituents to adopt a much more constructive tone to our debate.

We know that the current position is unsustainable, and that was reiterated in today’s National Audit Office report. We can continue to shout across the Chamber about how much is spent, but we know this will be a challenge whoever is in power, and I urge all colleagues to focus instead on a different approach. Yes, more can be done within the NHS, but I am afraid that the elastic is stretched far too tight for social care to make any more efficiencies. We now need to work together to see how we can fund this going forward.

5.31 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The NHS in Wirral is facing its grarest crisis, which is why I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. Cheshire and Merseyseyde’s so-called sustainability and transformation plan was published last Wednesday, and it is a piece of work that is shocking in its complacency, Orwellian in its use of language and potentially devastating in its consequences.

The Secretary of State has described these plans as open and transparent, but Wirral borough council has had zero involvement in the development of this plan. The first it knew about it was when it was posted on the NHS website last Wednesday.

I want to make three quick observations about the flaws in the STP process, which have become increasingly apparent as it has developed. The first concern is that the NHS has been starved of money and these plans are more about cutting the finances than reconfiguring the services. The second concern is that this has been a top-down process organised in a secretive way by the NHS. The third concern is that the extremely tight deadlines imposed on the process make it impossible to achieve any meaningful consultation or public buy-in.

The plans developed for Merseyseyde and Cheshire will affect services in Wirral. The plan was published on Wednesday. It confirmed that our local health services have been massively underfunded by this Government to the tune of £1 billion. But rather than providing the necessary resources to meet patient needs, the plan sets out massive cuts. It confirms the existence of entirely new meanings for some familiar words and phrases in the English language and elevating management gobbledygook to a form of high art.

In NHS-speak we now know that “sustainability” really means closing all deficits, and in Merseyseyde and Cheshire this means £1 billion of cuts; “openness and
transparency” actually means developing these plans in secret and in total isolation from local partners; and “the current acute configuration within this footprint is unsustainable” is gibberdegook for mass hospital closures, mergers and the downgrading of accident and emergency services. The report aims to make these huge savings by merging existing hospitals across the region, downgrading accident and emergency services and cutting access to maternity provision. It makes the heroic assumption that if care is provided closer to home, services will become cheaper and demand will go down. The report is silent on the future for Wirral acute services, despite its ominous observation that there needs to be a review to “determine future options for hospital reconfiguration”.

Wirral health trust’s annual report has let the cat out of the bag, however, by confirming that the merger of Arrow Park hospital, the Countess of Chester hospital and parts of Clatterbridge hospital are being considered. This threatens to leave Wirral devoid of any acute services and to leave my constituents with increasingly difficult journeys if they are to access any acute care at all. It is a fact that Wirral local authority has had zero opportunity to be involved in the development of the plans despite the NHS planning guidelines for STPs asking those NHS managers developing them to “engage with local authorities and other partners in their development”. It is a fact that this process has been the opposite of transparent. It is also a fact that the proposals contained within it are unacceptable.

The NHS needs more funding urgently. The STP process must be slowed down so that there can be meaningful consultation. The Government should end the top-down planning in secret and open up the process to involve the public and patients in their local communities, as well as other statutory authorities and staff. That is why I have launched a petition to ask the Government to press the pause button on these plans so that they can be properly considered by patients, the public and staff. It can be found at www.savewirralnhs.com. Please visit and sign the petition. Together we have to fight to save Wirral NHS.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I want to make five constructive proposals to help NHS funding. The first relates to prevention, which we have not heard nearly enough about in the debate so far. It is wholly unacceptable that a third of our children are obese by the age of 11. We have learned today that many children typically consume the equivalent of a bathful of sugary drinks every year. We also know that England and Wales are ranked at D minus in the global fitness matrix, and that Scotland is ranked at F.

If we could get these things right early on in our children’s lifetimes, we would be in a much stronger position. One way of doing that would be to extend the excellent work of St Ninian’s primary school in Stirling, which has pioneered the use of the daily mile. All the children run—if they cannot manage that, they walk—a mile at some point each day. This has had dramatic results: not one of the school’s 57 children is overweight, and there has been a significant reduction in coughs and colds. The exercise has helped to develop the children’s social, emotional and mental wellbeing as well as their physical wellbeing. The idea has been taken up across the Netherlands and Belgium, and I would like to see a lot more of it across our own country.

Secondly, we need to do a huge amount of work on health literacy in relation to self-care. I commend to Members the report from the all-party parliamentary group on primary care and public health, which came out in March this year. It showed that there were 3.7 million visits to A&E and 52 million visits to GPs for self-treatable conditions in 2014. It is estimated that if we could deal with that by persuading people to go to the appropriate place, we could save the NHS more than £2 billion a year.

My third point relates to gatekeeping in our hospitals. I commend the initiative taken in Fife in Scotland, where having senior consultant input in A&E has led to a reduction of 30% in acute surgical admissions. My own local hospital, the Luton and Dunstable, has introduced a similar methodology for patients with acute conditions, and that is also bearing fruit.

My fourth point relates to quality, which we have not heard nearly enough about today. I urge Members to look more fully at the work of the Getting it Right First Time initiative, which the Government have now spread across 18 medical specialties. It started in orthopaedics, and the Government estimate that it will save £1.5 billion a year. This is about not only a financial saving, but better outcomes for patients, who may have undergone the wrong operation or received poor-quality care and had to have significant revisions. That project is getting data from across the country. For example, the rate of return for another procedure within 90 days following oral and maxillofacial cancer surgery varies from 8.33% in some hospitals to over 80% in others. That degree of variation is simply unacceptable. If we can get a higher level of quality, that can lead to much better outcomes for patients and the NHS saving money, too.

Finally, enhanced recovery programmes, such as the advanced transfer team in South Warwickshire, have led to significant increases in productivity with better outcomes for patients. We need to see much more of that across the country.

5.40 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): The “South West London Five Year Forward Plan”, published last week, states its intention to save a staggering £828 million by 2020—a contribution to the attempted national saving of £22 billion by 2020. However, that draft sustainability and transformation plan, published by the south-west London partnership, does not shed much light on how it will actually be managed other than by reducing A&E attendance by 40% in three years. That is a totally implausible aim that has not been achieved by any health system in the world—let alone one so strapped for cash.

That unsustainable ambition brings us to the long-standing proposal, which has so often been denied, to reduce the number of acute hospitals in south-west London from five to four or even—God help us—three.
The five acute hospitals are St George’s, Croydon, Kingston, Epsom and St Helier, whose closure I have been fighting for 18 years. Of those five acute hospitals, St George’s will rightly be protected from closure. It is also clear that Croydon university hospital or Kingston hospital will rightly be protected from closure. It is also clear that St Helier and Epsom, both of which have been under threat before. No amount of vaguely-worded statements from the partnership will change the fact that the intention is to close St Helier. The STP clearly states that the partnership needs to “Review our acute hospitals to ensure that we meet the changing needs to close St Helier. The STP clearly states that the partnership will work to that end.”

It continues by stating that the partnership will “undertake further work, including analysis of revenue implications on 3, 4 and 5 site options”. Not only will one acute site definitely close, but commissioners are considering the closure of two sites. We know from the STP’s former iteration in 2011, the Better Services Better Values programme, that the closure of St Helier was the main recommendation. Despite that, however, colleagues on the Government Benches, including the hon. Members for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) and for Twickenham (Dr Mathias), have been taken in by the STP, peddling the myth that no hospitals will close.

When is a closure a closure? If A&E and maternity services, and all the associated diagnostic and other services, are removed, that is precisely a closure. I want to make it clear to the House, the Government, the partnership and, most importantly, my constituents that we have come together as a community before to fight the closure of St Helier hospital and will do it again. We will do that not only for those who use St Helier, but for those who use every hospital in south-west London. The closure of St Helier would mean the undermining of all those other hospitals.

5.43 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I start by commending all the hard-working people in our national health service—doctors and nurses—the increased activity in our NHS over the past several years. The NHS has never worked harder. We have never seen so many patients treated in our NHS and standards are certainly improving. However, we must face up to the fact that indices of mortality and morbidity that are amenable to healthcare are poor against reasonable international comparators. I am not satisfied by comparing the UK with the OECD average; I want to compare the UK with countries with which my constituents would wish it to be compared, such as France, Germany, Holland, Belgium and Denmark. I am afraid that our performance is behind the curve on such comparisons, and that is the challenge that we face.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), I am increasingly cautious about the £10 billion figure, so I urge my Front-Bench colleagues to provide clarity on it. We need to be clear about what it actually relates to. I commend the Government for spending this amount on our NHS, despite the opposition from Labour Members. If we are to have a collaborative and collegiate debate, we need some humility from them on this point, as Labour undoubtedly opposed such an amount at the last general election. However, we need to understand what the £10 billion is and what it is not. According to the Nuffield Trust, the King’s Fund and the Health Foundation, we are more likely to be talking about £4.5 billion. The reason for that, which was elegantly laid out by my hon. Friend, relates to which year we use to baseline, which year we use to base our prices on, and whether we include or exclude the money that has been removed from the public health function of local government and from Health Education England.

I would contend, as I believe she would, that those moneys need to be included in the sum total for healthcare in this country, and I think that that is what our constituents would understand as the totality of healthcare. That alternative figure therefore seems to be more reasonable.

I am also worried about the £22 billion in savings on which Simon Stevens based his five year forward view. The National Audit Office report published today suggests strongly that this process is not likely to result in anything like £22 billion and that those savings are “untested”—that is polite speak for unachievable. We know that the deficit is being dealt with through a transfer from capital to revenue, and from the sustainability element of the sustainability and transformation fund. That is not sustainable in the long term. We want more transformation; we do not want to have to rely increasingly on the sustainability bit.

Tomorrow, we must look for a big cash injection to sort this out, but I submit that we then need a long-term commission—perhaps not a royal commission, as royal commissions take for ever and cost the earth—that will involve a debate about how we pay for our health service in the long term, given the pressures that we face. That might involve a hypothecated tax. The end to the triple lock could save £2.1 billion by 2020-21, and that money could then be hypothecated to the NHS in the interests of generational fairness, given that the elderly consume the largest portion of healthcare spend. We also need to look at fiscal incentives relating to employees’ private medical insurance. But we need to do all this within a Beveridge envelope that delivers an NHS that is free at the point of need.

5.47 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), whose points about hypothecation were particularly interesting.

Long-suspected proposals to downgrade Darlington Memorial hospital were confirmed by the leak of the STP by Hartlepool Borough Council. I am grateful to the council for allowing the document to enter the public domain. Darlington Memorial serves not only the town of Darlington, with its population of about 100,000, but communities living far into the Durham and Yorkshire dales—Barnard Castle, Northallerton and beyond. Darlington is also the closest major town to Catterick garrison, the largest army base in Europe, which is set to expand yet further. Nearby hospitals have already been downgraded in recent years, with changes to emergency cover at Bishop Auckland hospital and to maternity services at the Friarage hospital in Northallerton. When those changes were made, in the face of enormous local opposition, residents were assured that services at the next nearest hospital, Darlington Memorial, would be safe.
Darlington Memorial is special to me, perhaps even more so than it is to many of my constituents—I make no apologies for that. Both my parents were nurses, and we lived in nurses’ accommodation at Darlington hospital for a while when I was eight or nine. My dad died at that hospital, as did my grandmother. My two sons were born there, and have made regular and at times unexpected use of its services ever since.

I do accept that, for some specialist services, there is a benefit to centralisation. I absolutely support clinically driven decision making. When cardiac services were moved from Darlington to Middlesbrough, it did not lead to a campaign—it was the right choice for patients, it improved outcomes and I supported it. However, major trauma is already located at James Cook University hospital in Middlesbrough, and the argument now is about centralising services that do not have problems in their outcomes. There is also no clinical gain for patients through such a change, which makes the proposal just wrong.

Another concern relates to the amount that has been spent on so-called engagement activity with the local community to explain the downgrading plans to residents and find out what they think about them. Answers to written parliamentary questions show that £4.6 million has been spent on such activities so far. That is a disgrace, and those responsible should be held to account, as they have wasted public money and are now misleading the public about the fact that there is absolutely nothing to show for that.

In recent months, a campaign to save Darlington hospital has been growing. People from SOS Darlington have been out campaigning in the town centre, knocking on doors, and holding coffee mornings, and they have done it all for free. They have managed to engage 6,000 people. They are doing a better job of engaging the public and they are doing it for absolutely nothing.

There is no clinical case for downgrading services at Darlington hospital. Everyone involved knows that, which is why so much time and money is being spent on making up ways to persuade patients that it is a good idea.

The STP’s description of my constituents as “passive recipients of care” is not helping. The trouble is that the nirvana that the STP tries to support is not achievable without massive—as yet unquantified—amounts of up-front spending.

I admit that my attachment to my local hospital goes beyond the utilitarian, but I understand enough about how this process is unravelling to know that staff at Darlington Memorial hospital and their patients—my constituents—deserve an awful lot better.

Both the total NHS budget and the amount of NHS spending as a proportion of total Government spending have increased in every single year since 2010. Spending is now 10.1% higher per head in real terms than in 2010, and that increase has brought our health spending as a proportion of GDP broadly in line with that of our western European neighbours. In order to achieve best value from its resources and to deliver £22 billion of efficiency savings—those are savings that the NHS identified as achievable in its five year forward view—it is necessary to reconfigure the way in which health and social care services are delivered at a local level. That is a huge issue, and until we amalgamate social care budgets with health budgets to deliver a truly health-driven service with proper health-led care in the community, we will struggle with this for many years. I mention that not to cause controversy, but to highlight the difficult decisions ahead. Too often those decisions and the long-term sustainability of our local services are hindered by ideology, local politics and empire protections over budgets.

A few weeks ago, the West Yorkshire and Harrogate STP was published, setting out the vision, ambitions and priorities for the future of health and care in the region. This built on the significant work that was completed locally by both the Calderdale and the Greater Huddersfield clinical commissioning groups, which have been working together to address the significant challenges facing the health economy across our whole area. The decision to proceed with the development of a full business case was met with considerable concern from some members of the public who have been vociferous in their opposition to what they perceive to be a complete withdrawal of urgent care treatment at Huddersfield royal infirmary. Although the process has been challenging, to say the least, I would argue that it has been absolutely essential. What is certain is that the current model through which health services in Calderdale and Huddersfield are delivered is not sustainable in the long term, and that changes are needed to ensure that we have a local health service that continues to provide excellent care.

Amid some of the sensational media headlines from the local press and the comments of some of my opponents at the last general election, it can be easy to forget that these proposals are being put forward, not by politicians or by the Government, but by our senior local clinicians and doctors—the very people who understand how our local health services can best be delivered in the long term. They have taken an independent view about how the additional resources that the Government are making available can directly lead to better care for patients locally, and we have to trust their judgment. However, if we are to receive the support of our constituents for transforming the way in which we deliver their care, we must vastly improve the way in which we communicate any proposed changes and not keep scaremongering about cuts and reduced services, especially when the annual NHS budget spend is increasing in real terms.
catastrophic financially driven plan drawn up by managers in secrecy under pressure from the Secretary of State for Health. They are already being implemented, without any of the affected stakeholders or the people of Cheshire and Merseyside ever being asked what they think.

If fully implemented, the STP would involve the merging of the Royal Liverpool, Broadgreen and Aintree hospitals, with the Liverpool Women’s hospital being “reconfigured” and merged into the new organisation at a later date. It is planned to be rebuilt nearer the Royal, but there is no NHS money available for the new hospital building. The plans entail the downgrading of hospital A&E services at Whiston hospital, where many of my constituents go, or at Warrington or Southport hospitals, or some combination of all three. Details are not provided.

These shocking cuts and mergers have very little chance of being accepted by the people of Garston and Halewood, for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it is clear that the Cheshire and Merseyside STP is financially driven. This has been admitted by those who have drawn it up. Katherine Sheerin, chief officer of Liverpool clinical commissioning group, accepted this in an interview that she gave in the Liverpool Echo. When asked what would happen if these changes were not made, she said:

“If we did nothing, we would not have enough money to run the services. This is about managing that, rather than letting it happen.”

When asked if these changes were being driven by cuts, she replied:

“The financial component has been a strong driver”.

The King’s Fund agrees with her. In its report entitled “Sustainability and Transformation Plans in the NHS”, it says:

“The original purpose of STPs was to support local areas to improve care quality and efficiency of services . . . The emphasis from national NHS bodies has shifted over time to focus more heavily on how STPs can bring the NHS into financial balance (quickly).”

Quite so, and we can see this in Katherine Sheerin’s answers.

The Cheshire and Merseyside STP has to deal with the pressure of almost a £1 billion gap in its funding by 2021, so making cuts in spending to meet the Government’s financial requirement is at the core of these plans. The people of Merseyside are not daft—they can see this. The Cheshire and Merseyside STP requires £755 million of capital funding, which is now no longer available. In Liverpool alone, our hospitals’ deficit is estimated to be £276.5 million. In her Liverpool Echo interview, Katherine Sheerin suggested that Liverpool City Council would provide the missing capital funding.

Ms Angela Eagle: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. The Wirral Borough Council was not asked to participate at all. Was the Liverpool authority asked to participate?

Maria Eagle: Neither Liverpool City Council nor Knowsley Borough Council has been consulted at all about the plans. However, when asked where she was going to get the money for the new hospital, Katherine Sheerin said:

“There’s limited capital available but there are options to explore. Councils tend to be able to access borrowing at a very cheap rate.”

There we have it: Liverpool City Council is expected to stump up the money to implement what is supposed to be a key part of the strategy—building a new women’s hospital. However, this is the same Liverpool City Council that has had 58% of its money from central Government removed—first by the Lib Dem-Tory coalition and then by the Tory Governments after 2010—and that relies for almost three quarters of its income on that Government grant. This is the same Liverpool City Council that already spends £151 million on adult social services for its ageing population, but that can raise only £147 million in council tax. This is the same Liverpool City Council that is expected to find another £90 million of savings over the next three years and that is facing some extremely invidious choices to balance its budget.

My second point is this: these plans have been drawn up in near secrecy by NHS managers, and without consultation with those who are now being exhorted to help. Neither Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council nor Liverpool City Council has been asked what it thinks. Consequently, both say, unsurprisingly, that they are opposed to the plans. In Liverpool, the ruling Labour group has made it clear that it will oppose any STP that proposes cuts, and the Mayor of Liverpool has said publicly that he opposes the proposed closure of the Women’s hospital and will campaign to keep a women’s hospital in Liverpool. I agree with him. Labour in Liverpool will support any change to existing provision only if it improves services to women in Liverpool.

The current plans are already being implemented, and that is another thing we cannot allow to go ahead without proper consultation.

6.1 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My starting point is that funding in the NHS must be used effectively and efficiently. To that end, we expect the NHS to deliver savings and best value for money.

There are a number of issues relating to social care in the NHS where there is considerable scope for solving existing problems, for ensuring that better health care is delivered and for achieving sustainability, and there is no better place to start the discussion of those issues than bed-blocking.

Oxfordshire’s historical performance on bed-blocking is poor. It came 151st in terms of headcount last November, with 158 people. Bed-blocking decreases the availability of beds and has adverse effects on patients, particularly when they are elderly—for example, incontinence in the over-65s increases, and muscle wasting in the over-80s after 10 days of hospitalisation is equivalent to 10 years of muscle wasting otherwise.

By September, the headcount had fallen to 113 people, improving the county’s performance to 108—a massive improvement of 50 places over that period. That was achieved through a joint initiative by the clinical commissioning group, Oxford University Hospitals, Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust and the county council, all working to move people out of hospital when they have been appropriately treated.

However, that improvement was also achieved by putting £2 million into funding extra temporary care beds in care homes, where people can stay until they are ready to return to their own homes, move to a permanent care home or receive care in their own homes. That joint and positive thinking is something I would encourage as we integrate social care and the NHS.
Craig Whittaker: Does my hon. Friend agree that one lever for discouraging bed-blocking would be to join up some of the budgets around health and social care?

John Howell: I do, and that is precisely what the organisations in Oxfordshire have been trying to achieve.

The second point I would make relates to how we produce better-serving hospitals. In my own area, the Townlands Memorial Hospital, which is in Henley but which serves the whole of south Oxfordshire, has recently gone through a major re-provision. It now has an increased number of facilities serving the population of the area, but the beds are not in the hospital. Although limited in number, they are in an adjoining care home, whose opening I happened to attend with the Duke of Gloucester only the other day. It is good to see the issues at the hospital finally resolved.

That is the way forward for local hospitals: better treatment for people in their home through a system of what has come to be called ambulatory care. Such a system prevents the problems I mentioned, with patients suffering when they stay in hospital for a long time. This view comes not from politicians but from clinicians both local and national. The national clinicians I would point to are those in the Royal College of Physicians, who are fully behind this process. This method costs more in the first instance but provides better value for money and increases better patient outcomes.

The third area I want to discuss is what can happen when we integrate the staff providing care who are employed by the county council and those who are employed by the NHS. This allows us to ensure that the pay and service requirements of both groups of people, who are doing exactly the same job, can be harmonised in a much more positive way. That sets out a very good scope for efficiency in the operation of social care within the NHS model. I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker), in that I would like to see them fully integrated, but until then I have set out a very good method of being able to operate in those circumstances and to co-operate in order to achieve the outcomes that I have mentioned.

Sustainability and transformation plans focus on organisations working together and are the best hope of improving health and social care services in the long term. That is not my view but that expressed by the King’s Fund when it looked at the plans. I fully agree with its assessment of the situation and of these plans, which are working towards achieving the same outcomes.

6.6 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The funding crisis in the NHS is no accident. It is a political choice made by the Tories for which patients and NHS staff are paying the price in longer waiting times, delayed operations, and increasingly stressful working conditions. It is a crisis driven by the Government’s demand that the NHS make £22 billion-worth of efficiency savings—or cuts. This is impossible without huge damage to our national health service.

An analysis by The Guardian of 24 of the 44 STPs stated:

“Thousands of hospital beds are set to disappear, pregnant women will face long trips to give birth and a string of A&E units will be downgraded or even closed altogether as part of controversial NHS plans to reorganise healthcare in England…Dozens of England’s 163 acute hospitals look likely to have services, including cancer, trauma and stroke care, removed as a result of the plans”.

In the 2015-16 financial year, the NHS reported a record net deficit of £2.45 billion—nearly three times higher than in 2014—and so we see the crisis in services accelerating. Last week, the chief executive of NHS Providers, Dr Chris Hopson, said:

“The NHS simply cannot do all that it is currently doing and is being asked to do in future on these funding levels.”

STPs are supposed to facilitate the integration of health and social care, for which they require the support of council leaders, yet the leader of Wirral Council has said in the past 24 hours that he has not been given the opportunity to feed into the development of the local plan. The STP for Cheshire and Merseyside is of great concern to my constituents because it requires nearly £1 billion to be taken out of local health services. If this goes ahead, the impact on the NHS will be devastating; it is impossible that it would be otherwise.

There was recently a proposal to close Arrowe Park hospital, Clatterbridge hospital and Countess of Chester hospital and build a new hospital in Ellesmere Port, and there has been no denial that such a conversation has taken place. The annual report of the foundation trust that runs Arrowe Park and Clatterbridge says:

“The Trust will explore with Countess of Chester Hospital the potential for the development of a single acute general hospital covering Wirral and west Cheshire within the next 10-15 years...Another option is to move all planned surgery and procedures to Clatterbridge, while Arrow Park will become a ‘hot site’ dealing mainly with emergencies.”

It is not clear what a “hot site” is if it is not a hospital. Surely the point about an A&E is that it needs to be in a place where there is a very wide range of expertise on how to deal with any emergency. I have very real concerns about the future of Arrow Park hospital, which is a major hospital highly valued by my constituents who use its services and who work there; indeed, it is a major employer in my constituency. The STP talks of “hospital reconfiguration”. It is no wonder that local people are up in arms about the plans.

The STP for Cheshire and Merseyside appears to set a greater deal of store by the development of ACOs, or accountable care organisations. These are an idea brought from America, where of course there is no national health service. They integrate health and social care, and have a strong emphasis on cost reduction. The core issue is that people in England often pay for social care, but certainly do not expect to pay for healthcare, other than through direct taxation. There is real concern that the introduction of ACOs through STPs is part of a desire on the part of the Government to introduce a private insurance-based healthcare system in England instead of our national health service. I would be grateful if the Minister could give some clarification on that point.

It is my belief that the Government are cutting the supply of healthcare in the public sector to create demand for a private health insurance marketplace like the one in America, and there is nothing in the STP to reassure me that that is not the case. The document is riddled with the language of the market, talking of increased customer satisfaction, better user experience and “commercially sustainable” clinical support services. If the STPs go ahead across England, we can expect to see A&E closures, hospital closures, downgrading of services, patients waiting longer for treatment, and deterioration in the pay and conditions of staff as the
drive to cut costs takes its toll. I urge the Government to use the autumn statement to address the underfunding of the NHS and to give it the funds it needs.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): May I just make an apology to Hansard? It is one thing reading a speech, but that was a record level of reading into the record. I appreciate that time is short and that the hon. Lady wanted to put those things on the record, but if she speaks a little bit slower and allows other Members to understand what she is saying, it will give them an opportunity to intervene and she will gain some extra time.

6.10 pm

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Speaking for myself, I was impressed by the pace of the hon. Lady’s speech.

In this short contribution, I want to address the supply of practitioners, not just the supply of money. I suggest to my hon. Friend the Minister that since we have regulated many more practitioners, many more practitioners should be available on the health service.

The Professional Standards Authority chief Harry Cayton has called for a much greater use of those on his register. He says: “We all know we need to deliver new, innovative ways to improve people’s health...That means looking beyond the traditional confines of our health and care system and the traditional health professions.”

The 23 organisations on his register—including the Federation of Holistic Therapists, the Society of Homeopaths and the British Acupuncture Council—regulate 20,000 practitioners.

The treatment of lower back pain needs much greater consideration. Since the regulation of chiropractors and osteopaths in Bills that I was involved with 20 years ago, there has been far too little communication with orthopaedic surgeons. There is an organisation called ARMA—the Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Alliance—but I ask my hon. Friend to look at the matter and see how much more effective integration can be. NICE now recommends acupuncture for lower back pain, as I hope it will continue to do, and that should be brought in.

On Brexit, we have the European legislation to consider. Three directives need close scrutiny when we take them over. The traditional herbal medicines directive has struck out proven Chinese medicines and other herbal medicines, the food supplements directive is very restrictive and tougher regulation will be needed when we get our hands on the food additives directive.

The chief medical officer wrote a report in the last year to show an ID before coming in and giving birth.

Secondly, it was rated inadequate in a recent CQC inspection. Finally, figures were released showing that one patient waited 36 hours in A&E before being admitted to the hospital.

The one question we are all asking is: why? Why are the roofs in the theatres leaking? Why are the computer systems inadequate? Why has Wandsworth Council been forced to cut almost £10 million from social care budgets? Why does my local hospital trust have a deficit of £50 million? Everywhere we look, the answer is a lack of funding.

We should not leave our hospitals with the bare minimum to function; we should prioritise their funding. It is a healthcare system: we cannot take risks. If we do, it will result in a loss of life—people die. The Health Secretary can point the finger at whomever he wants, but it is not because of our doctors, who always go the extra mile, our trainee nurses, who have had their bursaries cut, or our carers, who are overworked and underpaid. I am afraid the Conservative Government are to blame.

I have worked in our NHS under a Labour Government and under a Conservative Government, and there is a significant difference. Staff morale is at an all-time low, and patients are failing patients. Government Members know it, and Opposition Members know it. St George’s has not had significant resources put into it since Labour was in government. This is not a one-off story; it is happening up and down the country.

When Labour was in government, our healthcare system was a truly national health service: we saw more doctors, better equipment, new hospitals, and happier and healthier patients. Under this Conservative Government, waiting times are rising, buildings are falling apart and patients’ lives are being put at risk. We are making life and death decisions on the basis of costs. Our NHS is in crisis, and this crisis is turning into a disaster before our very eyes. The NHS was built by a Labour Government, it was saved by a Labour Government and it will be a Labour Government who rescue it.

6.14 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): For all the wrong reasons, St George’s hospital in Tooting has been in the news recently. First, it appeared on the front page of a national newspaper because it was requiring people to show an ID before coming in and giving birth. Secondly, it was rated inadequate in a recent CQC inspection. Finally, figures were released showing that one patient waited 36 hours in A&E before being admitted to the hospital.

The one question we are all asking is: why? Why are the roofs in the theatres leaking? Why are the computer systems inadequate? Why has Wandsworth Council been forced to cut almost £10 million from social care budgets? Why does my local hospital trust have a deficit of £50 million? Everywhere we look, the answer is a lack of funding.

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6.17 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I am very pleased to pick up where the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) left off. Quite frankly, I find it extraordinary that Labour Members have the audacity to come into
the Chamber and trumpet their views about the national health service when they know that they have had 18 years of running the NHS in another part of the United Kingdom and that, on any of the performance indicators that are looked at, the NHS in Wales is performing less well than the NHS in England. I do not for one minute want anyone to think that I am criticising NHS staff—the nurses and doctors—because I am not, and I am not running down Wales either, because I know exactly where the blame lies. It lies at the feet of the Labour party for implementing exactly the same policies that Labour Members are now calling on the Minister to implement.

There is no need to take my word, or that of any Conservative, for this; one can simply get hold of the Nuffield Trust report on “The four health systems of the United Kingdom: how do they compare?” This independent report looked at a range of indicators, and it makes this very clear. I am very happy to read from the report, which in its own way is far stronger than anything the Conservative party could publish. It says that waiting times in Wales have lengthened since 2010, with striking rises in waits for common procedures such as knee and hip replacements. When language such as “striking rises” is used, surely people should take notice of the report, especially when, as Labour Members must realise, those striking rises are being caused by the policies they are asking my hon. Friends to implement.

The report talks about how amenable mortality rates are lowest in England. In other words, people live longer in England. It also talks about waiting times, which are an absolute disgrace. There is a target waiting time of 26 weeks in Wales, whereas it is just 18 weeks in England. More than that, the report shows that some people are waiting for up to 170 days for knee and hip replacements in Wales, as opposed to just 70 days in England.

The report shows that funding in Wales has been cut in real terms. Wales is the only part of the United Kingdom where funding for the national health service has been reduced; in England it has been going up.

The report shows that there is a shortage of GPs. My hon. Friends have increased the number of GPs to 0.75 per 1,000 people, compared with 0.66 per 1,000 in Wales. On stroke care, 39% of patients spent 90% of their time in a stroke unit, as opposed to 51% of patients in England—a much higher amount. The figures for MRSA show, once again, that England is ahead of Wales.

The figures for ambulance response times show that 75% of ambulances make it within eight minutes in Wales. The figures for ambulance response times show, once again, that England is ahead of Wales.

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I read with interest the briefing provided by Macmillan. It sent chills down my spine. By the end of this Parliament, about one in every two people will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime. I look around the Chamber today and remember that those statistics include us and our loved ones. Indeed, there are some Members in the Chamber who have experienced cancer and are survivors. My own father battled and won against cancer three times. I am aware of what that battle entails, and how much of it is based on the right diagnosis and treatment, the availability of that treatment, the skill of the surgeon’s knife and the prayers of God’s people—those are all very important. It is clear that improvements in diagnosing and curing the disease mean that more people surviving it are living for longer with it; some 2.5 million people are living with or beyond cancer in the UK today.

In my opinion, more must be done to help those with rare diseases and rare forms of cancer. Will the Minister give us an indication of what funding and resources will be set aside for them? Those rare diseases and cancers are increasing. Put together, those conditions affect a large number of people. I know that funds are not infinite, but we must focus on those with rare diseases and with rare forms of cancer.

I will mention a tremendously courageous lady—I hope she will not mind me mentioning her name in this Chamber—who works in my constituency, called Aundrea Bannatyne. She watched her son battle cancer and triumph, only to be told that she had pancreatic cancer and that there was no treatment for it in Northern Ireland. The help she needs will cost up to £100,000 and the people of the area where she lives, Dundonald, have dug deep to help fund that.

That lady’s story could be replicated in the constituency of every Member in this Chamber, across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but the postcode lottery says that she cannot have treatment because she lives in Northern Ireland. However, she would be able to access it in other counties on the mainland, which is something that the hon. Member for Monmouth referred to. That lottery is not what is needed. We need treatment in all areas. That must be addressed by additional funding. Aundrea needs more than us wringing our hands and being sympathetic. She needs practical, physical help. That is the only thing that can change her hopes for her future and her son.

Macmillan has said that one in four people living with or beyond cancer face disability or poor health following their treatment. That can remain the case for many years after the treatment ends. It is vital that they can access the best care—the care that is right for them—when they need it. The NHS must be able to meet the changing needs of cancer patients. That would not only increase the quality and experience of survival, but ensure that resources are invested in the most effective way. That is key, given that the five year forward view projections indicate that expenditure on cancer services will need to grow by some 9% a year, to £13 billion, not to get ahead but simply to stand still. That level of spending is likely to yield outcomes that continue to be below average when compared with similar international healthcare systems. We must therefore act now to ensure that the money is spent as effectively as possible, to give England and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland a better chance to achieve world-class cancer outcomes and deliver the Government’s manifesto commitment.

The health service currently spends more than £500 million a year on emergency care for people with the four most common cancers alone. If we are spending £500 million on emergency treatment for cancer, there is something wrong with the system that we have to address effectively. Emergency care should be a last resort for people living with cancer. Such a vast amount of emergency care spending is symptomatic of a system that is not geared towards helping people take control of their health.

I am conscious that the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) is waiting to contribute, so I will conclude with this comment. Let us make the right decisions to sustain the NHS as it is—never mind give more, which is what people actually need. If that means taking simple things such as paracetamol off the prescription list, to save £80 million, let us do it.

Let us look at real issues that can make a change. Let us do the simple things for the greater good, and let us determine to be more efficient where possible and cut unnecessary red tape rather than services. Let us ensure that our NHS can withstand not only the surge of cancer diagnoses but the surge of diabetes—other Members have referred to that—heart disease, and all other major illnesses, which are only worsening. I do not envy the Minister’s task, but we have to make hard choices. We have to get the funding in the right place, and make decisions that take away bureaucracy and restore funds where they are needed—to cancer, rare diseases and rare cancers.

6.29 pm

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I want to start by saying a huge thank you to everybody in our hospitals, our GP surgeries and our care homes. Listening to the debate, one might be under the impression that brilliant things are not going on, but nine out of 10 people in A&E benefit from being seen within four-hours. This discussion therefore needs to be balanced. I have heard that there are problems up and down the country, but the West Suffolk hospital in my constituency has just been rated as outstanding not for its buildings or anything peripheral, but for its care. That is the most important thing we can ask anyone to give.

The hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) said that things were better under Labour. I was diagnosed with my second and third cancers when Labour was in government. The radiotherapy machines were under a sheet and not working because of a lack of staff. This problem has been coming down the track for ages. We do not do anybody a service if we deny that it is a problem and that it is looming.

GPs in Suffolk are under pressure. I talk to them regularly. I engage with social care, which is struggling. It is about the service, as my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) said, but we should remember that every patient is a person—a daughter, a mum, a dad. For the five year forward view, we listened and we came to the table with the money. Demand has outstripped us, and we need to look at streamlining services. Having one pot of money will help us to understand the blockages in the system to which so many people, including my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), alluded. We can then look to unblock the system. It is ridiculous to have people on
delayed discharge because we cannot get them into the community, and then for GPs to send to A&E people who cannot get into the hospital to be treated. We all know the problem; let us look at the solutions. Prevention is also an issue. The motion today is about far more than cash. The year 1948 is a long time ago and the system has always been a mix of private and public. It is stronger today, but there are 1.4 million in its workforce.

I said thank you earlier. I would especially like to thank junior doctors, many of whom speak to me on a regular basis. They tell me that just a little thank you from people for the hard work they do would make a difference in their daily lives, so I ask for that. Some 92% of the pot of money goes to the acute sector. Our GPs, who we are expecting to do more, receive 8%. Working together would help us to look at what funds are needed for social care.

Moving people through the system is tricky. With an ageing population and comorbidity, 70% of the health budget is spent on long-term conditions. Some 22.4 million people visited A&E last year—up 600,000. I applaud the budget is spent on long-term conditions. Some 22.4 million people visited A&E last year—up 600,000. I applaud the year 1948 is a long time ago and the system has always been a mix of private and public. It is stronger today, but there are 1.4 million in its workforce.

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It is important that we look at new ideas. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) mentioned in The Telegraph the other day that we should perhaps look at the triple lock. Today, Stephen Dalton, interim chief executive of the NHS, talked about using the private sector more slickly. The provision of care relief for patients could be moved around so that home services are sorted. We need to consider community diagnostics. We need to be able to talk about these new ideas. Let us think about the future.

A young medic told me on Friday how much a 10-hour operation involving nine professionals cost. People need to understand what things cost. A young clinician said to me only yesterday that when somebody does not attend they should be asked to pay. They are sent a text, and there has to be more responsibility.

In this country, where a diabetes crisis is looming, 66% of people are obese; one third drink too much; and 20% smoke too much. We have to decide what we want out of this overburdened system and what we want to put in. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, the NHS spends around £85 million on paracetamol, yet it can be bought for just 16p. Should we be investing money in different places? If we treasure the NHS, we should treasure ourselves and its resources. The rise in cancer diagnoses is linked to obesity. Some £3.5 billion is spent on treating alcohol-related illnesses. The system is in crisis, but we have ways of addressing it. I do not want this to be a blame game. We have recruited more doctors and nurses, but now we need to step up, talk about the problems and develop a streamlined system.

6.35 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This has been at times a high-quality and passionate debate that has made clear the concerns across the House about the sustainability of our health service. The Chancellor sadly could not be with us this afternoon—I assume he has a few other things on right now—but had he been here to hear the contributions from Members on both sides of the House, he would be in no doubt about the severity of the challenges facing the health and social care sector, or about the dire consequences that will follow if he does not deliver the rescue package that is needed tomorrow.

We have heard some excellent contributions. As right hon. and hon. Members have said, while we might have our political differences, we all appreciate the work that our staff in the NHS do—as we do the work of all public sector workers—and we thank them for it. The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), the Chair of the Health Committee, calmly and clearly explained how cuts to the health budget were used to help the Secretary of State reach his figure of £10 billion. Despite the huge volley of figures he mentioned in his speech, he failed to mention that amount at all. The hon. Lady pointed out how many of the cuts will store up other problems in the long term, and she is right that the moving of the goal posts that has taken place does nobody any credit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who described the savings required in her area as implausible, is clearly going to fight the closure of St Helier hospital. She rightly pointed out that that closure will undermine other services and hospitals in her area, and I have no doubt that her constituents will be relieved to have such a dozy champion on their side. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke with great sincerity and passion about the variations in cancer treatment and alarming statistics setting out anticipated increases in incidences of cancer. He also rightly highlighted the expenditure on emergency cancer treatments, showing that much more needs to be done on earlier detection.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) said that there seemed to be a focus in her area on consolidating services where there was no problem with clinical outcomes, and she made it clear that her constituents would not be fooled into accepting a downgrade in their local hospital. Her local health chiefs have won the award for the worst use of management speak today by calling patients “passive recipients of care”. My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) brought her recent experiences of the health service to the Chamber and said of the NHS that everywhere we look the answer is a lack of funding. She told us that staff and patient morale were now at all-time lows, and she should know what she is talking about.

We also heard from the hon. Members for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker), for Henley (John Howell) and for Bosworth (David Tredinnick), although none of them referred to the deficits their own STPs were facing—perhaps they do not think there is a problem. I can tell the House, however, that in South West Bedfordshire, the deficit is £311 million; in South West Wiltshire it is £490 million; however, that in South West Bedfordshire, the deficit is £311 million; in South West Wiltshire it is £490 million; in Calder Valley it is a staggering £1.07 billion; in Henley it is £479 million; and in Bosworth it is £700 million.

Andrew Selous: I am well aware of the financial challenges in my own area, but I noted in my STP the 26% increase in funding up to 2020-21, which I think is quite commendable.
Justin Madders: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has actually seen his STP; many Members have still not got hold of theirs.

Dr Murrison: How much worse does the hon. Gentleman think that the deficit in South West Wiltshire would have been had Labour won in 2015 and uprated NHS spending by just £2.5 billion, rather than the figure we are currently enjoying?

Justin Madders: Our manifesto was very clear that we would put in £2.5 billion immediately, plus whatever was needed. Indeed, research by the House of Commons Library has shown that if health spending had continued at the levels maintained by the previous Labour Government, there would be an extra £5 billion a year by 2020.

The NHS has deteriorated on every headline performance measure since the Health Secretary took office. It now faces the biggest financial crisis in its history, with providers reporting a net deficit of almost £2.5 billion last year. That deficit was covered only by a series of one-off payments and accounting tricks that do not disguise the true picture of a service that is creaking at the seams, of a workforce stretched to the limit, and of a Health Secretary in denial about his own culpability for this shocking state of affairs. While he rightly paid tribute to the work of NHS staff, he must know that when morale is so low, his platitudes are just not enough.

Ms Angela Eagle: I asked my sister whether Liverpool had had any input into the Merseyside and Cheshire STP. Obviously my hon. Friend represents part of the area that it covers, so can he tell us whether Ellesmere Port has had any involvement in the development of that STP?

Justin Madders: Only last week Cheshire West and Chester Council, which covers the Ellesmere Port area, put forward a resolution indicating that it was not satisfied with its level of involvement in the STP. Indeed, I do not think any council in the Cheshire and Merseyside area is satisfied, including even the Conservative-controlled Cheshire East Council.

Faced with an unprecedented crisis, what did the Secretary of State have to say for himself when asked by the Health Committee about investment in the NHS over the next five years? He said:

"Whether you call it £4.5 billion or £10 billion does not matter."

Well, it might not matter to him, but it matters to people up and down the country who are desperately worried about the future of their local health services. This is not loose change down the back of the sofa. We know the Secretary of State will not accept what the Chair of the Health Committee said about giving a “false impression that the NHS was awash with cash”, so perhaps he will listen instead to the head of the National Audit Office, who said yesterday:

"With more than two-thirds of trusts in deficit in 2015-16 and an increasing number of clinical commissioning groups unable to keep their spending within budget, we repeat our view that the financial problems are endemic and this is not sustainable."

Perhaps he will listen to the Nuffield Trust, King's Fund and the Health Foundation, which in a joint statement released this week said:

"The Department of Health's budget will increase by just over £4 billion in real terms between 2015/16 and 2020/21. This is not enough to maintain standards of NHS care, meet rising demand from patients and deliver the transformation in services outlined in the NHS five year forward view."

Ministers need to stop trying to hoodwink the public, patients and even their own Back Benchers about the extent of the crisis engulfing our health and social care sector. Every day we hear more about a service crumbling as six years of underinvestment and cuts in social care and public health come home to roost. At the weekend, we heard about the Yorkshire ambulance service piloting a new scheme that might involve heart attack victims waiting up to 40 minutes to get an ambulance. Only yesterday, there were claims from GPs that very young and elderly patients are dying because of worsening delays involving 999 calls. Indeed, the most recent ambulance figures were the worst on record, but what did we hear from the very top of the Government about the NHS this weekend? The only comment we heard was one reportedly attributed to one of the Prime Minister's assistants that they were going to “fix” Simon Stevens, the chief executive of the NHS, because he had dared to contradict the Prime Minister over funding. I have a suggestion: instead of trying to fix him for telling the truth, why do they not try fixing the NHS instead?

It is time to be honest about where we are and the true nature of the STPs, which are now finally starting to emerge. Let me be clear that we are not opposed to the idea of a more localised strategic oversight of the NHS and the health sector, but it is becoming increasingly obvious that these plans are putting money ahead of everything else. As the British Medical Association set out yesterday:

"There is a real risk that these transformation plans will be used as a cover for delivering cuts, starving services of resources and patients of vital care."

The few documents released so far reveal cuts to hospitals, services, beds and, in some cases, staff. As we have set out previously, we are deeply concerned by the lack of public, political and even clinical consultation, with two thirds of doctors not having been consulted on the plans and a third of them not even aware that the STPs exist. What a shambles!

It is also clear that without adequate resourcing, these plans will not lead to financial sustainability, and the only transformation that they will deliver will involve reduced services and longer waiting times. If the plans are as wonderful and transformative as Ministers claim, why will they not let us see them? The secrecy and the deliberate instruction not to release any of the information relating to the plans has only increased concern and cynicism among the public. That was, I believe, a serious error of judgment that the Government will come to regret.

We therefore call on the Government to publish immediately the plans that are not already in the public domain. We also ask them to ensure that there is a full consultation process before any of the changes are implemented. Consultation with the public does not mean presenting people with a completed plan and asking them whether they support it; it means involving them from day one, and the bigger the change, the better it is to start the consultation early. We are already playing catch-up, but genuine engagement can start now.

As we heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood),
there are major concerns about the Cheshire and Merseyside STP. My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey identified the three fatal flaws in the STP process: it is more about finances than patients; it is secretive; and it is run to deadlines that make consultation impossible. Every Member who talked about the Cheshire and Merseyside proposals rightly expressed concern about the devastating effect that they might have on local services. It seems that just about every council in the area has rejected them, or has said that it has not been involved. Indeed, there has been very little involvement with anyone.

My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood produced what I think was the runner-up in the competition for the worst use of management speak when she quoted the phrase

“The financial component has been a strong driver”.

That is the nub of it—this is all about money. Ministers must stop trying to pull the wool over our eyes and be realistic about the extent of the crisis that is engulfing our health and social care sector, because not one serious commentator or senior NHS manager believes that the sector will be financially sustainable without additional funding.

The Nuffield Trust, the Health Foundation, the King’s Fund, Unison, the Health Committee, the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, the Local Government Association, NHS Providers, the British Medical Association, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the NHS Confederation and Age UK are all calling on the Government to act urgently to address the funding gap. I do not know whether that list was long enough for the Secretary of State—he does not appear to be too hot when it comes to numbers at the moment—but there were a dozen respected organisations there. Will he listen to them? Will he implore the Chancellor not to repeat the mistakes of his predecessor, and to ensure that the health and social care sector is given the funding that it needs? This is the last chance before the crisis overwhelms us. I commend the motion to the House.

6.47 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I am very pleased to be able to close what the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) described as an interesting debate. I would describe it as an occasionally high-pitched debate, to which a number of Members made constructive contributions. I must say to the hon. Gentleman that those constructive contributions came from the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who made a characteristically impressive speech, and from Back Benchers on my side of the House, whose contributions, I might add, outnumbered those from Back-Bench Labour Members by four to three—or one third—although this was an Opposition day debate. Where are the Labour supporters for the motion, I ask the hon. Gentleman? We shall have to see whether they turn up to vote; they certainly were not prepared to turn up to speak.

The funding of the NHS is clearly a subject that is close to the hearts of most Members in the Chamber, precisely because it, along with the contribution of all who work in the NHS—to whom I pay tribute, as did the Secretary of State, but as the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston failed to do—is what keeps the NHS going. The Government are committed to the NHS, and committed to ensuring that it is free at the point of need.

Jenny Chapman: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the Minister to imply that there was a lack of interest among Labour Members, given that the speaking time limit was cut to four minutes, and then—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. It has been put on the record, and it is a matter of public record, but I will say that speeches were made by nine Opposition Members and eight Government Members. Speeches were made by six Labour Members and eight Conservatives. That may help the House, and may prevent any further arguments.

Mr Dunne: Mr Deputy Speaker, the facts speak for themselves, as you have just told us: eight Conservative Back Benchers and only six Labour in an Opposition day debate—what a shambles.

I do not question the fact that the NHS faces a significant challenge. Increasing demand for healthcare is a consequence of our ageing and growing population. It is our determination to look after each and every NHS patient with the highest standards of safety and care. These all contribute to the challenge, but, despite increasing pressures, the NHS is rising to meet this challenge, carrying out more than 5,000 operations every day compared with 2010, and handling 780,000 more accident and emergency attendances in the second quarter this year. That is 15.1% more than in the same quarter in the last year that Labour was in office. Today it is the Conservative party that is the party of the NHS. That is why we pledged more than Labour and why we are delivering more funding, with a higher proportion of total Government spending going into health in each year since 2010.

Some hon. Members have drawn international comparisons on spending. I gently remind the more excitable Opposition Members that, according to the OECD, total health spending in the UK for 2014 is 9.9% of GDP, which is 10% above the OECD average of 9% and just above the EU15 average of 9.8%.

Several hon. Members have today also questioned the figures around the rises in funding that we are providing over the term of this Parliament. I welcome confirmation from my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), the Chairman of the Select Committee, that she can see how the Secretary of State arrives at his figures, and she graciously conceded that both sides are correct. I want to focus directly on the straightforward maths.

Dr Wollaston: All I clarified was that the way it had been arrived at is not a way that the public would understand health spending, so I think the Minister is perhaps taking my words out of context, if he will forgive me.

Mr Dunne: We never claimed that we were increasing the Department of Health’s budget; we were talking about the increases to the NHS. For complete clarity, in 2014-15 the NHS budget was £98.1 billion; in 2020-21, it will be £119.9 billion. For Opposition Members who...
cannot do the maths, that is a £21.8 billion increase in cash terms to NHS England, or £10 billion in real terms. We promised £8 billion; we are delivering £10 billion.

We also listened to NHS leaders’ requests for a front-loaded settlement and delivered on that—it was welcomed by hon. Members in today’s debate—with £6 billion of the £10 billion increase coming by the end of this year, including a £3.8 billion real-terms increase in this year alone.

We have also created a £1.8 billion sustainability and transformation fund for the current year to help providers to move to a sustainable financial footing. This fund will mainly be allocated to emergency care provision, which faces some of the greatest demand growth and financial pressures within the system.

This brings me to the next important point I want to address. While more funding is obviously welcomed, hon. Members have drawn attention to rising deficits in the budgets of NHS providers. We recognise that stronger financial management is required to turn this situation around, and we have introduced robust governance arrangements to get things back on track. There are four main elements to this plan: extra investment in the second quarter deficit, which has been reduced to an average standard, if not higher.

We are now beginning to see the first fruits of the plan, with the publication last Friday of the figures for the second quarter deficit, which has been reduced to £648 million, down from £1.6 billion in the same period last year, representing a £968 million improvement. Progress halfway through the financial year is therefore encouraging, but there is no room for complacency. That is why the system needs to stick to its strong financial plan, supported by our investment and by a series of measures set out to help hospitals to become more efficient and to reduce the use of expensive agency staff.

Several hon. Members talked about the sustainability and transformation plans, 28 of which have now been published. The remainder will be published by the end of next month. Half of the Labour Members who spoke in the debate talked specifically about the STP covering Cheshire and Merseyside. It was disappointing that only one of those three Members was able to attend the Westminster Hall debate earlier today in which we discussed conditions in Cheshire and Merseyside. I remind Labour Members that that STP was led by the chief executive of Alder Hey hospital in Liverpool, with whom I would strongly encourage hon. Members who are complaining about a lack of engagement to have a conversation.

Ms Angela Eagle: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Dunne: No, I will not. I also remind all Members of the House that any reconfiguration proposals—

Ms Eagle: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. If the Minister is not going to give way, the hon. Lady will have to sit back down.

Ms Eagle: The Minister should not talk about something like this and then refuse to give way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Unfortunately, it is for the Minister to choose.

Mr Dunne: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I remind all Members of the House that any reconfiguration proposals that emerge from the STPs will be subject to statutory consultation, and I encourage all Members to—

Ms Eagle: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Dunne: I have already said that I will not give way.

I encourage all Members to engage with STP leaders in their area so that they can play their full part in considering how these plans should be taken forward. I remind the House that Chris Ham, the chief executive of the King’s Fund—

Ms Eagle rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. If the Minister wishes to give way, he will do so. The bottom line is that the hon. Lady is quite right to ask him if he will do so, but we cannot have people standing up and shouting—[Interruption.] We do not want people on one side saying no and people on the other side saying yes. The bottom line is, I want the Minister to get to the end. He may give way if he wishes to; otherwise, he should carry on.

Mr Dunne: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have explained to the hon. Lady that I do not intend to give way to her. I have only a limited amount of time left, and I would like to remind her of what Chris Ham, the chief executive of the King’s Fund, said. He regards the STPs as “the best hope to improve health and care services”.

Hon. Members referred to the role of the independent sector in the provision of NHS care. The test for commissioning decisions must always be the value provided for patients and taxpayers, not the type of provider. The vast majority of NHS care has been and will continue to be provided by public sector organisations, but Opposition Members would do well to listen to Stephen Dalton, the chief executive of the NHS Confederation, which represents commissioners and providers of NHS services, who wrote today in The Guardian, of all papers, that private and wider independent sector health care providers “increase the system’s capacity to respond to demand, help meet waiting time targets and enable investment bring important benefits for patients—most of whom are entirely relaxed over who provides their care, so long as it’s of high-quality and remains free at the point of use.”

I entirely agree with him.
My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have acknowledged that the NHS faces challenges, and I recognise concerns raised by many in the House today. As I have made crystal clear, however, this Government are fully committed to the NHS.

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 213, Noes 306.

Division No. 95

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, Rh Margaret
Benn, Rh Hilary
Berger, Ruth
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blunkett, Tom
Buck, Ms Karen
Bryant, Chris
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burnham, Rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, Rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, Rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Cheydt, Rh Ann
Cocker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, Rh Yvette
Corbyn, Rh Jeremy
Crausby, Mr David
Creasy, Stella
Crddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Dugher, Michael
Dunkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Elliot, T
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrell, Paul
Field, Rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fellow, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, Rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Glass, Pat
Glinond, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamblton, Fabian
Hanson, Rh Mr David
Harman, Rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, Rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Heburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rh Mr George
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Rh Alan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keelley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Mactaggart, Rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCarthy, Gerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, Rh John
McFadden, Rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Milliband, Rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Mulholland, Greg
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, Rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Spellar, Rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, Rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, Rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, Rh Dame Rosie
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Judith Cummins and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
7.12 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I rise to present the petition of several hundred residents of Scunthorpe county constituency.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of Scunthorpe County Constituency, Declares that there is strong opposition on the grounds of smell, noise, vermin and pollution to planning application WD/2016/1556, which has been submitted to North Lincolnshire Council proposing to build a waste transfer station on Sunningdale Road, Scunthorpe. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges North Lincolnshire Council to refuse planning application WD/2016/1556 which seeks to build a waste transfer station on Sunningdale Road in Scunthorpe, on the grounds of smell, noise, vermin and pollution to planning application WD/2016/1556 which has been submitted to North Lincolnshire Council.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P001981]

Flooding: River Medway

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

7.14 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is a privilege to be here for my first Adjournment debate on a particularly topical matter: flooding along the River Medway and its tributaries. The recent storm has brought some serious flooding across our country. I am sorry to have to report that some properties have been flooded in Edenbridge in my constituency. I am very grateful to the flood wardens in Edenbridge, Tonbridge and across the community who have done such sterling work not only in warning people about the floods but in ensuring that drains were cleared and culverts were not blocked. That has prevented surface water from becoming a problem.

Surface water and more serious flooding has been an issue for us in Kent in the past, although Kent is rightly recognised as the garden of England and has some of the most beautiful countryside in our land. I am blessed not just to represent it but to live in it. This unites me with all those who live from the coast to the High Weald, whether they are “men of Kent” or “Kentish men”—a distinction based on which side of the Medway they are from and whether they come from Jutish or Anglo-Saxon stock.

The river has shaped much more than just the names of the people. It has carved its way through our history and is reflected in two of the towns that I have the privilege to speak for in this House—Tonbridge, with the Medway running through it, and Edenbridge, with the tributary, the Eden, running through it. Both testify to the importance of the river in our county’s life. Further downstream, towns such as Maidstone and Rochester have grown over the centuries as a result of the river providing an important trading link with neighbours. Communities have grown up around the river because of what it offers. The Medway is no different. The floodplains offered fertile fields and later cheap development options with good flat land.

It is no wonder that the history of flooding long pre-dates my time representing this wonderful community, but it has also marked me. Three years ago, just weeks after being selected as the Conservative candidate for the seat of Tonbridge and Malling, I found myself making some of my first visits as a candidate to local villages. Sadly, many were under water. I can vividly remember seeing the impact of floodwater in Hildenborough in January 2014, when I visited with Councillor Mark Rhodes, now the mayor of our wonderful borough council.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour on bringing this important debate before the House. As he knows, my constituency was devastated by floodwater in the Christmas floods of 2013, and even now some of those areas are not fully recovered. Does my hon. Friend agree that in addition to everything that the Government are doing in respect of flood defences, they should also earmark funding for the more natural flood defence schemes, such as the four-acre wetlands site in Marden in my constituency, which can hold up to 15 million litres of floodwater? I am sure my hon. Friend is aware that many of these schemes are low cost, low tech and low maintenance, but very effective.
Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend and neighbour makes some persuasive points. I shall shortly speak about some local flood defences.

The Brookmead estate and surrounding roads, which I visited with the present mayor, were struggling to recover—as my hon. Friend and neighbour pointed out, some parts are still struggling to recover—from flooding by what to some may sound like a very small amount of water. In many parts it was just over a foot, and sometimes only a foot and a half, of water, but the damage done, even by so little water, can be overwhelming.

That Christmas will not be forgotten by me and, I know, by many residents, some of whom are still struggling to get insurance deals sorted out. Having been elected their MP, I am proud to be here representing them, but I am also conscious that flooding is one of the most pressing issues for me to solve.

The underlying causes of the massive Christmas 2013 flood have not changed significantly in the past three years, unfortunately. We all know that these instances may be getting more frequent. That catchment area flooded severely in 1947, 1958, 1960, 1963, 1974, 1979 and 2000, before the 2013 flood, and these are just the major events. Localised flooding on tributaries can occur much more often.

On Saturday 25 June this year, when many people were either celebrating or mourning the result of the referendum, very few people noticed that homes in Ightham, a beautiful village to the north of the community that I am privileged to represent, were being swamped, following only 33 millimetres of rainfall in just two hours. Busy stream was not able to cope and burst its banks, and the village suffered what the Environment Agency calls a one-in-19-year flood. Today, five months on, many residents are still not back in their homes, and sadly, they are not alone. In Hadlow and East Peckham, recent localised floods on the River Bourne have forced people out of their homes, while in Penshurst, Chiddingstone and Edenbridge, the River Eden has threatened to burst its banks many times since 2013. All these tributaries feed into the River Medway and underline the importance of finding solutions that address the underlying causes of these localised floods without simply passing the problem on to communities further downstream.

Let me take Tonbridge as an example. The new 320-metre flood wall at Avebury Avenue shows a local solution that works. Following restoration of the ground height, 80 homes in the Barden Road area, which were flooded in 2013, are now less at risk from the river. However, the scheme works only because the new walls work in conjunction with existing defences at Leigh and in Tonbridge town centre. Each individual solution must be part of a larger strategy for flood mitigation along the wider catchment.

I recognise that communities in the River Medway catchment are not the only ones in the country that flood. Indeed, we in Kent have great sympathy with the people of Somerset, Yorkshire and Cumbria, who have had their own dreadful floods in recent years, and Government funds to help those communities are welcomed by us, too. Both the larger schemes and the smaller projects, such as the £4 million investment in riverside footpaths in Cumbria, show a Government seeking to address the causes of flooding events. However, every time there is investment elsewhere, Kent residents rightly consider its effectiveness and ask whether such defences could help in our county, too.

Finding solutions to flooding on the River Medway is important for not just Kent but our country, because so much more depends on it than simply the protection of homes. Yes, our catchment area has 3,000 properties at risk of flooding, half of which are in Tonbridge and Hildenborough, with 500 more in East Peckham, but it is about more than that. Kent is also an economic powerhouse, and many businesses that rely on the ability to operate even in severe weather will be protected should we get the appropriate level of protection.

That is why I support the creation of a Medway flood action plan, which would bring together local authorities, businesses and residents, as happened in Cumbria and Calderdale. Indeed, the Cumbria model, which was well championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), is rightly recognised by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as a central feature of its 25-year environment plan. I hope that success can be mirrored under the banner of a Medway flood partnership. I look forward to its work starting in the new year—it would certainly have my support, and I hope it would have that of the floods Minister, too. Having a flood partnership panel on the horizon would be very popular, as it offers the possibility of a collective solution—one that is cost-effective and that does not cause unnecessary problems elsewhere.

That would support the work already done by the Environment Agency to protect each community and would reinforce the thorough work it has done to demonstrate where the greatest gains can be made. Those inquiries all point in the same direction. It will come as no surprise to the Minister, who is very aware of this issue, that the most viable scheme involves the enlargement of the Leigh flood storage area, the Hildenborough flood alleviation scheme and the East Peckham flood alleviation scheme. That is where resources for capital projects should be directed, with the Government also being clear that property-level resilience should be explored, where feasible, to deal with the 350 properties that may fall outside the effectiveness of those schemes. Where community defence projects are shown by agencies not to be viable, the Government should commit to property-level resilience. The fact that collective defence does not work does not mean that people should be left out. I am told by the Environment Agency that that applies to communities bordering my own.

For my community, however, tomorrow will be the defining moment, as we very much hope to hear from the Chancellor’s autumn statement the outcome of local growth fund allocations. I am sure the floods Minister will agree that the bid for the Leigh flood storage area is impressive and compelling, and it would be deeply disappointing to everyone involved were the £4.5 million requested not provided.

This bid is crucial to our community. It has the third largest amount of “other funding” of all the south-east local enterprise partnership region bids. It includes contributions from local businesses in East Peckham, from Kent County Council, from Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council, and contributions in kind from Southern Water and Tonbridge School. This is a true community project and, with the Environment Agency’s commitment of £15.5 million of flood defence grant in aid, a viable
one too. The Environment Agency’s contribution is not symbolic. It understands better than anyone that the project would increase capacity at Leigh by 30% while constructing much needed local embankments at Hildenborough and East Peckham. As I mentioned earlier, those projects work in conjunction with each other to improve the wider catchment area. That was why the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, promised Government funding on his visit to the area in the aftermath of the Christmas 2013 floods.

However, there is a wider issue at stake along the River Medway and all its tributaries that goes beyond individual bids through the local growth fund and localised schemes in particular villages—the strategic importance of the Rivers Medway, Eden, Beult, Teise and Bourne to Kent and to the wider south-east region. The Government have been very clear in highlighting the growth that they want to deliver in our part of the country over the coming years, and that depends on investment and people—and, in turn, on viability. This project alone would enable an additional 2,100 homes to be built in sensible locations in an area of predominantly green belt in the south-east of England. It would also deliver over 13 hectares of employment land by 2031, roughly equating to 2,900 associated jobs. The Government targets are rightly ambitious, and to succeed we need to address the creaking infrastructure of the towns and villages nearby. The long-term economic plan, about which we all once heard so much, would focus on these communities to ensure that we have every possible option open to us locally to plan for the future.

Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council is currently consulting on that future through its local plan, and has shown that without significant investment in local flood defences it will be unable to deliver the growth required by Government. The consequences of a funding shortfall would be severe. Investors would be deterred from coming to the area, new buyers would be priced out of the market due to a lack of supply to keep up with Government demand—or rather popular demand—and current residents would remain at severe risk of flooding. For the cost of a rather modest house in Chelsea, thousands would be left at risk.

Further upstream in Sevenoaks district, the demand for more services in Edenbridge is increasing, yet without additional defences on the River Eden, land will not be available to make these important developments. The doctors’ surgery needs more space, as do many in the town of Tonbridge, but their search is severely limited by flood risk in the town. Localised projects that tie in with the collective aim of the catchment could help to solve a variety of problems that our towns and villages face.

I feel it only right to end by referencing the importance of finding solutions to flooding on the River Medway and its tributaries for each individual community involved. A trip upstream from its mouth near the Isle of Grain through Aylesford, Maidstone, East Peckham and Tonbridge will show to all just what a beautiful county Kent is. It will also demonstrate the reliance that each of the communities places on the river, and how economic and cultural links have been forged by the connections it provides. Each of its tributaries, from the Beult and Teise to the east, to the Bourne to the north and the Eden to the west, have seen communities built around them. They no longer feed the tanner’s yard and the cricket ball factories, but they are still at the heart of our life. It is crucial that this Government make their contribution to ensuring that Kent has the ability to grow and to deliver its plans in the region. That is important not only for the Government but, most of all, for the people of Kent. The work has been done and the options are now present for each town and village. Some will require larger capital schemes, while others will require property level resilience to deliver the appropriate outcome. Each has its place.

Christmas 2013 is still in my mind, and I know just how much of an impact it has had on many others who lived through that night and the past three years. We all know that it could happen again at any time. I hope that the Government will do their bit so that next time we flood—sadly, I fear it will be next time, rather than never—the impact is limited and the people who have made their lives and businesses in west Kent are able to do so in the security of the appropriate flood defences.

7.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this debate on flooding on the River Medway and its tributaries. He spoke passionately on behalf of his constituents, and I congratulate him on securing his first Adjournment debate in the Chamber; I think this is also my first reply to an Adjournment debate in the Chamber.

I am very aware of the impact of flooding. I have supported my constituents in Suffolk following flooding in recent years, and I understand the impact it can have on people’s homes, businesses and livelihoods. I am committed to doing my utmost to raise awareness of, and to reduce, flood risk. My hon. Friend referred to the Edenbridge flooding today, and he praised flood wardens. I absolutely congratulate them on coming forward, and I thank the Environment Agency for working with Kent County Council in training those wardens. I am also pleased to hear of the preparations that were made to try to alleviate the risk of flooding today.

The Government continue to play a key role in improving protection for those at flood risk. We are spending £2.5 billion on 1,500 new flood defence schemes to improve protection for 300,000 homes by 2021, and we have increased maintenance spending in real terms over this Parliament to more than £1 billion. I understand that we have also spent £825,000 on the River Medway on maintenance in the last year; that is the highest it has been for some time. Moving to a six-year settlement has given the Environment Agency greater certainty on schemes and has made it easier to protect more homes, in contrast with the hand-to-mouth existence that arose from the previous annual settlement.

Mrs Helen Grant: The Minister is talking about funding. I wonder whether she thinks, as I do, that the Chancellor’s autumn statement tomorrow may be the perfect opportunity for the Government to turn their very wise and warm words about innovative flood measures into reality at last.

Dr Coffey: The plans that people at the Environment Agency are working on with DEFRA, which include potential developments on natural management schemes,
are exactly the kind of initiatives that I hope might get highlighted in the autumn statement. Nevertheless, we will all have to wait and see.

In the catchment area of the River Medway more than 3,000 properties are at risk of flooding, including 1,500 homes in Tonbridge and Hildenborough and 500 in East Peckham. During the winter 2013-14 floods, more than 900 homes and businesses in Tonbridge, East Peckham, Maidstone, Yalding and other smaller communities were flooded from the River Medway and its tributaries. This flood was the largest ever measured in many parts of the catchment of the River Medway. The Leigh flood storage area is situated upstream of Tonbridge and currently protects 1,200 homes and businesses from flooding. Although the Leigh flood storage area already plays a vital role in protecting those properties, the Environment Agency has also been working in partnership with the local community to improve the level of protection.

I wrote to my hon. Friends in August this year with an update on the work to reduce flood risk on the Medway, and I assured them that we remained committed to working in partnership to provide a scheme that will further reduce the flood risk to local communities. The Environment Agency has been working in partnership with local councils to find the most effective way to reduce flood risk for communities along the Rivers Medway, Beult and Teise. This work included an initial cost-benefit assessment of various options. In April 2014 those partners committed £1 million to fund the development of a business case for the schemes. That work included carrying out more detailed modelling of the Medway catchment.

Currently, the Environment Agency, Kent County Council and Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council are progressing the business case for enlarging the Leigh flood storage area and the Hildenborough embankment. I am aware that that is the favoured option for improving flood protection to homes and businesses in Tonbridge and Hildenborough, because together they will provide additional storage capacity that will benefit more than 1,400 properties. The project to enlarge the Leigh flood storage area and to build embankments is estimated to cost £17.1 million. The scheme qualifies for around £11.3 million of grant in aid, with a further £5.8 million of partnership funding contributions required. Work is also ongoing on plans for the East Peckham flood alleviation scheme, which involves constructing walls and embankments to protect some 560 homes and businesses. The scheme costs £7.5 million and requires £3.25 million of partnership funding contributions, which are being sought, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling described, from the South East local enterprise partnership and from local businesses that will benefit.

I am pleased that local partners are already working together to contribute to these schemes, alongside the considerable Government investment, and work is continuing to bridge the current funding gap. I should remind the House that it was under a Conservative-led Government that we changed the funding policy to give every scheme that had a positive benefit-cost ratio a chance to secure some grant funding, rather than the old system of all or nothing.

The Environment Agency is also scoping how it can work with partners to develop a Medway flood action plan, modelled on the successful integrated catchment planning approach of the Cumbria flood action plan. I am very pleased to hear that my hon. Friend is looking forward to participating in that process, and that the newly established Medway flood partnership will have its first meeting in the new year.

In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), I understand that natural flood management options will be considered for the action plan. Where schemes meet the objectives to which she referred, about the potential reduction in flooding, with economic benefits, such an option is already given to farmers. There are several schemes for which that is the case, although, admittedly, I believe that there is little such opportunity in Yalding.

This debate allows me to highlight what we are doing on a broader level to improve resilience and to be better prepared for whatever arises this winter. No Government can promise that no one will be flooded ever again, but we can learn and act. That is what we did with the national flood resilience review. The review was undertaken to assess how the country can be better protected from future flooding and extreme weather events. I can report that considerable progress has been made to help to prepare for future flood events. We have invested £12.5 million in mobile flood defences, which means that the Environment Agency now has 25 miles of such temporary defences, located in seven key areas, which are available to be deployed flexibly around the country, compared with the 5 miles that was available last year. We also have 500,000 sandbags ready. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has announced, 1,200 troops are on standby if the worst comes to the worst and councils need their help.

Infrastructure providers have been reviewing the resilience of key assets that provide vital services to our communities. They are identifying where they can also protect these assets with temporary defences this winter, while longer-term solutions are implemented. This means that the country will be better protected this winter, and services to our communities will be more resilient to flood events. We have also worked with the private sector to develop a new property flood resilience action plan, which illustrates some straightforward measures that homeowners and businesses can take to improve the resilience of their property to flooding, as well as enabling them to get back in far more quickly if, unfortunately, they are flooded. These can be simple measures, such as in-built airbrick covers, to more substantial works, such as installing a pump, having solid floors or installing wiring so that plug sockets are higher up the wall.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald is in the Chamber, I thought it would be helpful to refer to the flooding that happened in her community. I recognise that, unfortunately, flooding in this area is a frequent occurrence. An event leading to flood depths of more than 1 metre occurs roughly every 10 years in Yalding. The communities of Yalding and Collier Street sit at the confluence of the Rivers Beult, Teise and Medway, which makes the flood risk there particularly challenging. The communities could be flooded by any or all of the rivers.

I am aware that although the Leigh flood storage area helps to reduce downstream water levels on the River Medway, it offers only a marginal benefit because it is 10 miles upstream. Given the local geography and topology, as well as existing developments within the
catchment area, flood storage areas constructed on the Rivers Beult and Teise would not be sufficiently large to make a meaningful difference to flood levels in areas such as Yalding and the surrounding communities. That is simply not possible.

The Environment Agency now has a dedicated project manager working with the councils in Yalding and Collier Street to make progress in making properties and infrastructure more resilient to flooding. Early estimates suggest that approximately 350 houses may benefit from such property-level resilience. I am pleased that the Environment Agency will begin detailed surveys of each property in early 2017, and I, too, look forward to hearing the outcome.

The Environment Agency will continue to work with my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling to reduce flood risk in the area and will continue to work collaboratively to deliver projects in this part of west Kent. I assure you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I have listened to all the comments that have been made today and that the Government will continue to ensure that we are always as well protected from flooding as possible.

Finally, as has been referred to extensively, the autumn statement is tomorrow and there will be forthcoming announcements about LEP funding. If anything changes as a result of those announcements, I will be happy to update my hon. Friend again. Of course, he does have Question 1 at oral questions to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on Thursday, when he may talk about flooding.

Question put and agreed to.

7.40 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Tourism: LIBOR Funding

1. Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the amount of LIBOR funding available to museums, galleries and tourist attractions in Scotland.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Lots of good causes across Scotland have put bids in to the Treasury for the next round of allocations from the LIBOR fund, but I am afraid we will need to be patient and wait for the Chancellor’s autumn statement this afternoon to hear which have been successful.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The Secretary of State knows that there is no greater cause in my constituency than Holmwood House, a fine piece of Alexander “Greek” Thomson’s architecture. Next year is the bicentenary of his birth, and the Secretary of State knows how keen I am, and the Alexander Thomson Society is, to promote that, both around the UK and internationally. Will he assure me that the full weight of his office is behind making that happen?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman is to be commended for his efforts in promoting the bicentenary of Alexander “Greek” Thomson, who is perhaps an underappreciated icon of Scottish architecture. I can assure the hon. Gentleman—especially after my own visit to Holmwood House and meeting the Alexander Thomson Society—that the UK Government will do all we can to support and promote that bicentenary.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I have written to the Chancellor of the Exchequer suggesting that LIBOR money could be used to help fund opencast coal restoration in Scotland. Has the Secretary of State had any similar discussions with the Chancellor, or has he done nothing about the opencast pledge in the 2015 Green Book?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman knows that I—and, indeed, the UK Government—have done a great deal to work with East Ayrshire Council to ensure that opencast restoration could proceed in that area following the collapse of various companies involved in opencast mining. We continue that dialogue with both the Scottish Government and East Ayrshire Council to try bring the matter to a satisfactory resolution.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman was a bit tardy in standing, but we will hear the fellow anyway.

John Stevenson: Thank you very much. Mr Speaker. Scotland has some wonderful tourist attractions, many of which are in the border region and Cumbria. Does the Secretary of State agree that there are real opportunities to promote tourism in the border areas, but that that will involve close co-operation between councils on both sides of the border, and is not just about finance?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend knows that I am very keen to promote cross-border working between Cumbria County Council, his own local authority, Dumfries and Galloway Council and Scottish Borders Council. That is why I am a very big supporter of the so-called borderlands initiative to bring those councils together to try to secure economic development for the area, in which tourism would play a very important part.

Scotland Act 2016

2. Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): What progress has been made on the transfer of powers to the Scottish Government under the provisions of the Scotland Act 2016.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): We have made significant progress in transferring powers in the Scotland Act 2016 to the Scottish Parliament. A large number of provisions of the Act are already in force and we are continuing to work with the Scottish Government on the smooth transition of remaining powers.

Mr Jackson: The Scottish National party Government have failed to introduce a single piece of legislation in the past six months; the First Minister prefers grandstanding across Europe to block Brexit. Is it not time she used the powers devolved to her under the Act to start governing, rather than engaging in pointless photo opportunities?

David Mundell: I can update my hon. Friend. The Scottish Government have now brought forward one piece of legislation since the Scottish parliamentary elections in May. He may be interested to know that this Government currently have 19 pieces of proposed legislation before this Parliament. Of course I agree with him, and I think the majority of people in Scotland want the First Minister and the Scottish Government to get on with their day job of running Scotland and seeing to the devolved responsibilities, rather than constantly talking about independence.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): The Scottish Government have announced that the new powers over benefits will be used to end the misery being meted out to disabled Scots by the UK Government. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has pledged to reduce the need for assessments for personal independence payments and disability living allowance, in particular for those with
long-term illness. Will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to welcome that and urge his UK Cabinet colleagues to follow suit?

**David Mundell:** What I will welcome when I see it is some detail behind those fine words. We have heard lots and lots of fine words on welfare, but to date we have absolutely no detail as to what the Scottish Government plan to do.

**Angus Robertson:** I suppose we should view it as progress that the Secretary of State believes they are fine words, and perhaps he will follow the Scottish Government’s initiative, but it is fair to say that the majority of welfare and economic powers are not being devolved to the Scottish Parliament. Will the Secretary of State confirm that he has no plans to devolve powers to deal with Scottish legal partnerships, and the risks they pose in the fight against global money-laundering and organised crime? I have raised this matter with the Prime Minister and spoken to the right hon. Gentleman. Will he now tell the House what he and the UK Government will actually do about it?

**David Mundell:** As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the settlement in the Scotland Act 2016 was the outcome of the Smith Commission. The Scottish legal partnerships issue was not a part of that arrangement and will not be devolved, but I take it extremely seriously. I commend him for the way in which he has highlighted the issue. Colleagues to follow suit?

**Stephen Pound** (Ealing North) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow Hurricane Angus. Mr Speaker, may I thank you for your generous indulgence in allowing me to appear at the Dispatch Box in the absence of my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson), who is simply unable to be with us today? I have been immersing myself in Scottish legislation—and Irn-Bru—over the past week.

Many of us on the Labour Benches would give our eye teeth to have the powers contained in the Scotland Act 2016. Does the Secretary of State feel that the apparent reluctance of the Scottish Government to take more advantage of them indicates a surfeit of modesty, or, possibly, a lack of ambition?

**David Mundell:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the Dispatch Box at Scottish questions on behalf of the Labour party. The one question I have is, “Who next?” because we have had a selection of individuals. I say to the hon. Gentleman that these are very significant powers over tax and welfare. The autumn statement in this House is a very important event, but on 15 December we will see the Scottish Budget. For the first time, the Scottish Government will be able to raise income tax at the will in the Scottish Budget. That is a very significant moment in terms of taking responsibility and accountability.

**Small and Medium-sized Enterprises**

3. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that Scottish small and medium-sized enterprises are protected from economic uncertainty.

**Margot James:** The UK economy is strong in spite of uncertainty. Scottish SMEs constitute 99% of all private sector enterprise and more than 50% of employment in Scotland. If the economy suffers any form of setback—and the Chancellor is predicting one—these enterprises will be hardest hit. Given their importance, what is the Minister doing to reduce uncertainty and to support their growth?

**Margot James:** Figures produced by the Scottish Government show that SMEs constitute 99% of all private sector enterprise and more than 50% of employment in Scotland. If the economy suffers any form of setback—and the Chancellor is predicting one—these enterprises will be hardest hit. Given their importance, what is the Minister doing to reduce uncertainty and to support their growth?

**Margot James:** The UK economy is strong in spite of uncertainty. Scottish SMEs currently benefit from nearly £400 million of investment from the British Business Bank and Innovate UK aimed at helping them to grow and capitalise on new technologies and new export markets.

13. [907330] **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree, given that the UK market is four times the size of the EU market in Scotland, that it is clear why businesses are saying loud and clear that they do not want talk of another independence referendum, but instead want stability to strengthen the economy?
Margot James: I quite agree with my hon. Friend. SMEs in Scotland trade four times as much within the single market of the United Kingdom as with the EU. Indeed, they trade more with markets in the rest of the world than across the entire EU.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): One of the key things that the Scottish and UK Governments could do to take away uncertainty for SMEs and businesses across Scotland is to take a second independence referendum off the table. Something else the Government could do—I hope we will hear this in the autumn statement—is conclude the Edinburgh city deal. What discussions has the Minister had with the Chancellor to make sure we hear that in the next few minutes?

Margot James: I share the hon. Gentleman’s enthusiasm for that city deal, but we will have to wait another hour for more detail, and I could not agree more that the uncertainty in Scotland is coming far more from talk of another referendum than from the outcome of the EU referendum.

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Yesterday it was announced that over 500 jobs in the Tannochside area of my constituency were under threat, as Ageas Kwik Fit Insurance has announced plans to axe its entire Scottish operation. If these plans proceed, it will be a devastating blow to the local community just before Christmas. What assistance can the Secretary of State and his Government provide for these constituents and families at this difficult time?

Margot James: Obviously this will be a very difficult time for the Kwik Fit workforce and their families, particularly in the run-up to Christmas, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. I understand that Kwik Fit is consulting on closure by the end of next March, and I hope that the affected workers will quickly be able to move into alternative employment. The UK Government will assist with support from the Jobcentre Plus rapid reaction service, working also with North Lanarkshire Council, to help all those being made redundant.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Given the importance of exports to England from Scotland, what is my hon. Friend’s estimate of the number of jobs involved in this process, and does that figure not demonstrate the importance to Scotland and its economy of staying in the UK?

Mr Speaker: The answer should relate specifically to SMEs, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman intended to mention.

Margot James: The unemployment rate in Scotland is lower than that in the rest of the UK, and SMEs in Scotland, as my hon. Friend points out, benefit from this trend as much as any other businesses in Scotland.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): On 12 October, in response to a question about the deal struck with Nissan, the Secretary of State stood at the Dispatch Box and said—you can probably quote it verbatim, Mr Speaker—that “whatever support is put in place for businesses in the north of England will apply to businesses in Scotland.”—[Official Report, 12 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 287.]

Is the Secretary of State or the Minister willing to confirm that this is still the case? If so, will they provide us with more detail of the support? SMEs need to know.

Margot James: My right hon. Friend was exactly right in what he said about the Nissan deal. The same level of support will indeed be available to Scottish businesses, but, as for the detail, the right hon. Gentleman will have to wait another hour for the autumn statement.

Stephen Pound: I am very grateful to the Minister, especially for my promotion to the Privy Council. I welcome her commitment, which I am sure will reassure SMEs and businesses of all sizes, but there must have been an analysis of the costs. What assessment has been made of the cost of this support?

Margot James: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be making an assessment of the costs and the benefits of all such deals on an ongoing basis.

EU Convergence Uplift Funding

5. Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): What discussions has he had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on achieving a fair allocation of the convergence uplift funding from the EU.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The Secretary of State for Scotland has had numerous discussions with me about the intra-UK budget allocations under the common agricultural policy. I have also had discussions on this issue with the National Farmers Union Scotland, Scottish Members of Parliament and the Scottish Government’s Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Connectivity.

Steven Paterson: The convergence uplift is worth £230 million, and the UK Government are withholding that money, which should be supporting Scotland’s rural economy. Scotland’s farmers deserve fairness. When will Scotland’s man in Cabinet, by which I mean the Secretary of State for Scotland, do something about this, or will he continue to do nothing?

George Eustice: I simply say to the hon. Gentleman that we will provide an update on the review of CAP allocations before the end of this year. I add that the context has changed fundamentally, following the decision to leave the EU. Some argue that the area-based payments as required under the CAP have never suited Scotland very well. Indeed, NFU Scotland has previously raised concerns about the level of payments going to very large landowners, arguing that we should instead direct support to farmers and producers through livestock payments. We now have an opportunity to look at all of these issues, and I shall work closely on that with NFU Scotland and its talented team of officials.

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): What we really seek in Scottish questions is the confirmation that the Secretary of State for Scotland...
backs Scottish farmers and will get this promised money delivered. It is fantastic that we have the Minister with responsibility for farming here, but all we have heard so far is no detail and “just warm words”, to quote the Secretary of State. Can we have the detail put in place and give Scottish farmers what they deserve?

George Eustice: I completely disagree with the hon. Gentleman. As I made clear, the Secretary of State for Scotland discusses this issue with me regularly. I am passionate about Scotland, and I have discussed this issue with NFU Scotland from January onwards. We are working on joint proposals and joint agreements as regards post-Brexit agricultural policy.

Leaving the EU: Scottish Businesses

6. Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): What discussions he has had with Scottish businesses and other groups on the UK’s negotiations to leave the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): Since the referendum, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has held 60 meetings with well over 100 Scottish organisations to hear their views. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary has met businesses in Aberdeen, while the Minister for Trade has met business leaders in Edinburgh.

Victoria Atkins: Will my hon. Friend encourage Scottish businesses to seize the opportunities of our new relationship with Europe and the wider world, including, of course, my own constituency of Louth and Horncastle? Will she urge the Scottish Government to support their businesses, stop moaning about referendums and get on with governing?

Margot James: I thank my hon. Friend, and I am happy to give that encouragement. The message that the UK Government have heard loud and clear is that businesses in Scotland want stability and not another divisive referendum. Talk of independence is disruptive. What people want now is the economic stability that can be provided only by Scotland remaining in the UK.

Mr Speaker: I call Stuart C. McDonald.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I have No. 12, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Spit it out, man. Come in on this question; yours was similar.

12. [907329] Stuart C. McDonald: In July, the party leader of the Secretary of State told the BBC: “I want to stay in the single market, even if the consequence of that is maintaining free movement of labour.” Ruth Davidson was 100% correct, so can the Secretary of State explain the shoddy U-turn?

Margot James: There was no U-turn whatever on that. The UK Government will seek the best possible deal for all parts of the United Kingdom. That will include limits on free movement and the best possible access to, and trade within, the single market for British companies.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The creative industries in Scotland are one of the most successful areas of Scottish business, but there is real concern about the regulatory regime that Ofcom presides over and about what the future relationship with the European Union will look like. What discussions has the Minister had concerning that regulatory regime?

Margot James: My ministerial colleagues in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport will have had discussions, and I will ask one of them to notify the hon. Gentleman of their outcome.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): In the Northern Isles some of our most important exporting businesses are in the very successful food and drink sector, but representatives of the sector tell me that it is almost impossible for them to plan for their future until they know what access they will have to EU markets. Will the Minister ensure that their voices are heard in these negotiations, as well as those of the big boys in financial services and the automotive industries?

Margot James: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has regular meetings with representatives of the Scottish fishing industry and the agricultural sector, and Ministers throughout the Government engage in many discussions with representatives of the Scotch Whisky Association about how they can continue to build on the strengths of their exports beyond the EU as well as within the single market.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): During a live televised debate two days before the Brexit vote, Scottish Tory leader Ruth Davidson said that the EU provided “a level playing field” for small businesses, and that if the UK were to leave the EU, the rest of the EU would impose tariffs and taxes. Will the Minister please tell us how many of the 1.2 million jobs provided by small and medium-sized enterprises in Scotland she estimates will be at risk from those tariffs and taxes once they come into force?

Margot James: As I have said, the Government are committed to gaining maximum access to the single market and trade within it for all British companies, and that includes Scottish SMEs.

Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber. A number of very loud private conversations are taking place. Let us have some order for a very senior and respected Member of the House of 33 years’ standing, Sir David Amess.

Food and Drink Industry

7. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What discussions the Government have had with food and drink companies in Scotland on the importance of the UK market for that industry.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland held round-table discussions with representatives of the Scottish food and drink industry in August and October, and my right
hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs met representatives of a range of food and drink businesses during her visit to Scotland earlier this month.

**Sir David Amess:** Given that Scotch whisky is the finest in the world and such a valuable export, does my hon. Friend agree that the UK’s decision to leave the European Union may result in even more opportunities?

**George Eustice:** I very much agree with my hon. Friend. Scotch whisky is a fantastic success story for this country: in 2015, overseas sales were worth £3.9 billion. Earlier this year I attended an event in Tokyo to promote great British drinks, including Scotch whisky, which is particularly popular in Japan.

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheik (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP)** rose—

**Hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I do not think that the hon. Lady has ever fully realised the extent of her own popularity on the Government Benches.

**Ms Ahmed-Sheikh:** Is the Secretary of State aware that the value of exports from the rest of the UK to Scotland is more than £50 billion? That is more than the value of Scotland’s exports to the rest of the United Kingdom. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, regardless of any constitutional arrangements that may be made in the future, the trading relationship between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom is important to both constituent parts?

**George Eustice:** I think that what the hon. Lady has said underlines the fact that the union that is really vital to this country is the United Kingdom, because there is very close trade within it.

**Independent Fiscal Commission**

8. **Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the work of the Independent Fiscal Commission. [907325]

**The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell):** I have regular meetings with Scottish Government Ministers. I last met the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Constitution at the Finance Quadrilateral on 21 October. Both Governments are committed to providing all necessary support for the Scottish Fiscal Commission and the Office for Budget Responsibility.

**Mr Jayawardena:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is a core principle of stable, accountable, mature government that Governments must not fiddle their own forecasts, but must instead answer for their choices, and the consequences of those choices, to the people whom they govern?

**David Mundell:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and the transfer of income tax and welfare powers to the Scottish Parliament does just that. No longer will the SNP and the Scottish Government simply be able to complain. If they genuinely have ideas, they will be able to do something about it, and the people of Scotland will understand the tax implications.

9. **John Nicolson** (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Exports from the services sector could be cut by 60% if the UK is out of the single market. That would result in a £2.3 billion hit for Scotland. Given that, can the Secretary of State tell us why his Conservative colleagues at Holyrood voted against the Scottish Government motion to protect Scotland’s position?

**Mr Speaker:** With reference to the work of the Independent Fiscal Commission, I call the Minister to answer.

**David Mundell:** I am sure that the Independent Fiscal Commission will have noted that my colleagues in the Conservative group in Holyrood voted against the SNP’s motion because we have absolutely no idea where the SNP stands in relation to the UK’s future relationship with the EU.

**PRIME MINISTER**

The Prime Minister was asked—

**Engagements**

Q1. **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 23 November.

**The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May):** This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

**Peter Grant:** “Bairns come first” is the title of a report recently produced by a number of organisations, including Fife Gingerbread and Citizens Advice and Rights Fife. It found that a third of families who should have been claiming child maintenance support did not apply, that a major barrier to applying was the £20 application fee, and that the 4% collection fee had a serious impact on family budgets. Will the Prime Minister undertake to review those unfair charges?

**The Prime Minister:** Trying to ensure that those responsible for children actually pay for their children when a family has broken up has been a long-standing question which this House has addressed. There have been various ways of dealing with it through the agency that has been responsible. It is right that the changes that have been introduced are on a more level basis and more people are able to access the support they need as a result.

Q3. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): The Government have rightly focused on economic growth, jobs and prosperity—something all of us on the Conservative Benches can get behind. With that in mind, will the Prime Minister back our highly competitive bid for funding for the north-west relief road in Shrewsbury, which will not only deal with the congestion our town is facing but dovetail into that narrative?
The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. I know that the issue of the north-west relief road in Shrewsbury has been of particular concern to him; it is a priority for him and it has received considerable local backing. I understand that the local Marches LEP has put in a bid for feasibility funding so that it can prepare a business case for the scheme. What I can say at the moment is that the announcement of the successful bids for feasibility funding is expected very shortly indeed.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): The Government’s sustainability and transformation plans for the national health service hide £22 billion of cuts to our service, according to research by the British Medical Association. That risks “starving services of resources and patients of vital care.”

That quote comes from Dr Mark Porter of the BMA. When he calls this process “a mess”, where is he wrong?

The Prime Minister: The national health service is indeed looking for savings within the NHS which will be reinvested in the NHS, and I remind the right hon. Gentleman that it is this Government who are providing not just the £8 billion of extra funding that the NHS requested, but £10 billion of extra funding. Sustainability and transformation plans are being developed at local level in the interests of local people by local clinicians.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is very strange that the Prime Minister should say that, because the Select Committee on Health, chaired by her hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr. Wollaston), says that the figure is actually £4.5 billion, not £10 billion; there is quite a big difference there.

Part of the reason for the strain on our national health service is that more than 1 million people are not receiving the social care they need. As a result of that, there has been an increase in emergency admissions for older patients. Margaret wrote to me this week— [Interruption.] It is not funny. She described how her 89-year-old mother suffered two falls leading to hospital admissions due to the lack of nursing care, and went on to say,

“My mother is worth more than this.”

What action will the Prime Minister take to stop the neglect of older people, which ends up forcing them into A&E admissions when they should be cared for at home or in a care home?

Jeremy Corbyn: The precept is a drop in the ocean compared with what is necessary for social care. I shall give Members an example. I am sure the whole House will have been appalled by the revelations in the BBC’s “Panorama” programme this week. They showed older people being systematically mistreated. The Care Quality Commission’s assessment is that the care homes run by the Morleigh Group “require improvement”, and it has issued warning notices. The commission goes on to say that the owner “has allowed the services to deteriorate even further. She has utterly neglected her duty of care to the residents of these homes.”

What action are the Government going to take to protect the residents of these homes?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the quality of care that is provided in homes and the way in which elderly people are treated. I am sure everybody is appalled when we see examples of poor and terrible treatment being given to elderly and vulnerable people in care homes. What we do about it is ensure that the Care Quality Commission is able to step in and take action and that it has powers to ensure that nobody in the chain of responsibility is immune from legal accountability. We know that there is more that can be done, and that is why the CQC is looking into ways of improving its processes and increasing its efficiency. The Minister for community health and care, will be writing to the CQC shortly to see how we can improve what it does. It is the CQC that deals with these issues, and we have that in place. Is there more we can do? Yes, and we are doing it.

Jeremy Corbyn: As the Prime Minister well knows, health spending trebled under the last Labour Government and the levels of satisfaction with the health service were at their highest ever in 2010. This Government’s choice was to cut social care by £4.6 billion in the last Parliament, at the same time as they found the space, shall we say, to cut billions from corporate taxation bills. This is affecting patients leaving hospital as well. In the last four years, the number of patients unable to be transferred from hospital due to the lack of adequate social care has increased by one third. Will the Prime Minister ensure that her Government will guarantee all our elderly people the dignity they deserve?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the importance of caring for elderly people and providing them with the dignity they deserve. The right hon. Gentleman says that this Government have done nothing on social care, but I repeat that we have introduced the social care precept, which is being made use of by my local authorities and by his local authority. We have also introduced the better care fund. He is talking about support for elderly people, but let me remind him which Government it was who put in place the triple lock for pensioners. That has ensured the largest increase in pensions for elderly people.

Jeremy Corbyn: The precept is a drop in the ocean compared with what is necessary for social care. I shall give Members an example. I am sure the whole House will have been appalled by the revelations in the BBC’s “Panorama” programme this week. They showed older people being systematically mistreated. The Care Quality Commission’s assessment is that the care homes run by the Morleigh Group “require improvement”, and it has issued warning notices. The commission goes on to say that the owner “has allowed the services to deteriorate even further. She has utterly neglected her duty of care to the residents of these homes.”

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Jeremy Corbyn: The problem seems to be that that home was understaffed. We should not blame often underpaid and hard-pressed care workers; we should be ensuring that there are enough of them—properly paid—in all such homes. There was a serious problem of understaffing, and it was the last Labour Government who established the CQC. A warning notice is insufficient—we need stronger action than that.

Yesterday, the Government proposed that patients may have to show passports or other ID to access non-emergency healthcare. Have the Government considered the impact on elderly people? The last census showed us that 9.5 million people in this country do not have passports. Instead of distracting people with divisive, impractical policies, could the Prime Minister provide the NHS and social care with the money that it needs to care for the people who need the support?

The Prime Minister: Over this Parliament, the Government will be spending half a trillion pounds on the national health service. The right hon. Gentleman asks about a process to ensure that people who are receiving NHS treatment are entitled to receive that NHS treatment. For many years, there has been concern about health tourism and about people turning up in the UK and accessing health services but not paying for them. We want to ensure not only that those who are entitled to use the services are indeed able to see them free at the point of delivery, but that we deal with health tourism and those who should be paying for the use of our health service.

Jeremy Corbyn: Simon Stevens told us two weeks ago that the next three years will be the toughest ever for NHS funding and that 2018 would see health spending per person cut for the first time ever in this country. The National Audit Office has reported that the cost of health tourism is over a hundred times less than the £22 billion of cuts that the NHS faces from this Government. The reality is that under this Government there are 6,000 fewer mental health nurses and a record 3.9 million people on NHS waiting lists. All of us who visit A&E departments know the stress that staff are under and that waiting times are getting longer and longer. One million people in this country are not receiving the social care that they need. Instead of looking for excuses and scapegoats, should not the Prime Minister be ensuring that health and social care is properly resourced and properly funded, to take away the stress and fear that people face in old age and the stress that is placed on our very hard-working NHS and social care staff?

The Prime Minister: Billions of pounds extra into social care through the social care precept and the better care fund; half a trillion pounds being spent on the national health service; a record level of investment in mental health in the national health service—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Members must not shout down or attempt to shout down the Prime Minister. The question has been asked and was heard, and the answer must be heard.

The Prime Minister: There is a fundamental point that the right hon. Gentleman refrains from mentioning: we can afford to pay for the national health service and for social care only if we have a strong economy creating wealth, and that is precisely what he is going to hear from the Chancellor of the Exchequer in a few minutes’ time.

Q4. [907429] Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): On 23 June, my constituents voted by a margin of 62% to 28% to leave the European Union. Many of those people are unhappy and frustrated by what they see as delaying tactics from some remainers, who do not seem to understand the meaning of the word “democracy”.[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. This is very discourteous. The hon. Gentleman has a legitimate question and it and every other question should be heard fully and with politeness.

Gordon Henderson: Thank you, Mr Speaker—and I will repeat it. Some remainers do not seem to understand the meaning of the word “democracy”, which I would remind them is government by the people, especially the rule of the majority. With that in mind, what reassurance can my right hon. Friend give my constituents and me that article 50 will be triggered by March next year?

The Prime Minister: I am clear that we will trigger article 50 by the end of March next year. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to make the key point: it was decided by this Parliament, six to one, that the people should have the opportunity to vote on membership of the European Union. The vote was held, the turnout was high and the public gave their verdict. There must be no second referendum and no attempt to weasel out of this, and this is the Government who will deliver on the vote of the British people.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): We on the Scottish National party Benches have repeatedly brought up the issue of the devastating impact on disabled people of the UK benefits system. The Government plan to cut support for people with long-term health difficulties by £30 a week. Last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) proposed a motion, which was passed by this House with support from both Labour and Conservative Members, for these cuts to be postponed. Will the Prime Minister act on the vote of this House?

The Prime Minister: Let me tell the right hon. Gentleman what we have been doing in relation to benefits for disabled people: the overall funding for disability benefits will be higher in every year up to 2020 than it was in 2010; we have been focusing support on those who most need it—those who are not able to get into the workplace; and for those who are able, at some stage, to get into the workplace, we have been providing a wider package of support. I am pleased to say that over the last three years nearly 600,000 more disabled people are now in the workplace, with the dignity of having a job, which is what many people with disabilities want to have. So we are focusing help on those who most need it and helping those with disabilities who want to get into the workplace to do just that.

Angus Robertson: But it is widely trailed that the Prime Minister will make changes that will impact on benefit recipients in work. Will she confirm that she has no intention of helping people with disabilities and
medical conditions? Why should people who are unable to earn a living be punished for their disability or illness by losing £30 a week? Does she have any intention of changing that?

The Prime Minister: I have just set out for the right hon. Gentleman the ways in which we are providing support and help for those people who have disabilities. As I said, the overall spending on disability benefits will be higher in every year to 2020 than it was in 2010. But it is also important to recognise that when we give support for people with disabilities, it is not simply about the benefits system and how much money they are given; for those who are able to get into work and are on that part of the employment and support allowance, we provide packages that are outside the benefits as well, because we recognise that people want the dignity of getting into the workplace. That is what we are helping people with disabilities who can work to do.

Q6. [907431] Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that thousands of road commuters, including many of my constituents who use the A12, are travelling on roads that need to be repaired and upgraded? To improve connectivity and to speed up daily commute times, does she accept that the proposed £1.3 billion investment in improving our road network is warmly welcome and will do a great deal to enhance connectivity in the country?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of infrastructure expenditure in helping to deal with productivity in our economy, and I am pleased that that £1.3 billion for new roads does show us investing in the long-term future for Britain. It is about delivering jobs and economic growth, and about making sure that this economy works for everyone. It is just one part of the package that we are proposing, but of course my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will be setting our proposals out more clearly in a few minutes’ time.

Q2. [907427] Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): My constituent Nazanin Ratcliffe, a British national, is in prison in Iran. She has been separated from her husband and her two-year-old daughter for eight months. She has been on hunger strike and is now suicidal. The Prime Minister needs to reunite this mother, this daughter and this wife with her family. Will it take Nazanin’s death for the Government to start taking her seriously?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, this is a very difficult time for the whole family. I am sure that we are all concerned about the reports of the impact that detention in Iran is having on Nazanin Ratcliffe’s health. This is an issue that has repeatedly been raised with the Iranian Government by the UK Government—by both the previous Foreign Secretary and the current Foreign Secretary. I personally raised it with President Rouhani on 20 September in New York, and I stressed the importance of finding a resolution as soon as possible. I have since written to President Rouhani requesting confirmation of the charges, the sentence and the appeals process, and I have asked for assurances that Mrs Zaghari-Ratliffe will be allowed full legal representation and regular contact with her family. We will continue to do everything that we can for the family, and that includes the British Government remaining ready to help to bring back Mrs Zaghari-Ratliffe’s daughter to Britain if that is the request.

Q9. [907435] Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that most of our social problems are either caused or aggravated by the acute shortage of housing, so even if we manage to reduce the net immigration to this country, as I hope we will, we will have to build far more new homes? Is not the recommendation by the European Banking Authority to increase by 50% the reserves that banks must hold against house building, which makes it even more costly for them to lend for housing than for unsecured credit cards, profoundly unhelpful and perverse?

The Prime Minister: I am sure my right hon. Friend will recognise that we are subject to our own Prudential Regulation Authority, but the overall point that he makes about the importance of house building is absolutely correct. We do need to build more homes. That is something that the Government have been doing. We have seen about 900,000 new homes being built since 2010, but there is more for us to do, and that is what this Government are working on.

Q5. [907430] Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The Brexit Secretary and the Foreign Secretary are described by a senior German politician as having no idea what Brexit really means. The Times reports today that EU ambassadors think that the Foreign Secretary’s more colourful outbursts are damaging our relationships with member states. When will the Prime Minister get a grip on her Ministers and demonstrate to the country and to our EU colleagues that she has a coherent, workable plan for Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I have been very clear in this House on many occasions about the plan that we have for Brexit. Crucially, we will be leaving the European Union and we will be triggering article 50 by the end of March next year, and that is when the formal negotiations will start. It is absolutely right that we do not set out at this stage every single detail of our proposed negotiating strategy, because that would be the best way to get the worst possible deal for Britain.

Q12. [907438] Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): As we leave the European Union, maintaining the UK’s cutting edge and world leadership in scientific and technological discovery is of paramount importance to our industries and universities. May I welcome the Prime Minister’s announcement that, each year, we will invest a further £2 billion in research and development to boost our science and engineering base? Is not this just the type of vital support that our businesses and researchers need, rather than the threats from the Labour party to slash the R and D tax credits, which would hamper innovation and harm our economy?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The extra investment that we will be putting into research and development is a crucial part of our long-term task of ensuring that we have the economy and the growth and prosperity that we need in this country. The new funds will help to put us at the cutting edge of scientific discovery. That is already happening. I visited the Wellcome Genome Campus in Cambridge on Monday
The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of the appalling atrocities that are taking place in Aleppo, and it is right that we, along with our international allies, should be doing all that we can to try to bring this to a stop. He will recognise that the issue of who hosts sporting events is not in the Government’s remit. What is in the Government’s remit and what we are doing, as I say, is working with our international allies to put more pressure on Russia to stop the appalling atrocities—the appalling attacks—that are taking place in Aleppo. What we want to see is an agreement for a political transition to a Syria without President Assad.

Q7. [907432] John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Aleppo’s hospitals are destroyed and Syrians who avoid the barrel bombs and the chlorine gas are starving from the Russian-backed blockade. We must do more. Will the Prime Minister revisit the prospect for aid drops, and will she look at backing the campaign to stop this daily perpetrator of war crimes by stripping it of its right to hold the 2018 World cup?

The Prime Minister: I therefore welcome the announcement, which we are led to believe may be made shortly, of a £1 billion investment to achieve this.

Q8. [907433] Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the UK is to remain competitive and our citizens are to enjoy the benefits of the digital revolution, it is essential that we remain at the forefront of the deployment of both ultra-fast broadband and 5G mobile connectivity? May I therefore welcome the announcement, which we are to see is an agreement for a political transition to a Syria without President Assad.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend will, of course, be waiting in anticipation for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor’s autumn statement, but he is absolutely right that, as we look at improving productivity in this country and as we look to the economy of the future, the provision of superfast broadband and those new technological opportunities for people is absolutely a crucial part of that, and that is something that this Government recognise and will act on.

Q9. [907441] Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I welcome the announcement that new developments, like the body-worn videos, actually help to provide the evidence that ensures that people take in the fact of the assault as an aggravating factor into account, but also new developments, like the body-worn videos, actually help to provide the evidence that ensures that people can be brought to justice and that actually deter assaults in the first place.

The Prime Minister: As regards the STP process, of course, that will take place at local level—it will be at the local level that these proposals will be considered and put forward by local clinicians—but the concept of being able to deal with bed blocking in a variety of ways is absolutely right. There are good examples around the country of where having those step-down beds available is actually resolving the problem of bed blocking. There are other ways in which that is being done—in those parts of the country where social workers are being employed by hospital trusts, for example. But it is very good to recognise the good practice when it is being done, and we shall see more of that across the country.

Q10. [907436] Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Earlier this month, IRA man turned lawyer, Kieran Conway, confessed to the BBC that he took part in robberies, bombings and gun attacks that murdered British soldiers. He stated that he will never disclose information on any fellow IRA man, despite knowing details of IRA actions that he defines as constituting war crimes. Can the Prime Minister assure me that Her Majesty’s Government will apply for the extradition of this terrorist for questioning from the Republic of Ireland?

The Prime Minister: The question of whether or not an individual would be extradited or a request would be made for extradition is for the appropriate investigation and prosecution authorities to decide. We do, of course, recognise the concerns about those cases where it is still possible to bring people to justice, and obviously we want to see that being done.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): During the past six years we have had three major referendums, all eliciting varying degrees of excitement. Does the Prime Minister agree that one cannot have too much excitement, and will she therefore rule out any further referendums in this Parliament?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is trying to tempt me down a particular route. One thing that I will certainly rule out is a second referendum on whether we leave the European Union.

Q11. [907437] Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Aberdeen Cyrenians have launched a financial appeal because of the increasing number of people finding themselves homeless as a direct result of the UK Government’s pursuit of austerity. How can the Prime
Minister sleep in her warm bed at night knowing that her Government’s policies have consigned people to a cold Christmas?

**The Prime Minister:** The Government are taking action in a variety of ways to address homelessness. One of the key things we need to do is ensure that we see more homes being built in this country. The hon. Lady talks about austerity in the tone that she uses, but austerity is about us living within our means. When we talk about the Government providing support for individuals, we should always remember that taxpayers have to pay for that support, and many taxpayers are themselves struggling to get by.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): The Prime Minister will be aware that yesterday the Peninsula Rail Task Force launched its report, which was commissioned following the storms that severed Devon and Cornwall’s vital rail link, just as our vital rail link was severed again, this time by flooding. Does she welcome the report and will she commit the Government to ensuring that the vision it outlines is delivered?

**The Prime Minister:** May I suggest that my hon. Friend exercises a little more patience and listens very carefully to what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has to say?

Q14. (907440) **Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): In these uncertain times we would all surely agree that Britain needs strong defence, so how can the Prime Minister justify her Government’s decision to scrap all the Navy’s heavyweight surface-to-surface guided missiles without any replacement?

**The Prime Minister:** I do not recognise the picture that the hon. Gentleman presents of what the Government are doing in relation to the armed forces. We are investing billions of pounds in ensuring that our armed forces do have the missiles, the ships for the Royal Navy and the other pieces of equipment for the other armed forces. The picture that he presents is not the picture I recognise.

**Mr Julian Brazier** (Canterbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be good for confidence in the rule of law if judges did not enter into speculative public thoughts on cases that they are about to hear?

**The Prime Minister:** In this country we value the independence of our judiciary—that is, the independence of members of the judiciary when they come to make their judgments in court. Also, they are independent and it is for them to determine what they choose to put in their speeches. It is not for the Government to tell them what to do.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): As millions of public sector workers face another year of suppressed pay, after another week of shambolic Brexit negotiations, and with the national health service facing a winter crisis and crying out for cash, does the Prime Minister worry that her Government are only just about managing?

**The Prime Minister:** We are very clear about the amounts of money that we are putting into the national health service. The hon. Gentleman talks about the negotiations. Actually, the negotiations for us leaving the European Union do not formally start until we trigger article 50. We will trigger article 50 by the end of March next year. The hon. Gentleman wants to stop us leaving the European Union by denying the people the decision and the deliverability of the vote that they took, rightly, on 23 June. He wants to deny people what they want; we are going to give it to them.

**Charlie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con): May I raise with the Prime Minister the concerns of millions of drivers and hauliers across the United Kingdom who worry about the cost of driving and fuel duty? Will the Government look at keeping that down? Will they also look at how forecourt pricing has worked as the oil price changes? The prices jump like a rocket and fall like a feather.

**The Prime Minister:** I recognise that, as my hon. Friend says, many people look with very great concern at the cost of motoring in this country. I suggest, as I have to some of my other hon. Friends, that he be a little more patient and wait for the Chancellor’s autumn statement.

**Ms Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): The Prime Minister has talked about her worries about social care, but surely we have to judge her by her actions. In the last six years there has been an average 37% cut in local authority funding—57% in my area—and nearly a quarter of all those older people in need of social care have been denied any help at all. What is she going to do about it?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Lady might have noticed that I have been asked several questions about social care—[Interruption]—and I will give the answer that I have given previously. What the Government are doing about social care is to put more money in through the better care fund, to give local authorities the opportunity that is in the social care precept and to make sure that health and social care come together to ensure that we deal with the issue of bed blocking.

**Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con): How many of us would charge into a darkened store at night knowing that inside were three mask-wearing, crowbar-wielding thugs trying to rob it? My two constituents, Nigel Dunmore and Grant McGarry, did just that; as a result of their intervention, the thugs fled, leaving the money, and the staff were hurt less, although one of the gentlemen was himself hurt. Will my right hon. Friend join me in praising their courage and selflessness in carrying out this extraordinary act of bravado?

**The Prime Minister:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend and I commend the bravery and courage shown by those two individuals—Nigel and Grant, I think he said—who stepped into that situation to ensure that it was not as bad as it might have been. That is incredible bravery: many members of the public would not have been willing to step forward in that way. Will he pass my best wishes—and the best wishes of the whole House, I am sure—on to those individuals?

**Gloria De Piero** (Ashfield) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister believe that big companies should put a worker on the board?

**The Prime Minister:** I believe that we should see workers’ representation on boards. I make no apology for the fact that this Government are going to deliver on that. For all its years in government, the Labour party did nothing.
Autumn Statement

12.38 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):
It is a privilege to report today on an economy that the International Monetary Fund predicts will be the fastest-growing major advanced economy in the world this year. It is an economy with employment at a record high and unemployment at an 11-year low; an economy that, through the hard work of the British people, has bounced back from the depths of Labour’s recession. It is an economy that has confounded commentators at home and abroad with its strength and resilience since the British people decided, exactly five months ago, to leave the European Union and chart a new future for our country.

That decision will change the course of Britain’s history. It has thrown into sharp relief the fundamental strengths of the British economy that will ensure our future success; the global reach of our services industries; the strength of our science and high-tech manufacturing base; and the cutting-edge British businesses that are leading the world in disruptive technologies. But it is a decision that also makes more urgent than ever the need to tackle our economy’s long-term weaknesses such as the productivity gap, the housing challenge, and the damaging imbalance in economic growth and prosperity across our country. We resolve today to confront those challenges head on, to prepare our country to seize the opportunities ahead, and, in doing so, to build an economy that works for everyone—an economy where every corner of this United Kingdom is part of our national success.

I want to pay tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne). My style will, of course, be different from his. I suspect that I will prove no more adept at pulling rabbits from hats than my successor as Foreign Secretary has been at retrieving balls from the back of scrums, but my focus on building Britain’s long-term future will be the same. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton took over an economy on the brink of collapse, with the highest budget deficit in the west midlands, and every UK nation and region saw a record number of people in work. That is a labour market recovery that is working for everyone.

For those who claim that the recovery is just a south-east phenomenon, I have some news: over the past year employment grew fastest in the north-east, the claimant count fell fastest in Northern Ireland, and we grew strongly in the west midlands, and every UK nation and region saw a record number of people in work. That is a labour market recovery that is working for everyone.

Monetary policy has played an important role in supporting growth since the referendum decision, but a credible fiscal policy remains essential for maintaining market confidence and restoring the economy to long-term health. In view of the uncertainty facing the economy, and in the face of slower growth forecasts, we no longer seek to deliver a surplus in 2019-20, but the Prime Minister and I remain firmly committed to seeing the public finances return to balance as soon as practicable, while leaving enough flexibility to support the economy in the near term.

Today I am publishing a new draft charter for budget responsibility with three fiscal rules: first, that the public finances should be returned to balance as early as possible in the next Parliament and, in the interim, cyclically adjusted borrowing should be below 2% by the end of this Parliament; secondly, that public sector net debt as a share of GDP must be falling by the end of this Parliament; and, thirdly, that welfare spending must be within a cap set by the Government and monitored by the OBR. In the absence of an effective framework, the welfare bill in our country spiralled out of control, with spending on working-age benefits trebling in real terms between 1980 and 2010. As a result of the action that we have taken since 2010, that spending has now stabilised. The cap I am announcing today takes into account the policy changes made since the last Budget; and, thirdly, that welfare spending must be within a cap set by the Government and monitored by the OBR. In the absence of an effective framework, the welfare bill in our country spiralled out of control, with spending on working-age benefits trebling in real terms between 1980 and 2010. As a result of the action that we have taken since 2010, that spending has now stabilised. The cap I am announcing today takes into account the policy changes made since the last Budget; and, thirdly, that welfare spending must be within a cap set by the Government and monitored by the OBR.

I now turn to the OBR’s fiscal forecasts, but first I will set out the key drivers of changes since the Budget: the post-Budget changes that were made to welfare and housing policies cost the Exchequer £8.6 billion over the forecast period; and the classification changes have added £12 billion since the Budget; and tax receipts have been lower than expected this year, causing the OBR to revise down projected for growth in many of our European neighbours, including France and Italy. That fact will, no doubt, be a source of very considerable irritation to some.

As the effects of uncertainty diminish, the OBR forecasts growth recovery to 1.7% in 2018, 2.1% in 2019 and 2020, and 2% in 2021. While the OBR is clear that it cannot predict the deal the UK will strike with the EU, its current view is that the referendum decision means that potential growth over the forecast period is likely to be 2.4 percentage points lower than would otherwise have been the case. The OBR acknowledges that there is a higher degree of uncertainty around these figures than usual.

Despite slower growth, the UK labour market is forecast to remain robust. We have delivered over 2.7 million new jobs since 2010, and this forecast shows that number growing in every year—another 500,000 jobs created over the OBR forecast, providing security for working people across the length and breadth of Britain.

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I now turn to the OBR’s fiscal forecasts, but first I will set out the key drivers of changes since the Budget: the post-Budget changes that were made to welfare and housing policies cost the Exchequer £8.6 billion over the forecast period; and the classification changes have added £12 billion since the Budget; and tax receipts have been lower than expected this year, causing the OBR to revise down projected for growth in many of our European neighbours, including France and Italy. That fact will, no doubt, be a source of very considerable irritation to some.

As the effects of uncertainty diminish, the OBR forecasts growth recovery to 1.7% in 2018, 2.1% in 2019 and 2020, and 2% in 2021. While the OBR is clear that it cannot predict the deal the UK will strike with the EU, its current view is that the referendum decision means that potential growth over the forecast period is likely to be 2.4 percentage points lower than would otherwise have been the case. The OBR acknowledges that there is a higher degree of uncertainty around these figures than usual.

Despite slower growth, the UK labour market is forecast to remain robust. We have delivered over 2.7 million new jobs since 2010, and this forecast shows that number growing in every year—another 500,000 jobs created over the OBR forecast, providing security for working people across the length and breadth of Britain.

For those who claim that the recovery is just a south-east phenomenon, I have some news: over the past year employment grew fastest in the north-east, the claimant count fell fastest in Northern Ireland, and we grew strongly in the west midlands, and every UK nation and region saw a record number of people in work. That is a labour market recovery that is working for everyone.
revenues in the future. Added to this is a structural effect of rapidly rising incorporation and self-employment, which further erodes revenues.

Combining those pressures with the impact of forecast weaker growth, and taking account of the measures I shall announce today; the OBR now forecasts that, in cash terms, borrowing is set to be £68.2 billion this year, falling to £59 billion next year and £46.5 billion in 2018-19, and then £21.9 billion, £20.7 billion, and finally £17.2 billion in 2021-22. Overall, public sector net borrowing as a percentage of GDP will fall from 4% last year to 3.5% this year, and it will continue to fall over the Parliament, reaching 0.7% in 2021-22. This will be the lowest deficit as a share of GDP in two decades. The OBR expects cyclically adjusted public sector net borrowing to be 0.8% of GDP in 2020-21, comfortably meeting our target to reduce it to less than 2% and, importantly, leaving significant flexibility to respond to any headwinds that the economy may encounter.

The OBR’s forecast of higher borrowing and slower asset sales, together with the temporary effect of the Bank of England’s action to stimulate growth, translates into an increased forecast for debt in the near term. The OBR forecasts that debt will rise from 84.2% of GDP last year to 87.3% this year, peaking at 90.2% in 2017-18 as the Bank of England’s monetary policy interventions approach their full effect. In 2018-19, debt is projected to fall to 89.7% of national income—the first fall in the national debt as a share of GDP since 2001-02—and it is forecast to continue falling thereafter. Members might be interested to know that after stripping out the effects of the Bank of England interventions, underlying debt peaks this year at 82.4% of GDP and falls thereafter to 77.7% by 2021-22.

It is customary in the run-up to the autumn statement to hear representations from the shadow Chancellor of the day, usually for untenable levels of spending and borrowing. Conservative Members used to think that Ed Balls’ demands were an extreme example, but I have to say that the current shadow Chancellor has outperformed him in the fiscal incontinence sweepstake. What we do say that the current shadow Chancellor has outperformed Ed Balls’ demands were an extreme example, but I have borrowed. Conservative Members used to think that Ed Balls’ demands were an extreme example, but I have borrowed. Conservative Members used to think that Ed Balls’ demands were an extreme example, but I have borrowed.
of need, we will invest a further £1.4 billion to deliver 40,000 additional affordable homes. I will also relax restrictions on Government grant to allow providers to deliver a wider range of housing types. I will also announce a large-scale regional pilot of right to buy for housing association tenants, and continued support for home ownership through the Help to Buy equity loan scheme and the Help to Buy ISA.

This package means that over the course of this Parliament, the Government expect to more than double, in real terms, annual capital spending on housing. Coupled with our resolve to tackle the long-term challenges of land supply, this commitment to housing delivery represents a step change in our ambition to increase the supply of homes for sale and for rent to deliver a housing market that works for everyone.

Reliable transport networks are essential to growth and productivity, so this autumn statement commits significant additional funding to help to keep Britain moving now, and to invest in the transport networks and vehicles of the future. I will commit: an additional £1.1 billion of investment in English local transport networks, where small investments can often offer big wins; £220 million additionally to address traffic pinch points on strategic roads; £450 million to trial digital signalling on our railways to achieve a step change in reliability and to squeeze more capacity out of our existing rail infrastructure—I know the Leader of the Opposition will welcome that—and, finally, £390 million to build on our competitive advantage in low-emission vehicles and the development of connected autonomous vehicles, plus a 100% first year capital allowance for the installation of electric vehicle charging infrastructure.

The Department for Transport will continue to work with Transport for the North to develop detailed options for northern powerhouse rail. My right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary will set out more details of specific projects and priorities over the coming weeks.

Our future transport, business and lifestyle needs will require world-class digital infrastructure to underpin them, so my ambition—

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It says here.

Mr Hammond: Yes—it says here because I wrote it here.

My ambition is for the UK to be a world leader in 5G. That means a full-fibre network; a step change in speed, security and reliability. So we will invest over £1 billion in our digital infrastructure to catalyse private investment in fibre networks and to support 5G trials. From April, we will introduce 100% business rates relief for a five-year period on new fibre infrastructure, supporting further roll-out of fibre to homes and businesses.

We have chosen to borrow to kick-start a transformation in infrastructure and innovation investment, but we must sustain this effort over the long term if we are to make a lasting difference to the UK’s productivity performance, so today I have written to the National Infrastructure Commission to ask it to make its recommendations on the future infrastructure needs of the country, using the assumption that the Government will invest between 1% and 1.2% of GDP every year from 2020 in economic infrastructure covered by the commission. To put that in context, we will spend around 0.8% of GDP on the same definition this year.

I am also backing the commission’s interim recommendations on the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor, published last week, with £110 million new funding for east-west rail and a commitment to deliver the new Oxford-Cambridge expressway. That project can be more than just a transport link. It can become a transformational tech corridor, drawing on the world-class research strengths of our two best-known universities. I welcome the commission’s continuing work on delivery model options. We will carefully consider its final recommendations in due course.

The major increase in infrastructure spending I have announced today will represent a significant increase in funding through the Barnett formula, of more than £250 million to the Northern Ireland Executive, £400 million to the Welsh Government and £800 million to the Scottish Government.

Public investment is only part of the picture, however. About half of our economic infrastructure is financed by the private sector, and we will continue to support that investment through the UK guarantee scheme, which I am today extending until at least 2026. The new capital investment I have announced will provide the financial backbone for the Government’s industrial strategy that the Prime Minister spoke about on Monday, a firm foundation upon which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will work with industry to build our ambition of an economy that works for all.

I can announce four further measures to back business. I am doubling the UK export finance capacity to make it easier for British businesses to export. I am funding Charlie Mayfield’s business-led initiative to boost management skills across British businesses, I am taking a first step to tackle the long-standing problem of our fastest growing start-up tech firms being snapped up by bigger companies, rather than growing to scale, by injecting an additional £400 million into venture capital funds through the British Business Bank, unlocking £1 billion of new finance for growing firms. I am also launching today a Treasury-led review of the barriers to accessing patient capital in the UK, so that we can take further action to address them.

This Government recognise that, for too long, economic growth in our country has been too concentrated in London and the south-east. That is not just a social problem but an economic problem. London is one of the highest-productivity cities in the world and we should celebrate that fact. But no other major developed economy has such a gap between the productivity of its capital city and its second and third cities, so we must drive up the performance of our regional cities. Today we publish our strategy for addressing productivity barriers in the northern powerhouse, and give the go ahead to a programme of major roads schemes in the north. Our Midlands engine strategy will follow shortly, but I am today providing funding so that the evaluation study for the midlands rail hub can go ahead.

In addition, we are investing in local infrastructure in every region of England. I can announce the allocation of £1.8 billion from the local growth fund to the English regions: £556 million to local enterprise partnerships in the north of England, £542 million to the midlands and east of England, and £683 million to LEPs in the...
south-west, south-east and London. We will announce the detailed breakdown of allocations to individual LEPs shortly.

Devolution remains at the heart of this Government’s approach to supporting local growth, and we recommit today to our city deals with Swansea, Edinburgh, north Wales and Tay cities. I can also announce today we are beginning negotiations on a city deal for Stirling so that every single city in Scotland will be on course to have a city deal. To support new mayoral combined authorities in England, I can announce that we will grant them new borrowing powers to reflect their new responsibilities.

While we continue discussions with London and the west midlands on possible devolution of further powers I can announce today that London will receive £3.15 billion as its share of national affordable housing funding, to deliver a commitment of more than 90,000 affordable homes. I can also announce that we are devolving to London the adult education budget, and giving London greater control over the delivery of employment support services for the hardest to help.

I have deliberately avoided making this statement into a long list of individual projects being supported, but I am going to make one exception. I will act today, with just seven days to spare, to save one of the UK’s most important historic houses, Wentworth Woodhouse near Rotherham. It is said to be the inspiration for Pemberley in Jane Austen’s “Pride and Prejudice”. But in 1946, in an extraordinary act of cultural vandalism, the then Labour Government authorised extensive opencast coal mining virtually up to the front door of this precious property. Perhaps that is Labour’s idea of a heritage—all but destroyed by a Labour Government, urgent repairs to safeguard this key piece of northern heritage—all but destroyed by a Labour Government, and saved by a Conservative one.

I can also confirm distribution of a further £102 million of LIBOR bank fines to armed forces and emergency services charities, including, my hon. Friends will be pleased to hear, £20 million to support the Defence and National Rehabilitation Centre at Stanford Hall in Nottinghamshire, as well as £3 million from the tampon tax fund for Comic Relief to distribute to a range of women’s charities.

We choose to invest in our economic infrastructure because it can transform the growth potential of our economy, as well as improving the quality of people’s lives. That investment is possible only because the Government are prepared to take the tough decisions—every one of them opposed by the Labour party—to maintain control of current spending. When we took office in 2010, public spending was 45% of GDP; this year, it is set to be 40%. During those six years, we have seen crime fall by more than a quarter, the highest proportion ever of good or outstanding schools, the number of doctors in our NHS increasing by 10,000, pensioner poverty at its lowest level ever, the lowest ever number of children being raised in workless households and the highest ever number of young people going on to study full time at university.

We have demonstrated beyond doubt that controlling public spending is compatible with world-class public services and social improvement. But, as the OBR’s debt projections demonstrate, we have more work to do to eliminate the deficit. Departmental spending plans set out in the spending review last autumn will therefore remain in place, and departmental expenditure in 2021-22 will grow in line with inflation. The £3.5 billion of savings to be delivered through the efficiency review, announced at the Budget and led by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, must be delivered in full. I have, however, exceptionally agreed to provide additional funding to the Ministry of Justice to tackle urgent prison safety issues by increasing the number of prison officers by 2,500.

Having run two large spending Departments in previous roles, I came to this job with some very clear views about the relationship between the Treasury and spending Departments. I want Departments to be incentivised to drive efficiencies, and I want the Treasury to be an enabler for good, effective spending across government. To kick-start this new approach, I will allow up to £1 billion of the savings found by the efficiency review to be reinvested in 2019-20 in priority areas and I have budgeted today accordingly.

We manage public spending so that we can invest in the public’s priorities. The Government have underlined those priorities with a series of commitments and protections for the duration of this Parliament. I can confirm today that, despite the fiscal pressures, we will meet our commitments to protect the budgets of key public services and defence; keep our promise to the world’s poorest through our overseas aid budget; and meet our pledge to our country’s pensioners through the triple lock. But as we look ahead to the next Parliament, we will need to ensure that we tackle the challenges of rising longevity and fiscal sustainability, so the Government will review public spending priorities and other commitments for the next Parliament in the light of the evolving fiscal position at the next spending review.

I now turn to taxation. Since 2010, the Government have put a business-led recovery at the heart of our plan. We have cut corporation tax from 28% to 20%, sending the message that Britain is open for business. The additional investment in productivity and infrastructure that I have announced today underscores that message, and the raft of investments in the UK announced since the referendum—by SoftBank, Glaxo, Nissan, Google and Apple among others—confirms it. My priority as Chancellor is to ensure that Britain remains the No. 1 destination for business, creating the investment, the jobs and the prosperity to protect our long-term future.

I know how much business values certainty and stability, so I confirm today that we will stick to the business tax road map we set out in March. Corporation tax will fall to 17%, by far the lowest overall rate of corporate tax in the G20. We will deliver the commitments we have made to the oil and gas sector. The carbon price support
will continue to be capped out to 2020, and we will implement the business rates reduction package worth £6.7 billion. I can also confirm today that, having consulted further, my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary will lower the transitional relief cap from 45% next year to 43%, and from 50% to 32% the year after.

That’s complicated, but it’s good news—just in case anybody wasn’t sure, Mr Speaker. I will also increase the rural rate relief to 100%, giving small businesses in rural areas a tax break worth up to £2,900 a year.

In return for these highly competitive tax rates, the tax base must be sustainable. From April 2017, we will align the employee and employer national insurance thresholds at £157 a week. There will be no cost to employees, and the maximum cost to business will be an annual £7.18 per employee. Insurance premium tax in this country is lower than in many other European countries, and half the rate of VAT. In order to raise revenue, which is required to fund the spending commitments I am making today, it will rise from 10% currently, to 12% from next June. At the same time, I can confirm the Government’s commitment to legislate next year to end the compensation culture surrounding whiplash claims, a major area of insurance fraud. That will save drivers an average of £40 on their annual premiums.

Technological progress is changing the way people live and work, and the tax system needs to keep pace. For example, the OBR has today highlighted the growing cost to the Exchequer of incorporation. So the Government will consider how we can ensure that the taxation of different ways of working is fair between different individuals doing essentially the same work, and sustains the tax base as the economy undergoes rapid change. We will consult in due course on any proposed changes.

In the meantime, the Government will take action now to reduce the difference between the treatment of cash earnings and benefits. The majority of employees pay tax on a cash salary, but some are able to sacrifice salary by agreement with their employer and pay much lower tax on benefits in kind. That is unfair, so from April 2017 employers and employees who use these schemes will pay the same taxes as everyone else. Following consultation with stakeholders, ultra-low emission cars, pension savings, childcare and the cycle-to-work scheme will be excluded from this change, and certain long-term arrangements will be protected until April 2021. For pensions that have been drawn down, I will also reduce to £4,000 the money purchase annual allowance, to prevent inappropriate double tax relief being gained.

This Government have done more than any other to tackle tax evasion, avoidance and aggressive tax planning. The UK tax gap, it may surprise some Opposition Members to hear, is now one of the lowest in the world. But we must constantly be alert to new threats to our tax base as the economy undergoes rapid change.

We will shut down inappropriate use of the VAT flat rate scheme that was put in place to help small businesses. We will abolish the tax advantages linked to employee shareholder status, in response to growing evidence that it is primarily being used for tax-planning purposes by high-earning individuals. We will introduce a new penalty for those who enable the use of a tax avoidance scheme that HMRC later challenges and defeats. These measures, and others set out in the autumn statement document, raise about £2 billion over the forecast period.

There is understandable public concern that the pitch is tilted in favour of large multinational groups, which are able to use cross-border structures to manage their tax liabilities. Following detailed consultation, I can confirm that we will implement our new restriction on tax relief for corporate interest expenses and reform the way relief is provided for historic losses. These measures, scored at Budget 2016, will help to ensure that large businesses will always pay tax in years where they make substantial profits. They will also mean that businesses cannot avoid tax by borrowing excessively in the UK to fund their overseas activities. They take effect in April, and will raise over £5 billion from the largest businesses in the UK.

I said that the tax system must be fair, and that means rewarding those who work hard by helping them to keep more of what they earn. There is one tax reform the Government have pursued since 2010 that has done more than any other to improve the lot of working people: raising the tax-free personal allowance. When we entered Government in 2010, it was £6,475. After six years, it is now £11,000, and will rise to £11,500 in April. As a result, we have more than halved the tax bill of someone with a salary of £15,000 to just £800. That is a massive boost to the incomes of low and middle earners. Since 2010, we have cut income tax for 28 million people and taken 4 million people out of income tax altogether. I can confirm today that, despite the challenging fiscal forecasts, we will deliver on our commitment to raise the allowance to £12,500, and the higher rate threshold to £50,000, by the end of this Parliament. Once that £12,500 has been reached, the personal allowance will rise automatically during the 2020s in line with inflation, rather than the national minimum wage, as currently planned. It will be for the Chancellor to decide from year to year whether more is affordable.

As well as taking millions of ordinary people out of tax, we are the Government who introduced the national living wage and gave a pay rise to over 1 million workers.

[Interruption] Labour Members don’t like it—a Tory Government gave a pay rise to over 1 million of the lowest-paid workers. We are the Government who introduced 15 hours a week of free childcare for all three and four-year-olds, and we will double that for working families from September. We are the Government whose education reforms have raised standards and expanded opportunity, with 1.4 million more children now in “good” or “outstanding” schools, while the new capital funding I have provided today for grammar schools will help to continue that trend. We are the Government who pledged to invest in our NHS, and we are delivering on that promise by backing the NHS’s “Five Year Forward View” plan for the future with £10 billion of additional funding by the end of 2020-21. But we recognise that more needs to be done to help families make ends meet and to ensure that every household has opportunities to prosper. So today I can announce that the national living wage will increase from £7.20 to £7.50 next April. That is a pay rise worth over £500 a year to a full-time worker.
Creating jobs, lowering taxes and raising wages address directly the concerns of ordinary families, and the revenue-raising measures that I have announced today enable me to go further to help families on low wages. Universal credit is an important reform to our benefits system and is designed to make sure that work always pays. We want to reinforce that position. I have considered very carefully the arguments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrows) and others, and weighed them carefully against the fiscal constraints, and I have concluded that from April we can reduce the universal credit taper rate from 65% to 63%. This is effectively a targeted tax cut that will be worth £700 million a year by 2021-22 for those in work on low incomes. It will increase the incentive to work and encourage progression in work, and it will help 3 million households across our country.

We believe that a market economy is the best way of delivering sustained prosperity for the British people. We will always support a market-led approach, but we will not be afraid to intervene where there is evidence of market failure. We will look carefully over the coming months at the functioning of key markets, including the retail energy market, to make sure they are functioning fairly for all consumers. In the private rental market, letting agents are currently able to charge unregulated fees to tenants. We have seen these fees spiral, despite attempts to regulate them, often to hundreds of pounds. This is wrong. Landlords appoint letting agents and landlords should meet their fees. So I can announce today that we will ban fees to tenants as soon as possible. We will also consult on how best to ban pension cold calling and a wider range of pension scams.

We can also help today those who rely on the income from modest savings to get by. Low interest rates have helped our economy to recover, but they have significantly reduced the interest people can earn on their cash savings, so we will launch a new, market-leading savings bond through NS&I. The detail will be announced at the Budget, but we expect our new investment bond will help our economy to recover, but they have significantly reduced the interest people can earn on their cash savings, so we will launch a new, market-leading savings bond through NS&I. The detail will be announced at the Budget, but we expect our new investment bond will have an interest rate of around 2.2% gross and a term of three years. Savers will be able to deposit up to £3,000, and we expect around 2 million people to benefit.

The announcements I have made today lower taxes on working people, boost wages, back savers and bear down on bills. In early 2017, we will begin the roll-out of tax-free childcare across Britain, providing a saving of up to £2,000 per child. Once it is rolled out, we pledge to keep it under review to ensure that it is indeed delivering the support that working families need.

There is one further area of household expenditure where the Government can help. The oil price has risen by over 60% since January, and sterling has declined by 15% against the dollar. That means, of course, significant pressure on prices at the pump here in Britain, so today we stand on the side of millions of hard-working people in our country by cancelling the fuel duty rise for the seventh successive year. In total, this saves the average car driver £130 a year and the average van driver £350 a year. This is a tax cut worth £850 million next year and means that the current fuel duty freeze is the longest for 40 years.

I have one further announcement to make. This is my first autumn statement as Chancellor. After careful consideration and detailed discussion with the Prime Minister, I have decided that it will also be my last. I am abolishing the autumn statement. [Hon. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] No other major economy makes hundreds of tax changes twice a year, and neither should we, so the spring Budget in a few months will be the final spring Budget. Starting in autumn 2017, Britain will have an autumn Budget announcing tax changes well in advance of the start of the tax year. From 2018, there will be a spring statement responding to the forecast—[Laughter—]

Mr Hammond: Perhaps they should have read their briefing, Mr Speaker, because they might then have remembered that Parliament has mandated the OBR to produce a report to Parliament twice a year and has mandated the Government to reply. From 2018, therefore, there will be a spring statement responding to the forecast from the OBR but no major fiscal event. If unexpected changes in the economy require it, I will of course reserve the right to announce actions at the spring statement, but I will not make significant changes twice a year just for the sake of it. This change will allow for greater parliamentary scrutiny of Budget measures ahead of their implementation. It is a long-overdue reform to our tax policy-making process and brings the UK into line with best practice recommended by the IMF; the Institute for Fiscal Studies; the Institute for Government and many others.

The OBR report today confirms the underlying strength and resilience of the British economy. This autumn statement responds to the challenge of building on that strength, while also heeding the warnings in the OBR’s figures, as we begin writing this new chapter in our country’s history. It re-states our commitment to living within our means and sets out our choice to invest in our future. It sends a clear message to the world that Britain is open for business and it provides help to those who need it now. We have made our choices and set our course. We are a great nation, bold in our vision, confident in our strengths and determined in our ambition to build a country that works for everyone. I commend this statement to the House.

1.29 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): This morning, we heard the verdict from the trial, following the tragic murder of Jo Cox. That murder robbed this House of a fierce advocate for social justice and a passionate campaigner. Her killing was an attack on democracy itself. Our thoughts are with her family.

Today’s statement places on record the abject failure of the last six wasted years, and offers no hope for the future. The figures speak for themselves. Growth is down; wage growth, down; business investment, down.
The Government’s own deficit targets are failed; the debt target, failed; the welfare cap, failed.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me say now that if Members from either side want to shout out, they should not bother to stand, because they will not be called. I say that to Members on both sides—stop it. It is juvenile, low grade and hugely deprecated by the public, whose support we should be seeking and whom we should try to impress, not to repel.

John McDonnell: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

We have heard today that there will be more taxes, more debt and more borrowing. The verdict could not be clearer. The so-called long-term economic plan has failed. As the Treasury’s own leaked paper reveals, the Government knew it had failed before the referendum result was announced. We now face Brexit—the greatest economic challenge of a generation—unprepared and ill equipped. The new Chancellor acknowledged the failure of the economic strategy in October when he promised a reset of economic policy.

Today, we expected a change of direction after those six wasted years. Instead, we have seen further cuts to earnings for those in work through cuts to universal credit, and a living wage increase that is lower than expected under the previous Chancellor. This is a new Conservative leadership with no answers to the challenges facing our country following Brexit, and no vision to secure our future prosperity.

Labour respects the decision of the British people to leave the European Union, but the chaotic Tory handling of Brexit threatens the future prosperity of this country. The Chancellor must now do the right thing for British workers and businesses. He must insist on full, tariff-free access to the single market. He and the Treasury know that that is what will get the best deal for jobs and prosperity here. It may not be in the Chancellor’s nature, but in the national interest I urge him to stand up to the Prime Minister and the extreme Brexit fanatics in her party on those people who are called “just about managing.” To us, they are our friends, our neighbours and the people we represent. Let me tell the House why those people are just an electoral demographic. To us, they are people who are just an electoral demographic. To us, they are just about managing—one about managing—still remain in the Chancellor’s firing line. He is cutting £30 a week from the support that these disabled people receive. In our society, that is scandalous.

Those who are “just about managing” also rely on our public services. They send their children to local schools; they depend on their local hospital; they rely on local council services to clean their streets, tend to their parks and playgrounds and open their libraries. The reality, however, after six wasted years is that our public services are just not managing. Today, the childcare that parents rely on remains underfunded, as the Public Accounts Committee has reported—and it will remain underfunded, even after today’s announcements.

I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) for the important work they did in bringing the issue of child burial fees to public attention. I ask the Government to do the right thing on child burial fees and reconsider making funding available for families in these desperate circumstances.

Councillors from all political parties are reporting that they are at a tipping point in the provision of social care. The previous Chancellor cut £3 billion from social care, meaning that over 1 million people who need care are not getting it. They are not even “just about managing”, and they got little help today. We call for additional support for social care, because the funding being provided today is only a stop-gap measure. Our social care system will not be secure without long-term funding. Tonight, many elderly people will remain trapped in their homes, isolated and lonely, lacking the care they need because of continuing cuts to social care—and social care cannot be cut without also hitting the NHS.

The supposed £10 billion funding allocated to the NHS is a restatement of an earlier commitment, but the Health Committee described this £10 billion claim as familiar hollow rhetoric from the Tories on tax avoidance, when they have cut the resources of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs—the very people who collect these taxes. The resources available to HMRC today are 40% less than they were in 2000.

The Chancellor has frozen in-work benefits at a time when food prices are rising and we do not expect wages to keep up. We need an economy that is fundamentally more prosperous and where prosperity is, yes, shared by all. The increases in the national living wage announced today are lower than expected and leave the poorest-paid workers still earning less than they need to live on. So I ask the Chancellor to adopt a real living wage level, as Labour has pledged, and abandon his predecessor’s empty rhetoric.

Regrettably, the Chancellor is still going ahead with some of the cuts to universal credit. Thanks to pressure—I pay tribute to Members of all parties who have campaigned on this issue—he is offering to soften the blow. We do not want the blow softened; we want it lifted altogether.

Today’s changes will leave a single parent on average at least £2,300 worse off. These are the very people who are working hard to deliver for their families, and the Government are betraying them.

People with disabilities, who have been put through the ordeal of the discredited work capability assessment and are trying to get themselves ready to return to work—they are “just about managing”—still remain in the Chancellor’s firing line. He is cutting £30 a week from the support that these disabled people receive. In our society, that is scandalous.
“misleading and incorrect”. The real amount is less than half that claimed. As a result, we now have 3.9 million people on NHS waiting lists—more than ever—and many of those 3.9 million people are waiting in pain, and they got no relief today. Across the country, hospitals face losing their A&E units, their maternity units and their specialist units. This Tory Government are failing patients, as well as failing the dedicated NHS staff who serve us so well. This is the first time that healthcare spending per head has declined since the NHS was created, and I fear there will be a crisis in funding and care over this Christmas. The NHS cares for us, and we should care for the NHS.

Members of this Government have also overseen the biggest real-terms cuts in education for four decades. One pound in every seven has been cut from further education college budgets, and Conservative policy has saddled a generation of students with a lifetime of debt. How can a Government seriously talk about supporting a 21st-century economy when they are planning to pour tens of millions into the failed 20th-century policy of grammar schools, segregating our children at an early age?

As for housing, the Chancellor announced today that he was scrapping “pay to stay” proposals and letting agents’ fees—a U-turn that is a victory for Labour’s campaigns against both the “tenant tax” and letting fees. The Chancellor has spoken before about the dream of home ownership for the young. Nothing that he has announced today is of the scale that is needed to suggest that that will remain anything other than a dream. The hard facts are these. The Government of which the Chancellor was a member built fewer homes than had been built at any point since the 1920s, and there are now a third of a million fewer home owners under the age of 35. Today the Chancellor could have delivered the scale of investment that is required to build the homes that we need and to create a new generation of home ownership. He significantly failed to do so.

Thanks to campaigning by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), the Wentworth Woodhouse building will be saved. I am grateful for that. The accusation was that a Labour Government had sited an opencast mine near the building and threatened it. That, I believe, was in 1947. I only wish that some of the policies pursued by Tory Governments since the 1950s could be reversed so easily.

The Government’s biggest investment failure is this: the Chancellor has failed to address properly the Government’s most consistent shortcoming. His predecessor cut public investment to the lowest that it had been since the 1990s. Instead of delivering the ambitious investment that our economy needs throughout the country, the Chancellor has failed to recognise the scale of the challenge. He also risks repeating the mistakes from last year, with the national flood resilience plan failing to provide the protection that our communities need.

Just one in five of the projects in the investment pipeline is under construction, and shovel-ready projects worth £82 billion are still being delayed. The infrastructure gap between London and the rest of the country remains unbridged. London was scheduled to receive 12 times as much public investment per head as the north-east of England. The announcement of a £1.1 billion investment in transport is a reannouncement. The Oxford-Cambridge rail link is significantly delayed against Network Rail’s original planned completion date of March 2019. There are no new ideas here, just a promise to deliver what the Government have previously failed to deliver. This is press-release policy-making, not provision. All that we need now is the return of the high-vis jacket.

The “fourth industrial revolution” will not be delivered on delays, old news and reannouncements. The Government have, at last, realised their mistake, and now talk about an industrial strategy—words that Ministers refused even to refer to in the past—but it is not enough to change a few ministerial titles. The Government and the Chancellor need to deliver. We have yet to see the proposed Green Paper on industrial strategy that was promised over the summer.

The same Government who now talk up high-tech investment oversaw a real-terms cut of £1 billion in science funding during the last Parliament. The OECD recommends that developed countries should be spending 3% of GDP on science. On the basis of what we have heard today, the new spending will lift our expenditure from 1.7% of GDP to a mere 1.8%.

It is the same familiar story for business. The Chancellor is continuing the race to the bottom on corporation tax, and, while continuing the cuts in public services, he is cutting taxes for big business. We know that it is not headline tax rates that encourage long-term investment by businesses. Business investment has been revised down every year under this Government. What encourages businesses to invest is the knowledge that they have access to skilled workers, world-class infrastructure and major markets.

Today’s grim economic forecasts reveal the challenge that lies ahead. The Chancellor admitted over the summer that it was time for a change of course. He has now had to abandon the Government’s fiscal charter, with its failed hard surplus target. Labour warned that a hard surplus target lacked the flexibility to adapt to economic circumstances and the capacity to allow investment. The Chancellor’s U-turn today demonstrates just how right we have been over the past year.

Only weeks ago, the Prime Minister offered the hope of change and the Chancellor offered to “reset” economic policy. Today, we have seen the very people whom the Prime Minister promised to champion betrayed. The Chancellor has failed to break with the economic strategy of austerity. The country remains unprepared and ill-equipped to meet the challenges of Brexit and secure Britain’s future as a world-leading economy. I fear that, after all the sacrifices that people have made over the last six years, today’s statement has laid the foundations for more wasted years. Only a Labour Government will deliver on the ambition and vision to rebuild and transform our economy so that no one and no community is left behind.

Mr Hammond: Let me begin by associating myself with the right hon. Gentleman’s remarks about the Jo Cox trial and sending my deepest condolences to her family and friends, who will be suffering again today.

I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment to the Privy Council. I only wish that I could have been present at the investiture. I remember the procedure quite well: they give you a little red book to hold. [Laughter.]
I listened carefully to the right hon. Gentleman’s response to my statement. His central argument appears to be that the deficit is too high and borrowing is too high. That is a bit of a problem, because, as I have understood it, his central proposal for our economy is to borrow more and spend more. Under his rule, Labour would always be borrowing, in good times as well as bad. His analysis of the problem of the last Labour Government is not that they spent too much money, but that they spent too little. Indeed, his rule has remarkable similarities to Gordon Brown’s “golden rule”, and we all know where that got us. His big idea is to spend an extra £500 billion, without any notion of how he would pay for it.

The right hon. Gentleman welcomed the industrial strategy. I am not sure that I welcome his welcome, but I warn him not to welcome it too quickly, because it will not look anything like an industrial strategy that would come out of his office. What he has heard about today is a responsible set of decisions, such as the decision to borrow £23 billion of tightly targeted investment while paying for every single penny of every other commitment that has been made.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about Brexit, and attacked us over the way in which we are handling the Brexit process. I honestly do not know whether he has ever been involved in a negotiation—I suspect not—but I invite him to look across the continent for a moment and note the admirable discipline that our negotiating counterparts are displaying in their messages, revealing nothing as they prepare to go into this negotiation with us. My advice is this: if we want to secure the best possible deal for Britain, we must keep our cards appropriately close to our chest.

The right hon. Gentleman may have heard “cuts in people’s incomes” in my announcement about universal credit. Let me explain to him how this works. When we cut the taper from 65% to 63%, we allow people to keep an extra 2% of the income they are earning. I would have thought he welcomed that.

This is all about making tough decisions, and I am very happy to debate with the right hon. Gentleman, but I just wish he would be honest enough to accept that we cannot shower money everywhere, proposing to spend money on everything, without having to raise that money, either by taxes on ordinary people or by cutting spending elsewhere. It is simply no good to keep on pretending that we can do that just by taxing the rich. The top 1% of people in this country already contribute 27% of income tax paid, and unfortunately there are just not enough of them to be able to finance all the right hon. Gentleman’s ambitions.

The right hon. Gentleman said he was disappointed by the announcement on the national living wage. I do not remember—perhaps one of my hon. Friends can remind me—the level of the national living wage during the 13 years of Labour’s Government. He might note that the level I have announced today is precisely the level recommended by the Low Pay Commission, the body set up to pronounce on these things.

I wish the right hon. Gentleman would also be honest when he talks about the work-related activity group in the employment and support arrangements. This applies to new claims only, as he very well knows, so nobody is going to have £29 a week taken away from them however many times he says it. He also knows that it is not a stand-alone measure; it is part of a package. The money saved is being reinvested in a £330 million package to get these people into work, with targeted support to help them to be ready for work.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about house building starts. House building starts were 45% down under the last Labour Government.

The right hon. Gentleman and the Leader of the Opposition have spread division and disharmony through the Labour party, and that is exactly what they would spread through the country if they ever—God forbid—got into government. The right hon. Gentleman says there are no new ideas; I have to say that he needs to check the opinion polling, because that is not quite what public opinion believes. Instead of carping and opposing every measure we propose, why doesn’t he roll up his sleeves and support us in the hard work of building an economy that works for everyone?

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor on reverting to the extremely sensible practice of having only one Budget a year, which Gordon Brown abandoned in order to try to buy votes twice a year, with disastrous consequences. I also congratulate him on easing the taper on tax credit, because it is having distorting effects on the labour market at the moment, for example by discouraging part-time workers from working extra hours. I particularly thank him for the money he has spent on the very valuable work rehabilitating the disabled at Stanford Hall in my constituency.

With those notable exceptions, will the Chancellor reassure me he will resist political pressures of all kinds over the coming years to move away from the very sensible fiscal discipline he has set out, because the major risk to his period of office would come—and it would affect every section of our society, including the JAMs that the media have discovered—if he were unable to avoid or mitigate the risk of recession, which global uncertainty undoubtedly poses to us in the real world?

Finally, will he confirm that, wherever he holds his cards, he will continue, inside the Government if necessary, to spell out economic reality and the long-term benefits to this country, if he wants to develop a modern, competitive economy, of retaining access to our most important market, in Europe, by retaining the benefits of the single market and the customs union, and that no amount of short-term political pressure will allow him to be deflected from that?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend. I am delighted that we have been able to lower the taper rate of universal credit, because of course it is absolutely in line with our principle that we should be supporting and encouraging people into work. He says the taper rate discourages people, but it is of course a much lower rate of withdrawal than under the old tax credit system it replaces.

Let me reassure my right hon. and learned Friend that I and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister remain absolutely committed to the sound Tory principle that a country has to live within its means. Of course we have to deal with the realities the world throws at us, and that is why today I have adopted, as an interim measure for the remainder of this Parliament, a cyclically adjusted target which will always allow us to respond to
any downturn that occurs. However, I certainly understand the importance of economic reality, and I also understand, as does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, the extreme desirability of achieving the very best access to markets in Europe for those who produce our goods and services.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): First, may I associate myself with the words of the shadow Chancellor and the Chancellor on the late Jo Cox? May I also thank the Chancellor for what he said about the Tay cities deal? I note that what he said was slightly different from the words in the Red Book, so we will take him at face value from the Dispatch Box. In his attempt to clamp down on evasion, it was disappointing that no reference was made to Scottish limited partnerships. One would have thought that there would be more, too, in terms of fairness overall, and a reference to the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign and the unfairness for those women.

The Chancellor gave us plenty of information today, but with no more than a glib reference to being match fit at the beginning and a bit of deflection there was very little on the elephant in the room, which is Brexit. It is not as if the Treasury does not know what the consequences of it will be; its own assessment tells us that tax yields could be down by £66 billion a year after 15 years and GDP down perhaps by 9.5%—a figure confirmed by the London School of Economics—as a result of reduced trade lowering productivity. That amounts to some £6,500 per year per household. So where was the plan to ensure that there is no hard Brexit and to maintain access to the single market? Where was the plan to mitigate the losses in tax yield and GDP? Although the Chancellor said a considerable amount about capital investment and research and development—and I welcome some of it up to a point—where was the fully developed scheme actually to boost productivity?

We do not go into this next period from a position of strength. As the Chancellor knows, UK GDP is already nearly 20% lower than it would have been had we achieved even a 2% trend growth rate since 2008. Our argument is that the austerity of this Government and the previous Government sucked consumption out of the economy, weakening recovery. This Government are set to repeat the error. Growth barely reaches 2% for the forecast period, and although the Chancellor sensibly did not put a date on it, he is still targeting a surplus in the economy, perhaps again before recovery has been secured.

I am glad the Chancellor has changed the fiscal charter, because the previous permanent surplus rule, taking £10 billion a year more out than required to run a balanced economy and cutting £50 billion a year more than required to run a balanced current budget, left us with some terrible consequences. As discretionary consolidation, cuts and tax rises took place, the ratio of cuts to tax rises also increased, placing the burden of austerity and an arbitrary fiscal target on the back of the poor. That has made the poorest decile 5% worse off and the richest 10% almost entirely better off. The Government have clearly worked out something, and I welcome the move on the taper, but let us be clear: at 2p in the pound, on the minimum wage that is 14p an hour. It is not a king’s ransom and it will not cure poverty. The squeeze has not been lifted from the poor, and the screw of the welfare cap has not been turned off; this has simply made a brutal regime slightly less brutal.

I am glad that the Chancellor mentioned the actions of the Bank of England. Our party very much welcomes what the Governor has done. He has introduced an increase in quantitative easing and £60 billion of extra Government bond purchases, made £10 billion available for corporate bond purchases, set a 0.25% base rate and enabled additional term funding to encourage more and cheaper long-term lending from the banks. However, there has been a more or less complete absence of a fiscal policy stimulus to match the incredible monetary policy activism of the central bank.

The key part of today’s autumn statement—I am pleased to hear that this is the last one; it is my 25th Budget, autumn statement or pre-Budget statement—was the increase in total managed expenditure, but like, for like, it amounts to 1.5% of total managed expenditure over the forecast period from 2015-16 to 2020-21. It is to be welcomed, and it certainly represents a break from the recent past, but it can in no way be described as the sort of fiscal stimulus required to match the monetary policy discipline of the central bank.

The Chancellor talked about an increase in capital investment, which I very much welcome. He also talked about an increase in funding for research and development. However, given the fact that the description of research and development has changed in the Green Book, as has the description of the UK Trade & Investment funding—he said that there would be a doubling of some aspects of export support—it is hard to tell precisely what the impact of some of those measures will be. Will he tell us what the total increase in cash and percentage terms of this vital export support will be? Will he also tell us what the overall increase in research and development funding will be across the piece? How does he intend to deploy the £23 billion of what he described as capital investment?

Mr Hammond: I am not sure whether that was a “thank you” or not. I might have to consult my hon. Friends about that. I think it might have been—

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP) indicated dissent.

Mr Hammond: Oh, it was not. What we have announced today is a significant increase in capital investment, which includes research and development under the Office for National Statistics definition, and Scotland will get £800 million of that. Research and development is not Barnettised, so the increase will be spread across the whole of the UK, but the infrastructure element will be Barnettised and Scotland will get £800 million. I would point out to the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) that Scotland’s economic performance needs attention, and that its productivity needs addressing. I am sure that families and businesses across Scotland will hope that he or one of his colleagues can confirm that the Scottish Government will use this additional funding—in the spirit in which it is being raised for the rest of the United Kingdom—to invest in raising the productivity performance of the Scottish economy. I would very much welcome that.
The hon. Gentleman asked about details of the productivity message. I can assure him that there is no lack of enthusiasm in this Government for tackling the productivity challenge. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary, the Treasury and other Departments are involved in a process that will lead to a Green Paper that will allow us to consult extensively with business and other outside bodies before we firm up exactly how to deliver the strategy. What the House has seen today is £23 billion of additional investment, alongside the £150 billion that we have already committed to investing in economic infrastructure over the period, which will form the backbone for that policy and its delivery.

The hon. Gentleman knows very well—although he probably would not admit it—that survey after survey has shown that the biggest drag on growth and business investment in Scotland is the continuing threat of a second referendum.

**Angus Robertson:** No, it is Brexit.

**Mr Hammond:** The right hon. Gentleman needs to go back and look at the polling data. The concern about a second Scottish independence referendum is bigger than any concerns about possible Brexit arrangements.

In response to the specific points raised by the hon. Member for Dundee East, I am publishing a distributional analysis—I believe that it is available in the Vote Office now—of the measures that have been announced today and, cumulatively, of the measures that have been announced throughout this Parliament. It will not show the outcome that he suggested, so perhaps he would like to look at it and we can no doubt have another exchange on this at Treasury questions.

The overall package of measures announced today represents a fiscal loosening of around £23 billion. I acknowledge that that is a reduction of a planned fiscal tightening, but of course there has to be a fiscal tightening over time because we are moving towards living within our means, with a balanced budget in the next Parliament, and we are not going to be deflected from that intention. Finally, just to clear up the confusion, UKTI’s budget is now rolled into the budget of the Department for International Trade. What I announced in my statement was that the risk capacity of UK Export Finance will be doubled so that it can provide finance to enable exporters from all over the UK to sell their goods abroad on credit.

**Mr George Osborne** (Tatton) (Con): I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend and successor on his strong statement and assured delivery. I particularly welcome the additional support for the northern powerhouse. The independent Office for Budget Responsibility has given us a sober assessment of the economic and borrowing challenges that Britain faces, and the Chancellor is right to keep his powder dry. However, he is also right to adhere to the principles that we control current spending, that we ensure that work pays and make the welfare and tax reforms necessary to deliver that, that we make Britain the best place to attract business and that we have the freest possible trade with our key export markets. I support all the things that he is doing to deliver on those principles.

**Mr Hammond:** I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend. He is absolutely right to say that those principles will guide the actions of this Government—as they should guide the actions of any sensible Government—as we try to future-proof our economy in a time of extraordinary political and technological change. We are facing a period of 20 or 30 years in which the way we work, the way we live and the way we do business will change fundamentally, and unless we invest now in our infrastructure, our science and technology base and our innovation capability, we risk being left behind. That would not deliver the economy and the country that works for everyone that we are committed to.

**Edward Miliband** (Doncaster North) (Lab): I welcome the fact that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has adopted the fiscal rules that his predecessor described as the single biggest risk to economic recovery. They are the ones that we proposed in 2015. I want to ask him about Brexit. He said at the Tory party conference that the British people did not vote to become poorer. However, on page 19 of the Office for Budget Responsibility’s report, we see that £58 billion of the worsening in the public finances is due to the Brexit decision. Is this not a salutary warning to us about the decisions that we will take over the coming months and years? Is it not also a strong argument for us to remain as close as possible to our largest trading area, the single market, and inside rather than outside the customs union?

**Mr Hammond:** The Prime Minister has said many times—I shall undoubtedly repeat this many times today—that it remains our objective to try to get the closest possible trading arrangement with the European Union and the greatest possible access for our goods and services to be sold into European markets after we leave the European Union. In response to the right hon. Gentleman’s question, I think we have to disaggregate two effects. There is of course going to be a period of uncertainty as we go through the process of exiting the European Union, and that has had a dampening effect on business investment, as the OBR has identified. However, we have to rise to the challenge of getting ourselves match-fit to seize the opportunities that this country will have after we complete that process, and I would urge him to think about that longer-term challenge as well as the short-term issues.

**Mr Andrew Tyrie** (Chichester) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor on delivering a crucial statement for the country. It was a Budget in all but name, and I strongly support his decision to make it the first of many autumn Budgets, for which a number of us on the Treasury Committee have been pressing for a while.

The statement will provide reassurance and certainty for the whole country. Given that the education sector creates export earnings of £20 billion—about the same as the car manufacturing sector—will the Chancellor soon be able to provide our colleges and universities with the certainty and reassurance they need that foreign students will not be caught by the 100,000 migration target?

**Mr Hammond:** I am grateful to the Chairman of the Treasury Committee for his remarks and for the Committee’s work on a single fiscal event—it is much
appreciated and the right way for us to go. On his specific question, students are included, as he knows, in the 100,000 or tens of thousands target, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is looking at how best to manage student flows in the interests of what, as he says, is an important industry in this country.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): A few months ago, the Foreign Secretary promised the general public that we would by now have an extra £350 million a week for the national health service. Strangely, however, the Chancellor has just announced that growth is falling and business investment is collapsing and that there will be an extra £110 billion of borrowing over the forecast period when compared with March. I do not see any of his leave-campaigner colleagues on the Front Bench, but has he received an apology yet from the Foreign Secretary or any of them?

Mr Hammond: I am not responsible for remarks that may or may not have been made during political campaigns. The British people made a decision to leave the European Union, and we must respect that decision. If we are to make a success of this process and if we are going to ensure the success of the British economy in the future, we must move on and not repeat this sterile debate over and over again. We must focus our attention on building an economy that is match-fit for the future and that will enable us to deliver high living standards as we make our way in the world.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): As someone who is much more optimistic about the UK economy’s prospects under the Chancellor’s stewardship than the OBR usually is, I welcome the increased OBR forecast for this year—a faster rate of growth than in its pre-vote forecast. I also welcome its recognition that there will be no post-vote winter recession, as was forecast by some. Does the Chancellor agree that the OBR is probably still quite wrong about 2017? Its forecast is too low, its borrowing forecast is far too high, and we will get good access to the single market once we are out of the EU.

Mr Hammond: I hope that my right hon. Friend is right on that last point, which will of course be our objective. I am grateful to him for his implicit confidence in my stewardship. I am well aware of his views, which are, as always, long standing and utterly consistent. However, it is not my job to opine on the report that the OBR has made by statute to Parliament; it is my job to respond to it. That is what I have done today. Obviously, economic forecasting is not a precise science, and I absolutely recognise, as would the OBR, that individual Members will have their own views on the likely future trajectory of our economy. It is probably worth mentioning that the OBR specifically says in its report that there is an unusually high degree of uncertainty in its forecasts because of the unusual circumstances.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): In a long statement, we had not mention of the national health service. After the first six months of this year, the deficit is £648 million for trusts alone, with a year-end deficit forecast of £669 million. Given the extraordinary measures to which the Department of Health had to go to balance its budget in the last financial year and given those projections, what is the Chancellor doing to ensure that our national health service has a sustainable future?

Mr Hammond: I might be a novice at autumn statements, but I am not such a rookie that I did not mention the NHS, so I suggest that the hon. Lady checks _Hansard_, where she will find that I definitely did. She talks about an aggregate trust deficit of £648 million that was projected at a point that is four months out from the end of the fiscal year. That is in the context of a budget of £110 billion in an NHS that holds a contingency reserve at the centre. My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary is well aware of such pressures, which are not particularly unusual. They are being managed inside the NHS, and I am of course keeping and will continue to keep a close eye on them with the Health Secretary.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on a wide range of measures—short term, medium term and long term—that will undoubtedly turbocharge our economy and give it the boost it needs as we face the realities of Brexit. Does he agree that it has never been more important for British business to be at the heart of local enterprise partnerships, great ideas such as the midlands engine, and all the infrastructure plans? Such projects should be driven by British business, not politicians.

Mr Hammond: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend and I am grateful for her comments. I passionately believe that business should be engaged at the heart of this process—that is the right way to do it—and local enterprise partnerships and area-specific project organisations are a good innovation for delivering it. However, this is also part of meeting the challenge of regional imbalance, which as I said earlier is not just a social problem, but an economic problem. When we look at our productivity gap when compared with other advanced economies, we should logically look for the things in our country that are different from those in our comparators. The gap between our capital city and our other cities and regions is one of the defining features of the UK economy. By working with businesses from across the country and the regions, in particular by promoting our regional cities, we can at last start to address the problem.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): The north of England is crying out for a plan for investment in rail, and people will be left asking today, “Where is it?” It is also crying out for investment in social care. It is quite frankly unbelievable that the Chancellor could find no place to mention it today. Six years of cuts to social care have left a record number of older people trapped in hospital and the NHS on the brink. With a dangerous winter now facing us, can he say a little more about how he came to the judgment that new grammar schools are a higher spending priority than the funding of care for older people?

Mr Hammond: I am a little surprised that the right hon. Gentleman—a former Chief Secretary to the Treasury—is not actually able to distinguish between capital and resource, because the funding that we are talking about for grammar schools is capital spending. I
said in the course of my statement that the Department for Transport will continue the discussions on northern powerhouse rail with Transport for the North and will make announcements in due course.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked specifically about social care. Opposition Members are fond of talking about cuts to social care budgets, but local authorities have to manage their budgets as they think best. They have to manage the envelope of resource that they are given. We have created a better care fund that will be delivering £1.5 billion a year into social care by the end of this Parliament. We have allowed local authorities to raise a social care precept, which will be delivering another £2 billion a year by the end of this Parliament. That is £3.5 billion a year of additional funding into the social care system. I accept that there is an issue that local authorities are raising—we have heard what they are saying—about profiling and how this large amount of additional money ramps up. My right hon. Friends the Health Secretary and the Communities and Local Government Secretary are extremely aware of the issue and I am discussing it with them.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The Care Quality Commission has warned that social care is at a tipping point and vulnerable people across the country are being left without the care and support that they need, which is adding hugely to costs for the NHS. I am disappointed that the better care fund has not yet been brought forward, but encouraged to hear that that is actively under discussion. Will the Chancellor confirm that we should try to get away from this divisive debate in the House about how we are going to fund our health and social care, and that all parties should work together for a new, sustainable, long-term settlement?

Mr Hammond: I am all in favour of discussing these big strategic questions in a grown-up way, trying to build a consensus across the House, but I see little interest from Opposition Members in doing that. We have made a commitment of £10 billion of additional funding for the NHS over this Parliament—[Interruption.] Yes, I have. It is £10 billion of additional funding by the end of this Parliament. A senior management team in the NHS has drawn up a plan, set the budget and asked for the money. It has been given the money and I think we should allow it to show what it can do.

Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): The Chancellor’s autumn statement suggests yet more public borrowing, with total public debt due to increase to £1.6 trillion in the new year and £1.9 trillion by 2020, when it will be four times what it was in 2005. Rather than being a reflection on Brexit, is not the accumulation of these unsustainable levels of public debt due to his predecessor’s failure to match words with deeds and get a grip on public spending?

Mr Hammond: No. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman will not have had a chance to read the report, but when he does so, he will see that the big drivers of debt are: the deteriorating forecast for growth, which of course has a big impact; the structural change that appears to be taking place in the relationship between a given level of GDP and tax receipts—I mentioned in my statement that we will have to address that—and the measures that the Bank of England took, which have a direct impact on public debt, but only in the short term, because they do unwind over the course of a few years.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I warmly welcome the Chancellor’s significant commitment to British science today, regarding both research and commercialisation. As he moves towards his next Budget, may I urge him to look carefully at removing many of the regulatory barriers and at providing greater tax incentives for individuals to invest in science and technology start-ups so that we can start to build a true enterprise culture in which everybody participates?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend has been kind enough to come to see me over the past few weeks to make some suggestions in this area. I did announce in my statement that the Treasury will conduct a review of the availability of patient capital in this country, and I include in that genuine individual investment in start-up businesses and how we make sure that that is incentivised to stay in for the long haul. I thank him for his input and we will look at this further.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): May I start by associating myself with the comments made by the Chancellor and the shadow Chancellor about the verdict in the Jo Cox trial? I hope that the whole-life sentence for Jo’s murderer can at least give some comfort to her family at this incredibly difficult time, and will also enable us to remember Jo for the way she lived, rather than the way she was murdered.

May I ask the Chancellor about the changes to universal credit that he announced today? The taper rate will now be 63p in the pound, which means that for every additional pound earned, the recipient of universal credit will lose 63p. That marginal tax rate is three times higher than the basic tax rate. Does he honestly think that sufficiently rewards work and encourages people to take on those extra hours that we all want them to do?

Mr Hammond: Again, I associate myself with the hon. Lady’s remarks. I am sure that she is right that the entirely sensible sentence that has been handed down will be a source of some comfort to the family.

The hon. Lady asks whether the taper rate is a disincentive or an incentive to work. Of course the lower the taper rate, the greater the incentive to work—I readily recognise that. I said in my statement that I had listened carefully to representations about doing something in this area and balanced those against my judgment about our fiscal capacity. I have funded every single spending commitment made today. If we had gone further than 63%, we would have had to raise more money somewhere else, and I judged that at the present time that was not the right thing to do. I also gently remind her that 65%, never mind 63%, is a lot lower than a marginal withdrawal rate of 90%, which was what many people were facing under the tax credits system.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): May I welcome the steps that the Chancellor has taken to tackle some of the issues facing rural businesses, particularly the extension of rural rate relief and of fibre broadband? I particularly thank him for the £1.4 million that will be
going to the Alder centre, which will help to build a new building for the provision of counselling services across the north-west to bereaved parents. I know that the trustees are absolutely delighted.

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that, and I am delighted that, even in these difficult fiscal times, we are able to make these investments, which can be life-changing in local areas.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): So that there can be no doubt, may I welcome the fact that the Northern Ireland Executive will have £250 million of additional capital spending, as well as the commitment to reduce corporation tax, which should lower the bill for the devolution of corporation tax to Northern Ireland without damaging our ability to compete with the Republic? The Chancellor says that growth is still damagingly imbalanced across the United Kingdom. If the Northern Ireland Executive make sensible proposals of further measures to address that issue, will he pay attention and respond to those? Does he agree that his acceptance of the lower forecast of growth for the UK in the long term, despite the fact that it contradicts totally the short-term forecasts, can be self-fulfilling and can damage places such as Northern Ireland disproportionately when compared with other parts of the UK?

Mr Hammond: I am not sure that receiving the OBR report constitutes an acceptance of anything; the report is the report and we have to respond to it. The hon. Gentleman asks about the imbalance in growth; of course that is a problem, and increasing economic growth in Northern Ireland is a high priority. Wages and living standards are lower in Northern Ireland than we would like, and the only way to address that is to improve productivity, increase the size of the private sector and get more investment into Northern Ireland so that growth rates are increased. Obviously I will respond to any proposals that come from the Northern Ireland Executive. I cannot promise him how I will respond to them, but I can promise him that I will respond.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): The extra investment in building affordable homes and infrastructure is excellent news. Does the Chancellor agree that cheaper investments in building affordable homes and infrastructure in Northern Ireland Executive makes sensible proposals of further measures to address that issue, will he pay attention and respond to those? Does he agree that his acceptance of the lower forecast of growth for the UK in the long term, despite the fact that it contradicts totally the short-term forecasts, can be self-fulfilling and can damage places such as Northern Ireland disproportionately when compared with other parts of the UK?

Mr John Penrose: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his statement. Autumn Statement Autumn Statement 23 NOVEMBER 2016 Autumn Statement 926

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I welcome those elements of this statement that are positive? I am talking about the spending for infrastructure, especially in broadband and mobile phone signals, the reduction in fuel duty and the changes to universal credit. They are all steps in the right direction, but we wanted extra cash to be given to the NHS and social care, where it is needed, because as winter comes

Dominic Raab (Westminster North) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) and the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), may I point out that there is not one mention in the 72-page autumn statement document of the words “NHS”, “social care”, “mental health” and “public health”? The Chancellor cannot ignore the fact that our health and social care services are in crisis and face massive deficits. Surely the many economists in his Department will have told him that it is economically illiterate to ignore the massive decrease in people receiving social care in the community, and the cuts to public health and NHS staff training. Why was the NHS missing from his autumn statement?

Mr Hammond: We have been round this loop before. We are putting £10 billion a year more into the national health service by the end of this Parliament. We are delivering exactly what the senior management of the national health service asked for, and we will work with them to ensure that it is effective, because the money has to be spent and delivered effectively. I keep in close contact with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health. He is working very closely with NHS management. I know that it is tempting for Opposition Members to paint everything as a crisis or to talk of looming chaos, but that is not the case. We have a programme for investment in the NHS. It is being delivered and we will keep a close eye on the way it is being delivered.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I welcome today’s announcement and the autumn statement. I am particularly pleased to welcome the extra £2 billion for research and development that was announced earlier this week—it is absolutely pivotal. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it will help to underpin our leadership in life sciences, which is a key sector for success in the northern powerhouse?

Mr Hammond: I completely agree. To be clear, by the end of the Parliament, an additional £2 billion a year will go into research and development. My hon. Friend is right that life sciences and synthetic biology are an area in which the UK has gained a really significant lead in a disruptive area of technology that will shape the future of our economy and the economy of the world. There are three or four such areas in which we really have to invest now to ensure that we get the critical footprint that will allow us to be leaders in this fourth industrial revolution, just as we were in the first industrial revolution.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I welcome those elements of this statement that are positive? I am talking about the spending for infrastructure, especially in broadband and mobile phone signals, the reduction in fuel duty and the changes to universal credit. They are all steps in the right direction, but we wanted extra cash to be given to the NHS and social care, where it is needed, because as winter comes
on we risk the problems becoming acute. I understand the difficulties that face the Chancellor today. He has a £122 billion black hole as a result of Brexit. As the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) said, instead of using the NHS as a political football, will he work with people of all parties and none to identify where that money can be found because, frankly, the NHS is too important to be treated like this?

Mr Hammond: First, I urge the right hon. Gentleman to look at the figures in a little more detail. The £122 billion that he quotes runs over a fifth year. It includes the £23 billion of discretionary additional commitments that I have made today, as well as more than £20 billion of baseline adjustments due to previous policy changes around welfare benefits and classification changes made by the ONS. He therefore really needs to look at the figures.

On the NHS, as I have said already, there are trust deficits building up across the country. At the moment, they are manageable within the context of the NHS's own internal cash management system, but we will of course keep a close eye on them. We take the view that the NHS has asked for financing of a specific and defined plan. We have provided that financing. We now need to challenge NHS managers who have asked for that money to deliver the outcomes that they promised. We will watch very closely and stick close by as they do.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his first and last autumn statement. In particular, I warmly welcome the support for infrastructure. With regard to the investment for 140,000 new houses, may I ask him to consider the suggestion from the National Housing Federation that those affordable houses are built tenure-free so that they might be delivered more quickly?

Mr Philip Hammond: I did say in the statement—my hon. Friend might have missed it—that we will relax the restrictions on tenure that are normally attached to affordable housing grant funding so that affordable housing providers can build with the mix of tenures that is right for the particular market in which they are operating. That will allow housing to be built more quickly, and housing need to be met more quickly.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The Prime Minister expressed outrage in her conference speech at the fact that two thirds of energy bill payers are paying over the odds on the standard variable tariff. That percentage has been confirmed by the Competition and Markets Authority. I first spoke about this five years ago, so it was disappointing that the problem was not mentioned in the Chancellor’s speech today. We should have a protective tariff and a cap for those on the standard variable rate. I understand that there are meetings across Whitehall to discuss that idea. Will he confirm or deny the rumours that a protective tariff, or a default tariff, is under discussion?

Mr Hammond: I will not confirm or deny what discussions are going on across Whitehall. I did say—I fully understand that the right hon. Lady might have missed it in the depths of the statement—that we are setting up a review of markets, including the retail energy market, to ensure that they are operating fairly for consumers. Where we find that they are not, we will make proposals and take action.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I welcome the autumn statement. There is always a question on the beer industry, and here it is. Beer is taxed at three different levels depending on its alcohol by volume. The lowest rate is for beers with an ABV of 1.2% to 2.8% to try to attract consumers to less alcoholic beers. Will the Chancellor meet me, as president of the all-party beer group, to discuss the upper level, and perhaps raising it to 3.5%, with a view to attracting people away from those heavier alcoholic beers to lower-alcohol beers?

Mr Hammond: If my hon. Friend names the bar, I will meet him.

Disappointingly, this Chancellor has joined his predecessor in failing to mention the words “climate change” even just once anywhere in the statement. That is in the year that is set to be the hottest on record, when parts of the country are under floodwater. Can he justify continued handouts to the oil and gas sector when there is no assurance of support for clean energy post-2020, no reversal of the critical solar tax hike, and nothing on keeping homes warm this winter?

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Disappointingly, this Chancellor has joined his predecessor in failing to mention the words “climate change” even just once anywhere in the statement. That is in the year that is set to be the hottest on record, when parts of the country are under floodwater. Can he justify continued handouts to the oil and gas sector when there is no assurance of support for clean energy post-2020, no reversal of the critical solar tax hike, and nothing on keeping homes warm this winter?

Mr Speaker: That was a splendidly pithy answer, but questions are becoming rather long. There are still nearly 50 Members seeking to contribute, and I am keen to accommodate them, but I can do so only if people can—to put it bluntly—abandon the preamble and get on with the pithy, preferably single-sentence, inquiry. I am sure that we can led in this by Caroline Lucas.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: One sentence if it involved the abandonment of punctuation.

Mr Hammond: If the hon. Lady looks carefully at the statement, she will see that I did announce significant additional funding to pursue ultra-low emission vehicles. That is an area in which the UK is already a technology leader. I have also announced today that, from next April, there will be 100% first-year allowances on all electric charging infrastructure. We know that the biggest deterrent to moving to electric vehicles is the fear of being unable to charge them. Getting a widespread charging network rolled out will allow us to meet our ambition to electrify the fleet.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Innovation and the condition of working people have always been priorities of the Conservative party. In that vein, I particularly welcome the fiscal changes in the autumn statement, especially regarding fuel duty, tax allowances and the national living wage, for which I campaigned for many years. May I just take the Chancellor back to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond)? Through the dispersal of public money for affordable housing, would it be possible to break the monopoly of housing associations
Mr Hammond: This is not absolutely my area of expertise, but my understanding was that there already are opportunities for other providers to deliver affordable housing and to receive grant support to do so. I will look into that matter and, if I am wrong, I will write to my hon. Friend accordingly.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Like many Members, I welcome the £23 billion of infrastructure spending. Some 1% of people who currently work in the construction industry are women. Can the Chancellor tell me how many women’s jobs will be created by the £23 billion? Does he think that the tax that we women pay should sometimes pay for our own prosperity?

Mr Hammond: I am afraid to tell the hon. Lady that I do not have a ready answer for her on precisely how many women’s jobs will be created, but I do know that we have more women in work than ever before in this country and that our female participation rates are approaching the levels of the very highest rates in Scandinavian countries. I also know, because it is an area of interest to me, that more women are going into professions that are traditionally male preserves—engineering and construction—than ever before. That is a trend we should welcome enormously and encourage further.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I just want to say, “Thank you.” An awful lot of R and D funding will help my constituency. Scientific businesses in South Cambridgeshire have been worried since Brexit, so I thank my right hon. Friend for that. East-west rail links and road links will help us to spread that prosperity. Overall, I thank him for the money on universal credit. That was a difficult decision. It is not everything that we wanted, but I very much welcome the money that he put aside for universal credit, and I thank him.

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her generous words.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Chancellor quite rightly noted at the beginning of his statement that one of the big challenges that he faces is the gross wealth inequality in the British state—a task that will be made harder with the loss of EU structural funds—so is it his intention in future statements to announce a UK convergence fund to replace the lost EU regional money?

Mr Hammond: I recognise the hon. Gentleman’s concern. He will know that I have made two statements since becoming Chancellor seeking to reassure businesses, universities and others who apply for EU grant funding that, where they are successful in such applications, however long the funding runs on, we will underwrite it, so if Brussels does not foot the bill, the Treasury will. But he is absolutely right: we will have to put in place alternative arrangements for the period after we leave the EU. We will have to have a discussion with the devolved Administrations about how that works—between Whitehall and the devolved administrations—and once we get into the negotiation with the EU, we can start to see the direction of travel. I think that it will then be appropriate to have this discussion, but I do recognise the concern.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): As the Chancellor pointed out, we have a major productivity issue to address. I look forward to the Green Paper and the benefits of the £23 billion of targeted investment, but may I congratulate him on making that £23 billion-worth of investment within a fiscal framework that is reliable, sustainable and will continue to bring down the record deficit that this Government inherited from Labour?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and we have embarked on the right course of action to protect our economy for the future and to ensure that it can take full advantage of the opportunities that will be available to it.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the reference to the northern powerhouse and Transport for the North—with details to follow—but will the Chancellor tell us whether there is any more funding, so that we can invest in better transport across the north?

Mr Hammond: I welcome the question from a former Transport Committee Chairman—[HON. MEMBERS: “She still is!”] All right. I welcome the question even more. If I remember rightly, she was the Chairman when I was a member of the Select Committee, so she probably gets the prize for longevity.

I have deliberately chosen not to read out great, long lists of specific projects and allocations of funding, but rather to create a framework, and what I said in the statement—I will repeat it now—is that my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary will make a series of announcements about the detailed allocations over the coming weeks.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): May I ask the Chancellor to urge the Transport Secretary to spend some of the £1.1 billion on a new motorway junction between junctions 25 and 26 on the M1, which would undoubtedly improve growth and productivity in my constituency?

Mr Hammond: One of my thoughts in deciding not to announce all the allocations personally was that I would avoid the lobbying for individual projects. I had not realised that I would be invited to act as a conduit to the Transport Secretary, but in this case and because it is my hon. Friend, I will pass on her request.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I must advise the House that I have received a growing split within the Chamber between the gloomiers and the smilers—Members deploying different techniques in a bid to be called. Some have very beatific smiles and others—

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Which works?

Mr Speaker: A smile is more effective.
Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Affordable house building last year fell to its lowest level since 1991. In my borough, Wandsworth, the Conservative council approved the building of over 10,000 homes at Battersea power station and Nine Elms, 13% of which were deemed affordable. However, the cheapest home there is a studio flat costing £400,000. These are not genuinely affordable homes for local residents; they are used as gold bricks for overseas developers. Can the Chancellor tell me today what is an affordable home?

Mr Hammond: There are two points here. We have, of course, a definition of affordable housing, which we use in statutory terms, but there is a much broader consensus in the House that we need to make all housing across the UK more affordable, including housing that people buy in the marketplace. To do that, we have to address fundamentally some of the challenges with land supply, particularly in London and other high-demand areas. As I said earlier, my right hon. Friend the Communities and Local Government Secretary will introduce a housing White Paper, which will address these more strategic issues.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): There is much to be welcomed in the Chancellor’s statement, particularly the warm words about the strength of our science and technology endeavours, especially in the light of the recent Science and Technology Committee report that called for a rise in spending on R and D to 3% of GDP. Obviously, the extra £2 billion is a helpful step in that direction, but to realise the potential and deliver on those ambitions, we need to attract the best talents here to the UK. Will my right hon. Friend work with colleagues across the Government not only to reassure scientists and researchers who are already here, but to come up with a system as soon as possible to attract the best people into the UK?

Mr Hammond: I welcome my hon. Friend’s comments as Chairman of the Science and Technology Committee. Of course, the £2 billion a year referred to is just public investment in R and D. Most investment in R and D in this country is done by the private sector. As the Prime Minister said in her speech to the CBI on Monday, we are committed to looking at the R and D tax credit system to make sure that the UK is the most attractive place for an innovative company to do its research, development and innovation.

On immigration, I absolutely recognise the points that my hon. Friend makes. Many companies that choose to locate in the UK depend on being able to bring people with high skills into the UK to work in their businesses. I have said before and I am happy to say again today that, although it is our clear intention to introduce controls on migration into the UK from the European Union, I cannot conceive of any circumstances where we would use those controls to strangle investment in our businesses by not allowing high-skilled, high-paid individuals to be transferred here to work in them.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The most alarming number in the OBR forecast is the 13% drop in forecast business investment, and the Chancellor said it himself: the big problem is uncertainty. The OBR says rather plaintively: “we asked the Government for ‘a formal statement of policy as regard its desired trade regime…as a basis for our projections’” but they left us “little the wiser.”

The Chancellor had a real opportunity today to tackle this uncertainty, which is the basic problem, by setting out the objectives for the Brexit negotiations to keep us with access to the single market and in the customs union. Why did he not do so?

Mr Hammond: I did not, because to do so would be to give away our negotiating cards in what will be a very complex negotiation. With respect to the hon. Lady, even if I or the Prime Minister set out precisely our objectives, our tactics and our strategy for the negotiations, that will not remove the uncertainty because the outcome will depend on the negotiation itself. As the Prime Minister has said, a negotiation is a process of give and take between the parties to get to a mutually acceptable outcome, and that is what will be embarked upon.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I congratulate the Chancellor on his excellent statement? I draw his attention to page 96 of the OBR report, which sets out the assumptions in relation to Brexit. It seems to me that there are two problems with those assumptions. First, they assume that we will apply tariffs on the same basis as we do inside the European Union, which the Chancellor will know he will be able to remove. Secondly, they are particularly gloomy on the prospects for financial services. Might we be able to take a slightly more optimistic tone and, with the freedoms that we have outside the customs union and the single market, be able to solve the productivity problem?

Mr Hammond: As my hon. Friend knows, the OBR is mandated to report by Parliament and I am mandated to respond on behalf of the Government to the OBR’s findings. It is an independent body. It does receive representations, and I suggest that my hon. Friend makes his concerns known to the OBR.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: From the abundance of smiling Scottish nationalist countenances, I choose Mr George Kerevan.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): I congratulate the Chancellor on abolishing the autumn statement and the spring Budget, and introducing a spring statement and an autumn Budget. I trust that that is not his definition of productivity. The OBR central forecast suggests that after 2019 there will be a precipitate fall in the contribution by business investment to GDP growth. In addition, there will be a negative contribution from trade. Does that not suggest that when Britain leaves the single market—if we are taken out of the single market—the only thing between a recession and growth will be public expenditure and an overheated housing market?

Mr Hammond: On the hon. Gentleman’s first point, I recognise that the fact that we have to respond to the OBR report in the spring can easily be caricatured as swapping an autumn statement and a spring Budget for a spring statement and an autumn Budget. All I can say
is that I promise it will not be like that. The intention is clearly to move to a single event each year when, in normal times, we will make tax changes, but it is prudent, especially in these times, to reserve the right in extremis to announce tax measures at the secondary event, if absolutely necessary. The hon. Gentleman poses a perfectly sensible question. My interpretation of the figures in the table is not the same as his, but I would be very happy to engage in a discussion with him offline.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Although my right hon. Friend has made it clear that he is not a conduit for the Transport Secretary, may I nevertheless welcome the £80 million for smart ticketing included in his statement? He is interested in productivity and our flexible labour market. Is he aware that we have many constituents who commute three or four days a week at most and are forced to pay for a full-time travelcard? In his programme of smart ticketing, will he look at that?

Mr Hammond: I am aware because I was once upon a time the Transport Secretary. I am convinced that smart ticketing is the future for us. Smart ticketing allows us not only to deal with those commuters who do not travel every day, but to explore options where people might wish to travel in the peak period on some days but are able to travel off-peak on other days. If we could shift just 10% or 15% of commuters from the peak to the off-peak, we would change dramatically the pressure on rail infrastructure around London and other major cities, so that is definitely the future.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): May I return the Chancellor to the OBR’s statement that the Government’s reply on their Brexit position left the OBR “little the wiser”? The OBR has assumed that the Prime Minister has asked Matthew Taylor to undertake a review of working—

Mr Hammond: First, the hon. Lady will find if she looks in the autumn statement document that we are moving to shut down an abuse of the VAT flat rate scheme that has been used by employment agencies to disguise employment remuneration. But she is right about self-employment, and I also mentioned specifically the increasing challenge of incorporation—the increasing number of single-person, zero-employee, single-director companies. The Prime Minister has asked Matthew Taylor to undertake a review of ways of working—

Mrs Lewell-Buck: It has been going on for two years.

Mr Hammond: No, it has not been going on for two years. Let me tell the hon. Lady what happened. The Prime Minister took office in July, so it definitely has not been going on for two years. She asked Matthew Taylor to undertake that review, which is now under way. It is a very important review, looking at how employment rights more generally are being affected by this transition in our economy. That is being driven by technology, as much as anything, and I have said today that we also have to look at this issue from the point of view of the tax base, because the tax base is also under threat from these changes.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I thank the Chancellor for helping low-income families today and, for helping to make work pay for those on universal credit. I thank him, too, for the London devolution deal for housing, which will increase the number of affordable homes to rent and to buy. Can he reassure me, though, that this is not a destination but a direction of travel and that, whether it be spring, autumn or any season, we will continue to stand up for working families and for the weak?

Mr Hammond: Absolutely. My hon. Friend knows very well that our stated ambition and the driver in everything we do is to build an economy that works for everyone, but we are realists, unlike the fantasists on the Opposition Front Bench. We know that we can build an economy that works for everyone only if it is a strong economy with strong investment and good, strong British companies exporting their products around the world.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Although I regret that there is no help for those WASPI women who need transitional protection, I welcome the investment in broadband infrastructure. Can the Chancellor assure the House that that will be fairly spread across rural
communities and throughout all devolved and non-devolved jurisdictions to prevent further broadband inequalities opening up across Northern Ireland and Britain?

Mr Hammond: The money that we are investing will be used partly to fund pilots, particularly to cement our lead in 5G, and partly to catalyse private sector investment. Our telecoms infrastructure is primarily funded by private investment, but I can assure the hon. Lady that this funding will be spread across the United Kingdom. We want to spread the benefits of 5G and superfast broadband as widely as we possibly can.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for listening to colleagues on our side of the House who have long campaigned hard for more investment in regional infrastructure, R and D, and innovation. The £683 million towards south-west regional local growth funding and the £1.1 billion English transport fund will make a big difference to constituencies such as mine. Will my right hon. Friend commit to working with the west of England devolved authority and the new mayor to ensure that we better unlock productivity, more growth and the jobs that we require in the west of England?

Mr Hammond: As far as we are concerned, that is the principal purpose of the mayoral combined authorities: yet another lever to drive productivity in the English regions. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will be happy to work with my hon. Friend on that project.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am always shining on you, Mr Speaker.

The Chancellor is no philistine, so he will know that Lloyd George, a predecessor of his, visited Holmwood House in my constituency in 1928. Although the right hon. Gentleman appears to have dismissed my appeal for restorative funding for the building next year as we approach the bicentenary of its architect, will he assure me that this is not quite the end of the road? Will he commit, as the Scottish Secretary has done, to engaging positively on the matter in future?

Mr Hammond: The danger, of course, of having indulged myself with one specific announcement is that hon. Members are bound to assume that that means bad news for other projects. The bulk of the funding available for that kind of work will be held and distributed by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport; my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport will make announcements as appropriate.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): The gross value added of my constituency, like that of many constituencies in Hampshire, is affected by missing junctions on the M27, the queues on the M3 and poor east-west connectivity. Chickenhall link road in my constituency is vital to facilitate a longer runway at Southampton airport. It will tackle air pollution and unlock potential housing. Will the Chancellor make a statement about the local majors fund and how that will play into this autumn statement?

Mr Hammond: No; I am sorry to say that to my hon. Friend. What I have done today is added £23 billion-worth of infrastructure and R and D expenditure to existing very significant budgets. Part of that will go to transport and some of that will go to road schemes, but it will be for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport to listen to the representations that my hon. Friend and others are making and to allocate the fund, according to the appropriate principles, to maximise productivity growth in our economy. I am sure that he will be delighted to talk to her.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Schools in my constituency are not alone in stepping in to fill the welfare gap, as parents on the breadline hit by Government cuts struggle to buy their children’s school uniforms, shoes and stationery. The situation is getting worse—in the 21st century. What impact does the Chancellor believe his projected 8% per-pupil spending cuts, as estimated by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, will have on the social mobility of a generation of children? How can it be right that instead of softening the cuts, for which he voted, he has instead chosen to spend £60 million a year on expanding grammar schools? What I have raised should have been part of his plan for productivity.

Mr Hammond: I do not agree with the hon. Lady; she needs to look at these things in the round. I know that Labour Members like to take a single example and exaggerate it, but they need to look at the package in the round: what we are doing with raising personal allowances for taxation for people in work, dramatically reducing the tax that they pay; taking millions of people out of taxation; and a pay rise for millions of people from the national living wage. The hon. Lady should look at it in the round.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): I welcome the news on universal credit, but support is also vital. I urge the Chancellor to support the extension of the DWP’s excellent small employer pilot, which is already helping those with disabilities and long-term health conditions.

Mr Hammond: The Department for Work and Pensions has some excellent programmes and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions confirms to me that he has adequate funding for all those programmes.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The oil and gas industry has a bright future. When will the Chancellor implement the tangible changes that his predecessor committed to on both decommissioning tax relief and loan guarantees? The industry needs those measures to secure current investment and so secure increased future productivity.

Mr Hammond: Yes; I have confirmed again today that we will proceed with those measures. We will proceed with them as quickly as we possibly can.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): There has been a lot of negativity from some Opposition Members, but more people are in jobs than ever before and that means that in North East Hampshire more people are in good jobs, with average earnings of more than £47,000. May I congratulate my right hon. Friend not only on committing to increasing the tax-free allowance...
but on raising the threshold for the higher rate? Clearly, many hard-working families are being hit by a tax that was never intended for them.

Mr Hammond: That is absolutely right. We made that commitment in our election manifesto; it was a commitment on which we were elected. Despite the difficult fiscal circumstances, we will deliver on that commitment.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I thank the Chancellor for agreeing to the request made by me and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) to reintroduce the distributional analysis of the Budget. I have looked at that analysis and, in spite of a bit of tinkering with the methodology, it is clear that, as a result of the tax and welfare changes in this autumn statement, the bottom three deciles—the lowest-income households—will be left worse off than the highest earning group of households. How can he possibly justify that? As well as helping the “just about managing”, will he commit to helping the people who are barely managing or cannot manage at all?

Mr Hammond: Our intention will be to try to ensure the fairest distribution possible. I welcome the debate that the hon. Gentleman and others have stimulated on the appropriate way to present distributional analysis—the issue is not completely cut and dried or straightforward—but I say this to him: we were elected on a manifesto commitment to get welfare under control. Working-age welfare had spun out of control between 1980 and 2010. We have now got it buck under control, which implies that we have had to take some tough decisions. We have taken them. I will accept and explain the consequences of those.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): To support those who are just about managing, there need to be more affordable houses. Is the Chancellor pleased to see the welcome from the chief executive of the National Housing Federation for today’s measures that will enable an additional 40,000 such houses to be provided? With planning consents running at the highest level for years, does my right hon. Friend look forward to the sector getting spades into the ground very quickly?

Mr Hammond: Yes. One of the attractions of funding affordable housing is that it is a tried and tested and generally pretty efficient delivery method. I am afraid that while I stand at the Dispatch Box, I am not digitally enabled, as they say: I was not aware of the welcome that my hon. Friend refers to. However, I am delighted that this has gone down as I hoped it would with the relevant people.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am disappointed, but not entirely surprised, that there has been no reversal from the Government on the two-child policy and the rape clause, which will mean that people cannot possibly work their way out of the situation they are in. May I ask about another group of people who cannot work their way out of the situation they are in? I am talking about the new “pretendy living wage” rate. That will leave 16 and 17-year-olds £3.45 worse off than someone of 25 doing the same job. Why is the labour of 16 and 17-year-olds worth less to the Chancellor than that of those aged 25?

Mr Hammond: We judge that getting people into the workforce, even at entry-level jobs, is critically important. There is abundant evidence that if people get into a culture of worklessness at a young age, that will blight their lives for ever.

Alison Thewliss: Pay them properly!

Mr Hammond: I am sorry to have to tell the hon. Lady this, but we live in the real world, where people will be employed only if employers can afford to take them on at the wage rates they have to pay them. Getting these young people into the culture of work is the most important thing we can do for them, for the rest of their lives.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): In East Sussex, we have the challenge of a large social care bill for an ageing population and low business rate returns to pay for that. I am aware that the Chancellor will not be allocating county money, but may I ask that his £23 billion investment fund is allocated with East Sussex’s financial and demographic challenge in mind?

Mr Hammond: I am afraid I may have to disappoint my hon. Friend. Because the £23 billion is specifically targeted at productivity-enhancing investment in R and D and infrastructure. That is because we judge that, with our level of debt, to be credible in the markets, we have to borrow only for that kind of additional productivity-enhancing investment, and it will go into network investment, R and D and innovation.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The statement about Wentworth Woodhouse is very welcome economic news for South Yorkshire, but it failed the graciousness test, because it omitted to pay tribute to the campaign led by the formidable Julie Kenny to save the house. However, South Yorkshire needs much better transport links if it is to succeed economically. On that basis, why has only one of the five strategic road projects—the Oxford to Cambridge expressway—been given the go-ahead today? Is South Yorkshire going to get its trans-Pennine tunnel link or not?

Mr Hammond: As I tried to make abundantly clear, I am intending to move away from a micromangement approach to the budgets of my right hon. Friends, who are perfectly capable of evaluating the arguments, making the decisions and announcing them themselves, and that is what will happen in future. What I will say to the hon. Lady is that I did have the pleasure of meeting Julie, who explained to me the very considerable efforts that have been made so far, and I am delighted that we have been able to support that project.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I warmly welcome the announcement by my right hon. Friend of increased infrastructure spending, but I would be failing in my duty if I did not plug the rail connection—not least at Yeovil junction—that will take faster trains to my constituency, where roads are at a premium and we
cannot, because we have beautiful countryside, have more tarmac. Can I just tell him that we shall be coming to seek his help with that?

Mr Hammond: To be consistent, I would have to direct my hon. Friend to my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary, who, I am sure, will be delighted to hear his representation.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Why should anyone believe the promises being made by a Conservative Government pretending to be the friend of working people and the party of the working class, when but six weeks ago workers were promised a seat on the board of the companies that employ them and a voice in their own future, only for that promise to be broken six weeks later, on Monday of this week, by the Prime Minister?

Mr Hammond: That is not what happened. I am afraid I am not responsible, and neither is my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, for what newspapers choose to write in their headlines. What she said, what she believes and what she is committed to is ensuring that there are proper channels for the voices of consumers and workers to be heard at board level in companies, so that those voices can be taken into account in a proper way in decision-making processes—and that is what will happen.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I join colleagues in welcoming the £1.1 billion infrastructure spending, particularly as the Brighton main line is falling apart and needs fixing if we are to enhance the productivity of Croydon constituents and others. What reassurance can the Chancellor give the hundreds of thousands of people using this line that the Transport Secretary will look at upgrading and fixing that infrastructure?

Mr Hammond: I can certainly guarantee that the Transport Secretary will look at it. What I am afraid I cannot guarantee for my hon. Friend is where it will be prioritised in the rail investment programme—as he knows, it is a very long-term programme. What I have done today is announce specific funding for piloting and trials of digital railways. This is another transformative area, because if we can get trains on main line railways running at the kind of headways we are used to on the London underground, for example, we will not need to build expensive additional infrastructure; we will be able to squeeze a lot more juice out of the infrastructure we have, and that is my preferred route forward.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): In the light of the move to an autumn Budget, will the Chancellor listen carefully to any recommendations from the Procedure Committee about reform of the estimates process, particularly in terms of opportunities for us on Scotland’s Benches to scrutinise Barnett consequentials, which we were told we would be able to do through estimates as a result of the English votes for English laws process that was introduced?

Mr Hammond: I will certainly look at the point the hon. Gentleman raises. I do hope he welcomes the move to an autumn Budget. Certainly, one of the considerations when we were looking at this was the way it will interact with the Scottish Government’s Budget, and I hope it will be helpful.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I warmly welcome the investment in rail and road links from Oxford to Cambridge through Milton Keynes, delivering on the infrastructure commission’s recommendations. I have been campaigning for east-west rail for many years. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that investment will accelerate delivery of the project?

Mr Hammond: Yes, it will accelerate delivery of the project. As I said in my statement, and I cannot emphasise enough, I think this has the potential to be so much more than just a transport link. We have many world-famous universities, but we have two there that, more than any others, are world-famous, recognised research names. Linking them together over a 60-mile stretch of road and rail unleashes enormous possibilities for creating a new tech corridor, building on the huge success of the Cambridge science park.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): In his statement, the Chancellor correctly mentioned the scourge of tax avoidance. Has he seen the report published last week by the Public and Commercial Services union and the Tax Justice Network, which warns that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs staff believe that its office closure programme “will negatively affect its staff and its ability to collect tax and enforce tax compliance”? Will he review the HMRC office closure programme as a result of those concerns?

Mr Hammond: We have put £800 million of additional resource into HMRC. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the statement today, he will see that we have put some more money in today. But much of the way in which HMRC operates is about having specialist units, which often have to be concentrated; it is not about the old local office structure that has traditionally been in place. If we want effective action against the most complex forms of tax avoidance and evasion, we have to be prepared to go with the recommendations of the experts.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I listened carefully to the Chancellor’s autumn statement, and I then carefully read the Green Book to find the reference to the resilience of the Dawlish coastal railway on page 29. I know he is not doing individual schemes, but am I right in assuming that the inclusion of this £10 million preparation project and work is an indication that the massive infrastructure investment that has been talked about is likely to include the nearly £300 million project to secure that line, which this work is the preparation for?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend can take this as a clear indication that this is a high priority in terms of rail resilience. We are all acutely aware of the vulnerability of the rail system in the south-west as a result of flood risk, and this is the first step to resolving that.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Given the decline in the value of sterling, how much will we have to pay for the F-35 fighters to go on our aircraft carriers? The
present going rate is $100 million a time. Has the Chancellor increased his estimate of the cost of these fighters and other defence kit imports for future years?

Mr Hammond: It is a fair question, and the answer is that the Ministry of Defence, unusually among Government Departments, has the ability, and does in practice use the ability, to hedge currency risk, because so much of its capital expenditure programme is denominated in US dollars. So it does have a degree of protection over the coming years; that protection will not last forever, and if sterling’s current relative weakness against the US dollar persists, we will have to revisit this. But I would hope and expect that, as the cloud of uncertainty around the British economy disperses in due course, and people are able to see the strong prospects for this economy in the future, we will see sterling gradually finding its feet again.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I welcome the fact that the Edinburgh south-east Scotland city deal is still in today’s autumn statement, but the local authorities involved in this process have been making plans for it for more than two years. In June, they were expecting sign-off by December, but we have not seen anything come forward yet. Can the Chancellor confirm when the city deal will finally get sign-off?

Mr Hammond: No, I cannot. We are committed to, and engaged in, the process, and I have just confirmed that today, but, obviously, there are things that have to be agreed between the parties. I am not into the details of the negotiation on Edinburgh, but we clearly have to get to a conclusion as quickly as possible to see that the benefits are delivered to the people of Edinburgh. I hope the hon. Gentleman will urge the city council to engage enthusiastically in getting this done.

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): I am interested in the National Infrastructure Commission investment and the money that is going to LEPs in the north of England—that is to be welcomed. I accept that the Chancellor has said that the Transport Secretary will be making an announcement very soon, but does the Chancellor not agree that money for the electrification of the Calder Valley rail line would help improve productivity in the area and redress the imbalance in the country?

Mr Hammond: I am not going to be tempted, as a former Transport Secretary, to get into the weeds of my right hon. Friend’s portfolio and talk about specifics of individual projects on the rail network, but, as I said, he will be making a statement in the near future.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Will the Chancellor confirm that the assumption on pages 241 to 248 of the OBR’s “Economic and fiscal outlook” not only means that all forecast numbers will be subject to high margins of error but implies that the Government will fail to achieve single market membership?

Mr Hammond: No, it does not imply that. However, it is the case, as I have said, that the OBR has acknowledged specifically that there is a higher degree of uncertainty around its forecasts this autumn than there is usually, for reasons that are obvious.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Having opposed the welfare cap as a search engine for cuts, may I at least acknowledge in passing the projected increases that are allowed in the statement? On devolution, the Chancellor rightly waxed positive about city deals in Scotland and in Wales, as he has on those in England. Will he be more than passive in his encouragement to the Northern Ireland Executive, who have been persistently derelict on these prospects?

Mr Hammond: Yes. I am not sure how much influence I will have over the Northern Ireland Executive, but next time I bump into a Member of it, I shall make that very point.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): According to the OBR, the fall in immigration following the referendum will cost the Chancellor £16 billion over five years. Surely he should be a brave and enthusiastic champion of free movement of people, with his next-door neighbour.

Mr Hammond: The Prime Minister has made it clear that we have to accept not only the decision of the British people to leave the European Union, but that clearly implied in that decision is a desire for control over movement across our borders. That is not the same as cutting ourselves off from Europe, or turning our backs on Europe, but there has to be control of the flow of people into the United Kingdom. The challenge, therefore, is to get a deal that effectively allows our businesses and workers to sell their products into Europe, and European businesses and workers to sell their products into the UK, while still meeting the political mandate that we have received from the British people.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Leeds remains the biggest city in Europe without a light rail or an underground scheme. I welcome the announcement on transport infrastructure to tackle congestion. Can some of that money go towards the existing £250 million on a ground-breaking light rail scheme connecting with Leeds Bradford airport, which does not have any fixed rail link?

Mr Hammond: I am afraid I am just going to repeat that I am not going to get into the weeds of trying to allocate every pound of funding that I announce in these statements to specific projects. This must be an issue for my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Green Book confirms a £1 billion shale wealth fund, but after more than four decades we are still awaiting an oil fund in Scotland. However, the big ask is on loan guarantees. Given that the Thames tideway project got a £4.2 billion loan guarantee, can the Chancellor confirm the value of loan guarantees for oil and gas as soon as possible?

Mr Hammond: I have announced today that the UK loan guarantee scheme will be extended until at least 2016. It has a very significant amount of headroom; I think the cap on it at the moment is £40 billion, and we are nowhere near using up that capacity. The important thing about the UK loan guarantee scheme is that it underpins projects at an early stage. Many projects have
gone ahead without loan guarantees, but because they had a commitment on the loan guarantee they were able to proceed and then eventually were able to get funding without it. It is playing a very important role that is understated by the measure of guarantees actually issued.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): On the shale wealth fund, is the £1 billion totally Treasury money or is some of it coming from the companies that will be developing the shale gas project?

Mr Hammond: It is money coming from the companies.
Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the strategic defence and security review last year, it was reported that the national shipbuilding strategy and the Government’s response to it would be published by the time of the autumn statement. Sadly, the strategy and the report have not yet been published. Have you, Mr Speaker, received any indication from any Minister from the Ministry of Defence whether they will make a statement today on the industry, which is iconic and highly skilled and which affects many of my constituents?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is no. I have received no such indication. However, knowing what an assiduous and eager beaver the hon. Gentleman is, I feel sure that he will be in his place for the business question tomorrow and veritably leaping to his feet in order to request a statement or a debate on this important matter.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require those on the electoral register to produce proof of identity at polling stations before voting; and for connected purposes.

The purpose of the Bill is to bring the electoral rules used in Northern Ireland to elections for the rest of the United Kingdom, to reduce electoral fraud and ensure that our elections continue to be both fair and free. Our democratic system, and especially the way we vote, is based on trust. The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which observes elections across the world, has raised concerns about trust-based electoral systems and their potential to be abused, and about the vulnerabilities of the UK system.

A polling station is a place in which a ballot can be cast in secrecy and free from any external influence; it is the individual’s decision for whom to vote. The role of polling station staff is to ensure that voters can cast their vote in secret, free from undue influence and in a calm atmosphere. We have all heard the phrase “vote early and vote often”, but it appears that that is increasingly happening. In some polling districts where the population is stable with a high turnout, repeat visitors will be noticed by the staff at the polling station, especially if the staff have worked the same station for a series of local and general elections. Repeat visits will be far harder to spot, and the polling station staff less confident to challenge them, where turnout is low and there is a more transient population, because a far greater proportion of voters will be unfamiliar.

As society changes, we have to assess whether our traditional “trust” system of voting needs to change, because it risks becoming outdated and being undermined. Our democracy is a living thing, and we have reformed and developed it over time. All the measures taken by Parliament in the past to improve free and fair voting, such as the Ballot Act 1872 and the Representation of the People Act 1918, were made in the interests of the electorate and of democracy. We are now approaching a time when an improvement must again be made so that we do not lose our democratic integrity, which has evolved over time and which must evolve again.

In recent years, concerns about the integrity of our voting system have been building in a wide range of areas. I wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the independent review and report by my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles), the Government’s anti-corruption champion, who concluded:

“To retain the integrity of our democracy, we need to introduce more rigour into the processes we use”.

His comprehensive report highlights a whole range of concerns and suggests actions to put them right. No doubt many colleagues in this place will share those concerns and will be aware of problems in their own constituencies. Because of its nature, the level of fraud, particularly personation at polling stations, is difficult...
to gauge, but that does not mean that it is not happening or that simple steps should not be taken to stop it happening.

Electoral abuse was evident on a significant scale in Northern Ireland before the requirement to produce identification was introduced 30 years ago, and the situation was further improved in 2003 with the requirement for photo ID. Although I appreciate that some may have reservations about that requirement deterring people from voting, in Northern Ireland the number of people who do not vote because of a lack of suitable ID is very small. There is a strong case to be made that the use of ID may, in fact, increase voter turnout; some people do not vote after losing their polling card, which they do not actually need to bring in order to cast their ballot.

When we see a problem and contemplate a solution, we have to ask ourselves whether the cure is worse than the disease—whether requiring people to have suitable identification to participate in democracy is too big a hurdle. If someone buying cigarettes or alcohol was asked for ID we would hardly think it a problem. When we pick up a package from the Royal Mail collection office we may think that having to show proof of identity is rather a good thing. We have to prove who we are in so many different circumstances that it can hardly be viewed as a problem to have to do so when directly participating in something so important as democracy.

I wish to make it very clear that the Bill does not represent a move to create a national identity card or a way to keep a check on people. It is simply a move to add voting to the list of many things that require identification. Identification does not have to take one single form; for example, when we collect our post from the post office 20 forms of ID are acceptable, from a birth certificate to a bank statement or passport. Northern Ireland allows seven different forms of photo ID for voting, including an electoral identity card, which is provided free of charge.

The purpose of requiring ID is not to create a barrier for people but simply to prevent fraud and enhance the integrity of the voting system. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Electoral Commission all recommend the use of ID in voting.

Britain has a formidable history as the mother of Parliaments, and the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy has been adopted by many other nations. If our model falls into disrepute and fails, that will be bad for democracy the world over; if we sit back and allow that to happen for fear of change, we will be in the wrong. We cannot and should not sacrifice the integrity of our democratic system. Challenging issues of community cohesion and political engagement must be taken into account, but they must never be an excuse for failing to act to uphold the rule of law.

I ask that the Bill be introduced, so that electors are confident in their democratic system, and so that those entitled to vote may do so and, as in Northern Ireland, we minimise personation and fraud in polling stations in Great Britain.

3.36 pm

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I see from the profile of the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) that he is an engineer. Frankly, if someone had put a project to him with such a singular lack of evidence as this has, I am sure he would have thrown it in the bin, which is what should happen to this miserable Bill. It comes straight out of the Donald Trump, US Republican, Conservative central office school of disinformation.

As we have seen in the United States, such measures are a blatant attempt to depress voter turnout. Very interestingly, the hon. Gentleman gave that away. He talked about areas with stable populations and those being a problem in areas with a transient population. What was he talking about? I wonder? Basically, he was saying that things are all right in Tory areas, but we must have a problem in city Labour areas. He gave the game away very easily.

Of course, in a democracy it is very difficult to justify denying people the right to vote, so a mythology has to be developed that there is widespread and significant voter fraud. In the post-truth, post-fact world, that becomes easier to spread. But let us look at the data and the facts, starting with the United States, where this conspiracy theory comes from—Donald Trump was repeating it only recently. There has been a detailed study: under Republican President George W. Bush, the US Justice Department was tasked with searching for voter fraud. From 197,056,035 votes cast in the two federal elections in the period studied, just 26 people were convicted and/or pled guilty to illegal registration or voting.

Let us not rely only on the United States, although that is where this idea has come from; let us look at the United Kingdom and the Electoral Commission report on elections in 2015. At the 2015 general election, 31 million votes were cast; in the local elections that year, many on the same day as the general election, 20 million were cast; and there were about 400,000 cast in mayoral elections. How many cases of fraud were there? Let us have a look. There were 123 cases relating to voting offences. Remember, 31 million votes were cast. The 123 figure includes: voting offences; personation—voting as someone else; breaches of secrecy requirements; tampering with ballot papers; bribery; cheating; and undue influence. Out of 31 million votes cast, there were 26 cases of voting as someone else at a polling station, 27 cases of postal vote fraud, and 11 proxy cases—we should not forget them.

That was the number of cases reported, of course, not the number found to have any substance. Police investigation revealed that in 45 cases, no offence had been committed; in 36 cases, there was insufficient evidence; and that 10 suspects were impossible to identify.

I am not sure whether any of those cases went to court, so let us look at the data and the facts, starting with the United States, where this conspiracy theory comes from—Donald Trump was repeating it only recently. There has been a detailed study: under Republican President George W. Bush, the US Justice Department was tasked with searching for voter fraud. From 197,056,035 votes cast in the two federal elections in the period studied, just 26 people were convicted and/or pled guilty to illegal registration or voting.

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A great edifice is being erected on the basis of 16 cases and 123 cases—we should not forget them.

We should not be developing the idea that there is widespread and significant voter fraud. There are, therefore, no grounds for imposing its arrangements on the rest of the UK. If he wants voters to show identification, he may want to ask those on the Government Front Bench why, when they came into government in 2010, they abandoned their support for identity cards.

The Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland does issue electoral identity cards, but in mayoral elections. How many cases of fraud were there? Let us have a look. There were 123 cases relating to voting offences. Remember, 31 million votes were cast. The 123 figure includes: voting offences; personation—voting as someone else; breaches of secrecy requirements; tampering with ballot papers; bribery; cheating; and undue influence. Out of 31 million votes cast, there were 26 cases of voting as someone else at a polling station, 27 cases of postal vote fraud, and 11 proxy cases—we should not forget them.

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There is no evidential basis for this measure. It would involve a lot of extra work. It would also increase delays, with longer queues at polling stations as people have arguments about it or have to go back. We already have problems at many polling stations. It would prevent a number of voters, particularly elderly voters, from exercising their rights. It is a petty, politically partisan proposal that should be dumped in the bin.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Chris Green, Sir Eric Pickles, Jason McCartney, Jim Shannon, William Wragg, Mr David Nuttall, Mary Robinson, Craig Tracey, John Stevenson, Martin Vickers, Maria Caulfield and Luke Hall present the Bill.

Chris Green accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 20 January 2017, and to be printed (Bill 97).

Exiting the EU and Transport

3.43 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I beg to move,

That this House has considered exiting the EU and transport.

If I may crave the indulgence of the House briefly, I would like to say a couple of words about the situation on the railways in the south-west. As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, there has been considerable disruption as a result of storms, including line closures and very extensive delays. I can inform the House that following the flooding that closed the great western main line between Exeter and Tiverton, the line has now just reopened. The Barnstaple branch is due to reopen this afternoon. The Looe branch is still closed, but I hope it will reopen on Thursday. There was also disruption when the South West Trains route was closed. I am immensely grateful to all the staff at Network Rail. They sometimes get a hard time when things do not work, but they rally around when there are major incidents and deliver solutions quickly. I thank them all very much for their work.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for speaking to the House about this matter because it is not good enough for the south-west to be cut off again, or to be the poor relation of the national rail network. The report by the Peninsula Rail Task Force that was presented yesterday must be the framework for a fair deal going forwards, so will he commit to doing everything in his power to deliver on this piece of work and to make sure that Network Rail delivers for my constituents?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely understand the importance of the task ahead of us. The report, which I have read carefully, shares my view that the No. 1 priority is the sea wall and the cliffs at Dawlish. My hon. Friend will also be aware that last Thursday I announced—this was in today's autumn statement—the provision of £10 million for the next stage of the project. I am committed, as is the Chancellor, to making sure that it happens. It is a strategically important project for our nation—the south-west cannot be cut off via its principal railway routes—so I assure him that we will move ahead expeditiously with it.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his comments and join him in thanking the Network Rail staff who turned the situation from that of two days ago, when there were literally hanging tracks, to one in which trains can run again. I am pleased that the Chancellor today described the £10 million of funding as the first step in this programme, and I thank the Secretary of State for his personal interest in this issue and his commitment to sorting out the issues with our rail infrastructure once and for all.

Chris Grayling: This absolutely needs to be done, and we will move ahead as quickly as we can. Following the incident on the Cowley bridge this week, flood protection works are due to start there imminently. It is a shame that the works have not quite started yet, but they will
be starting very shortly, and I hope that they will deal with that issue so that such an incident cannot happen again.

Moving to the main business, the autumn statement demonstrates the Government’s commitment to modern infrastructure that can serve the public and support a dynamic economy. Our forthcoming departure from the EU represents a huge opportunity for Britain to carve out a new role in the world and to be a stronger and more ambitious country—a country that is better able to shape its own future in the world and a country that is outward-looking and open for business. That was what I campaigned for in the summer, and it is what the Government will deliver.

Business is starting to share this optimism. Since the referendum, several companies in the transport sector have announced significant investment in the UK. Nissan’s commitment of investment is fantastic news for the British economy, the north-east and the car sector, particularly as it is not just maintaining capacity at the plant, but expanding it. In August, Bombardier received an order for 665 new vehicles from Greater Anglia, which will secure jobs and skills in Derby. When I spoke to the international head of Bombardier’s rail division about a month ago, he said that such was the quality of the work in the UK, Derby was going to become a global hub for its rail business, which is another positive statement of commitment to this country.

Alstom has started work on developing a new site at Widnes, which will create 600 jobs along with, crucially, a training academy. The Spanish firm CAF has said it will now set up a train manufacturing plant in the UK, and Siemens, which manufactures rolling stock and other products in the UK, has committed itself to a continuing presence. Its chief executive said in July, “We’re here to stay.” Alongside Hitachi’s new rolling stock and manufacturing and assembly plant in Newton Aycliffe, which is creating 730 new jobs, this shows that we are becoming a centre for high-quality rolling stock manufacturing, so it is with good reason that I view the future with optimism as we approach negotiations on leaving the EU.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): While, of course, I entirely endorse the Secretary of State’s sentiment, there is an issue regarding British ports. It is a big issue, but I will not go into it now, as I am hoping to catch your eye, Mr Deputy Speaker. However, there are some serious questions still outstanding around qualified majority voting, as I am sure the Secretary of State knows.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. He and I have discussed this matter in the past. The regulation coming out of the EU on ports is tailored to the particular structure of ports on the continent, but does not fit well with a private port sector such as ours. The opportunity to ensure that we have a regulatory framework that is right for the UK is one benefit that comes from leaving the EU.

Robert Fiddell (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): If between now and the great Act incorporating European legislation into UK law, as the first step towards unpicking things, the ports services directive comes into being—I am not sure how likely that is—would it not be incorporated straight into UK domestic legislation?

Chris Grayling: We have said very clearly that we will fulfil our legal duties while we are still members of the European Union, and that at the time of our leaving, it is our intention to transpose EU law into UK law. However, it is then for this Government and this House to decide what areas of regulation we want to keep and what areas we want to change. Having listened to the representations of Members about the ports directive, I suspect that this House will want to return to this area.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): How has this regulation, which to everyone’s great pleasure disappeared back in January, now reappeared? Why was it so popular that the House did not need to scrutinise it? Will my right hon. Friend tell me what amendments have been made to the regulation that now make it acceptable?

Chris Grayling: The first thing to say is that no piece of European legislation passes through this House unscrutinised, particularly thanks to the assiduous work of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). This is one area where the Government intend that the House has the opportunity of proper scrutiny. It is very much my hope and belief, as I have said, that our decision to leave the European Union will ensure that in respect of ports, for which our model does not conform with that of the rest of Europe, we will have the opportunity to tailor something that is right for this country.

I want to focus on two particular areas, which will be the priorities for my Department in the coming months. At the top of the list is aviation. Our aviation industry is world class, and our airports service the third largest aviation network in the world. UK airlines have seized opportunities globally, including those offered by the European open skies agreement. I am focused on securing the right arrangements for the future so that our airlines can continue to thrive and our passengers have opportunities, choice and attractive prices. When I met the aviation industry, I found that one of its priorities was and remains the effective regulation of safety and air traffic management. That is also a priority for me as we approach the negotiations.

Our connections with Europe are, of course, important, but we need to widen our horizons, too, and we need to make sure that we have continuity for the aviation industry internationally. Leaving the EU gives us more freedom to make our own aviation agreements with other countries beyond Europe, and ensuring that we have that continuity when we leave is an imperative for me and my Department.

I have already had positive discussions with my current US opposite number about the arrangements that we will need after Brexit for the vitally important transatlantic routes. There will, of course, be a new counterpart in office in America in the new year, and I intend to reprise those discussions when the new US Transportation Secretary is in post. Both sides have an interest in reaching an early agreement and I am confident that we will achieve that.

Looking the other way, last month we signed a deal with China that will more than double the number of flights that are able to operate between our two countries, thereby boosting trade and tourism. This country is open for business and open to the rest of the world, and
Chris Grayling: Aviation has a big role to play in making that happen. Whether through new agreements or our support for a third runway at Heathrow, I will do whatever is necessary for our aviation sector to continue to fly around the world and within the European Union. Not doing so is in no one’s interests. Many parts of the EU depend on the contribution made by British airlines for our industry, businesses and the public. I shall have talks with other countries, such as Canada, where there is an interest in ensuring that we have good arrangements post-Brexit. There is a job to be done to make sure that happens, but I am in absolutely no doubt that we will secure in good time and effectively the agreements that aviation sector needs to continue to fly around the world and within the European Union. Not doing so is in no one’s interests. Many parts of the EU depend economically on the contribution made by British airlines flying to regional airports. It is in all our interests that that continues.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Given that the Secretary of State campaigned for leave, will he tell us how much preparation regarding this issue the Government of which he was a member carried out before the referendum?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman mentions preparation, but the objective is very straightforward. It is in the interests of the different regions and countries of the European Union that we continue to trade and to have good transport links between us. I see no logical reason for anybody to stand in the way of that. We now have to work out what the best precise arrangements will be. When it comes to aviation, however, the objective is business as usual. That is what is in everyone’s interests.

Mr Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State refers to business as usual, but he will know that aviation emissions are now included in the EU emissions trading scheme. Is it his view that we should remain in a trading scheme once we leave the EU?

Chris Grayling: The world has moved on somewhat. The International Civil Aviation Organisation agreement that was reached in Montreal six weeks ago provides a global framework to tackle emissions in the aviation industry. All of us, both inside and outside the European Union, will be part of that as we ensure that the economies of the developed and the developing world can continue to benefit from improved aviation links while, at the same time, we meet our obligations to control carbon emissions.

The second area on which I am focusing is road haulage. We depend on road hauliers—without them, our shops would be empty and industry would grind to a halt. Our logistics industry does a first-class job in getting our goods to the right places, but the vast majority of lorries on the roads never leave the country. As we look to the future and to trade that does leave the country and crosses borders, there is one simple fact that we need to bear in mind. About 85% of the lorries operating between the United Kingdom and the continent belong to EU-owned businesses—international hauliers that are not based in this country.

The member states of the EU and the United Kingdom have a common interest in reaching an agreement. We need sensible arrangements for the future to allow goods to flow freely from and to the United Kingdom. We need to give UK hauliers a fair chance to win business and to be successful. We shall focus on that during the negotiations, ensuring that we achieve the right outcome for the international hauliers that serve this country and for UK hauliers as well. I am talking to all those who are involved in running our roads and the freight services that use them.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will that include an aggressive look at freight charges for the movement of goods outside the United Kingdom to faraway markets? I understand that New Zealand, Australia and Canada have freight subsidies that allow them to cut the prices of freighted goods.

Chris Grayling: I am not necessarily a great fan of inappropriate subsidies, but I hope and believe that as we negotiate free trade agreements with countries around the world we shall create an environment in which trade and freight haulage are conducted on a level playing field, and that there are no artificial barriers that push up our costs and help others to reduce theirs. Above all, however, we benefit from a world in which trade flows freely. That is clearly in the commercial interests of European hauliers, especially hauliers from the Irish Republic. I am very aware that as we enter the negotiations, we have a particular duty of care to our friends in the Republic. We have a duty to seek to reach an agreement that will ensure that their trade, which frequently involves travel by road through the United Kingdom to other parts of Europe, can flow smoothly. It is in all our interests to ensure that we have sensible cross-border arrangements.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State mentioned discussions with haulage companies. Is he discussing with them the fact that they currently rely on EU drivers, courtesy of licence harmonisation, and the fact that, even so, it is forecast that there will be a shortage of 40,000 HGV drivers by 2020? Is he having discussions about what the Government can do to plug that skills gap?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. The task is within the remit of the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes). Not only is he the Minister responsible for our strategic road network but, as a former skills Minister, he holds the skills portfolio in my Department, and I know that he is very exercised about this issue. Of course, with a managed system of migration, we shall be able to recruit skills internationally when we need them, but I want a new generation of young drivers. There is much that we can do to make the profession more attractive, and my right hon. Friend is working on that at this very moment.

I have talked about the potential for a more tailored regulatory framework for the ports sector after we have left the European Union. We have a thriving and competitive ports sector, strong international investment, and some first-class facilities. I believe that the sector will be an essential part of a nation that is focused on global trade, trading opportunities, and opening up trade links with other countries.

Our railway services through the channel tunnel link us with the continent, but apart from that Britain’s rail network is domestic. Although on day one after exit the rules will be the same as before, in future we shall be able to make our own decisions about changing those rules. We currently have a derogation from many of the
EU standards for our existing railways. That is because many of them date back to Victorian times and were built to entirely different standards. That is not the case for new railways, so one example of the kind of challenge that we are dealing with in the construction of HS2 is the fact that European specifications for platform heights are inconsistent with flat access for disabled people on to trains. We have to address that as part of the development of HS2, but it is an example of how, freed from European Union regulation, we can make sure that we do a better job, in this case for disabled people, which I believe that Members on both sides of the House will think is the right thing to do.

I talked about the global opportunity for Britain, and across the transport sector I am determined not only to negotiate the best deal for Britain within Europe, but to find new opportunities for our transport sector around the world. We should support our industries as they sell their expertise and products and seek to win major contracts around the world. We have world-class expertise in this country in the automotive sector, aerospace, logistics, transport engineering, rolling stock manufacture and much more. We need to be confident in offering these services to the world, and we have every reason to be confident: we are doing some great things in this country at the moment, from the first-class work being done to deliver Crossrail in London to the high-quality automotive technology that is developing the new generation of autonomous and semi-autonomous vehicles.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about Crossrail. The infrastructure gap between London and the rest of the UK remains unbridged, so does he agree that the Cardiff-Swansea section of the great western railway electrification project must be delivered with UK Government funding as soon as possible?

Chris Grayling: As I said in the House the other day, I am not at all happy with the progress that has been made on the electrification of the great western main line so far. Actually, right now my priority is to get investment in better services into Swansea as soon as possible. The economy of Swansea and south Wales needs improved services, and that is my focus. I do not want to wait for the future for infrastructure projects; I want better services now. As we re-let the Great Western franchise, I am determined to see improved services to south Wales that provide a real boost to the economy in the areas that the hon. Gentleman and other Members for south Wales represent. Better transport links and improved services to south Wales and to the south-west are essential to making sure that we have a productive economy.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): One of the key hurdles facing a lot of railway companies is the European procurement rules. Has the Secretary of State had conversations with the Department for Exiting the European Union on the procurement opportunities that are available outside the EU?

Chris Grayling: Clearly, outside the EU, we have the opportunity to shape our own procurement rules. I do not want to be part of a Government who say that international firms are not welcome in the UK—that would be quite the wrong thing to do—but it is equally reasonable for us to say, for example, “If you’re coming to do business with us by being involved in the construction of HS2, we want you to leave a skills footprint in this country. We want apprenticeships and technical skills, and we want the engineers of the future to be trained and developed, and to be working on these projects so that they can carry on beyond them to build us further projects for the future.” That is our intention.

Let me be clear: Brexit is an unprecedented opportunity.

Nick Smith: I am very unhappy that the Secretary of State avoided my question about supporting the Cardiff-Swansea electrification, so I would like a better answer on that in the future, please. I am owed a letter from his ministerial colleague the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). Having said that, the Secretary of State did say he wanted to support an economic boost for south Wales, so will the UK Government be supporting the Cardiff metro plans, which are important for getting Blaenau Gwent working again?

Chris Grayling: Not only are we supporting the Cardiff metro plans and looking at how to deliver better services to the whole of south Wales—it cannot be just about Cardiff; it has to be about what happens to the west—but I will also be looking at whether we can provide better services to connect with the west of Wales and better services to Swansea. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for saying it is not just about south Wales; it is also about how we deliver better services to north Wales. There is a tendency, particularly in the Administration in Cardiff, always to look to the south—there are important things happening there—but we as a Government have not forgotten that there are many different parts of Wales, and the commitment to the north is also very much in my in-tray.

Let me be clear that Brexit represents an unprecedented opportunity to shape our own future, and we will make the most of that opportunity. We will get out into the world and do business right across the globe, and at home we will continue to build a world-class transport system for this country.

Stephen Gethins: Will the Secretary of State tell us what meetings he has had with the European Transport Commissioner, given the importance that that relationship will have over the next little while? Will he also tell us what was discussed in those meetings?

Chris Grayling: I have already had one meeting with the Commissioner, when we were in Japan, and I will see her again next week at the Transport Council. We will work out the best way to take forward negotiations in due course, but we have had exploratory discussions. Those discussions have been constructive, and I look forward to having further such discussions with her.

I have to be mindful of the need to ensure that we have a structure for the future that will create stability and opportunity for our aviation and haulage sectors, and that takes advantage of the potential freedoms that leaving the European Union will offer this country’s transport sector. We fully intend to take advantage of that opportunity.

4.6 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I echo the Secretary of State’s expression of his regard for the
rail system yet again. We have heard other hon. Members express their disappointment that we are still looking at issues of resilience in that area, and I know that they will want that matter to be resolved as quickly as possible.

The Government’s strategy for leaving the European Union—or rather, the lack of one—is causing great uncertainty throughout the transport sector. I do not know who the Secretary of State is speaking to about this, but we, and those in the aviation, rail, road and maritime sectors, are none the wiser about what the Government’s plans might be and what impact Brexit will have on the future of those sectors and all those who work in or depend on them.

Sir William Cash: I have already referred to the question of the ports sector. Speaking as Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, I can tell the House that it has been well established over a long period that the Government, the Labour Opposition, the unions and every one of the 47 port employers are against ports regulation. What are Labour Members going to say about that during this debate? Are they going to oppose it?

Andy McDonald: If the hon. Gentleman can wait six or seven minutes, I will come to that very point.

Today’s debate offers a welcome opportunity for the Secretary of State to provide some much-needed clarity on his plans for transport in a post-Brexit UK. He was one of the leading advocates of Britain leaving the EU, and he now has the privilege of being the Transport Secretary, so if anyone can provide us with a clear picture of what to expect in the months and years ahead, presumably he can.

One of the areas of transport most likely to be affected by the country’s decision to leave the EU is the aviation sector, which is a key pillar of our economy. Taken country by country, the UK’s aviation sector is the largest in Europe and the third largest in the world. It is worth about £50 billion in terms of our GDP, it supports 1 million jobs and it secures the Treasury some £9 billion in taxation each year.

While we accept the result of the referendum and are determined to secure the best possible deal for all the UK, we must not be an inward-looking nation that is cut off from the cultural and economic benefits that come with being an interconnected country. We must be ready to do business with the rest of the world. That means retaining and building on the connectivity that the UK currently enjoys in order to allow the flow of goods and services that will be key to getting the best out of Brexit.

Robert Flello: I, too, want Brexit to be a success and for us to get on with it and ensure that we get the best possible deal for our country. However, does my hon. Friend share my concern that the Department for Transport, which has seen massive cuts to its revenue budgets and day-to-day spend, just will not have the staffing in place to be able to deal with the huge number of issues? At the same time as we negotiate Brexit, we will be negotiating different agreements with other countries on matters such as aviation.

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We have seen the inability to see such things through and deliver them not only on this issue, but through the prism of the franchising system in the rail market. He raises a grave concern about something that we will be watching with great care in the weeks and months ahead.

Through its membership of the EU, the UK currently relies on the EU single aviation market, which allows airlines to operate freely inside the EU without restriction on capacity, frequency or pricing and enables the use of the EU’s external aviation agreements. Leaving the European economic area could mean that we are no longer part of the single aviation market and could lose access to those external air service agreements. That is critical, because unless the position is clarified urgently UK airlines will lose the right to operate within the European Union and airlines will lose the right to fly UK domestic routes. The Government must ensure that Brexit does not damage the UK’s connectivity. The aviation sector has been clear about the importance of retaining an unchanged operating environment.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman and others have talked about getting the best out of Brexit as it arrives. Given the seven options for that process, does he imagine that any will be as good as the situation that we have at the moment? People are looking for the best decision, but the question is whether it will be as good as what we have.

Andy McDonald: The hon. Gentleman raises a critical point that is the whole focus of this debate. It is our concern in this House that we are simply not going to be able to deliver the same level of interoperability and accessibility as we currently enjoy throughout Europe. In the aviation sector, it is critical to achieve that before we even begin discussions about our trading relationship going forward.

Nick Smith: The National Audit Office says that, under this Conservative Government’s watch, Network Rail and the Government have wasted £330 million so far on the great western mainline electrification. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Department for Transport needs to pull its socks up to deliver on future infrastructure projects?

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend makes his point eloquently. That is the sort of wastage from this Department that we have seen in so many areas over the past several years. We have seen smart ticketing costs written off and the Great Western debacle. Everyone in this place is worried about its inability to function effectively.

It is vital that there be not only early assurances from Government, but confirmation that the status of current aviation practices will be guaranteed beyond our formal departure from the EU.

Robert Flello: My hon. Friend is being generous in taking interventions. I was slightly reassured by what the Secretary of State said a few moments ago about his planned meetings with the US Secretary of Transportation. My hon. Friend talked about access to the European network, but the danger on the US side is that we will fall back on the Bermuda II agreement, which was designed for a whole different world and certainly not
for the 21st century. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that we have more to worry about than just European skies?

Andy McDonald: I do share those concerns. Although it is clearly imperative that conversations be had with those across the Atlantic, I was a little anxious to hear from the Secretary of State that that becomes the first port of call, rather than trying to resolve matters within the European Union.

Chris Grayling: I have also spent quite a lot of time with my German counterpart and with a number of other European Transport Ministers, and I will be doing that next week.

Andy McDonald: I am delighted to hear it.

Will the Secretary of State explain to the House his plans for the UK’s relationship with the European Aviation Safety Agency on leaving the EU? What is his intention? Will he seek to maintain technical co-operation through a bilateral aviation safety agreement approach, as with the United States, Canada and Brazil, or through a working arrangement with the EU, as is currently enjoyed by China, New Zealand and Russia? I urge the Government to confirm that air service agreements will be negotiated separately from the UK’s negotiations on future trade with the EU, as well as specifying the nature of those agreements. I invite the Secretary of State to outline his plans for UK airlines to retain the right to operate within the EU and retain access to the EU’s external air service agreements.

Mr MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman has touched on an important point about retaining the work done on the open skies agreement, because if we look back on UK air policy before that time, as I have done, we see that it was about bilateral agreements that specified flying into London airports only. I believe Iceland broke that by getting into Glasgow, because the father of one of the negotiators wanted to go shopping for suits in Glasgow. That absolutely points out the problem we faced when the UK was managing this itself: it was centralised for the benefit of the south-east of the UK, to the detriment of others.

Andy McDonald: I do not know where you get your suits, Mr Deputy Speaker—[Interruption.] Neither in Iceland, nor in Glasgow. It appears we should always go to Glasgow. The issue the hon. Gentleman raises is particularly pertinent given the decision we have just had on the additional south-eastern runway, so he makes the point well.

Numerous rail projects in the UK receive support via loans or direct funding as a consequence of our membership of the EU, and now is not the time for the Department to row back on investments in our railways, as we have seen happen repeatedly in respect of electrification works, which hon. Members have spoken about so eloquently this afternoon. I invite the Secretary of State to reassure the House that any funding shortfalls will be made up by the Government and that investment in rail will not suffer as a consequence of Brexit.

The Secretary of State said during the EU referendum that he wanted to take back control. Labour Members very much wish to take back control of our railways from private and foreign state-owned companies, which currently profit from the system at the expense of passengers and taxpayers. Ours is a policy supported by two thirds of the public, but, as the Secretary of State is aware, although running services in the public sector is currently entirely consistent with EU legislation, the fourth railway package may restrict the different models of public ownership that might be available. Does he agree—I believe he said so earlier—that it should be for UK voters to decide how best to order our railways? If so, will he confirm that his Government will not attempt to retain any European requirements in domestic law that would frustrate any future attempts to bring railways back into public ownership? I was delighted to hear what he had to say about HS2, and I suppose that if there is going to be a silver lining from leaving the EU, it will be that we will not be able to blame “them” any longer for any problems we have with disabled people getting access to our railway system.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) has not had an answer to his question, because he made it abundantly clear that he was talking about the infrastructure. The Secretary of State suggested he should be satisfied with improved services, but those will come only with improvements in the infrastructure.

The skills footprint, to which the Secretary of State referred with great regularity—of course we share some of his concerns—should be delivered whether or not we are in the European Union. That is not a consequence of any move. It should be an absolute prerequisite that is woven into everything we do.

Although we have decided as a nation to leave the European Union, co-operating with, and retaining our connectivity to, the EU is vital. We would greatly appreciate it if the Secretary of State enlightened us on what progress is being made to ensure that hauliers from the UK can carry goods between other member states and on whether it is his intention to secure an agreement for British driving licences to continue to be exchangeable with those of EU member states after Brexit.

Finally, let me mention UK ports, which directly employ more than 25,000 people, many of whom voted to leave because of anxiety surrounding EU ports services regulation. Many leave campaigners argued that leaving the EU would ensure full exemption from those regulations. However, the former shipping Minister, the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), was reported as saying that the ports services regulation would still apply under an arrangement that granted the UK access to the European economic area. Can the Secretary of State clarify the Government’s intentions on any withdrawal from ports regulations and guarantee that any exemptions do not inadvertently undermine strong industrial relations and the welfare standards of dock and port workers?

Sir William Cash: Whatever the hon. Gentleman may try to infer with regard to the European economic area, it is completely beside the point. The fact is that there is a regulation and, as he knows, it is on the brink of being brought in—I believe it is by the end of this month. All that talk that he has just given us has nothing to do with the issue. The real question is whether the Labour party is going to oppose it. Will it say that it condemns it, because that is what the unions, the Government and, as I understood it, the Labour party wanted?
Andy McDonald: I am not sure whether I could have been any clearer. I have just addressed the issue head on. If the hon. Gentleman reads Hansard, he might be a little clearer in his own mind.

My contribution has been full of questions, because little has been revealed so far that would give any idea of what the Government are setting out to achieve after Brexit and of the mechanisms by which they aim to achieve any such objectives. Huge questions remain over the future of our flourishing aviation sector; over what existing EU legislation will be retained and what that will mean for our railways and ports; over whether EU funding for transport projects will be made up by the Government, and over issues to do with connectivity by road and what Brexit will mean for haulage.

I invite the Secretary of State to bring forward the details of his Department’s plans for Brexit, which have been, so far, so stark stairingly absent.

4.22 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My main concern in relation to this debate is with regard to ports services regulation. It is a perfect example of where the European Union has gone completely wrong, and of why, in this particular sector, it is vital that we leave the European Union. I will give a number of reasons for that, which are drawn from those who have the most knowledge of these matters, including those who are referenced in the latest Library briefing.

As has been said by the Major Ports Group, many of the issues that confront UK ports are affected by policy and legislation from the European Commission and the European Parliament. The European Parliament is about to hold a plenary session, and, for present purposes, it is assumed that the regulation will go through. It will then go to the Council of Ministers, which is governed by qualified majority voting.

The European Scrutiny Committee and I have been following this for several years, and I will come on to the timetable and my concerns about the failure to have a proper debate on the Floor of the House on this issue exclusively. The port employers say:

“While UK ports receive virtually no financial assistance from the public purse, the situation is very different in most continental ports.”

That is hugely important. We are an island. We have 47 ports. They are incredibly important, and I accept, of course, that the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), has made clear his concern, but it does not alter the basic point: we cannot resolve the question of the port services regulation because of the qualified majority voting system. Even if we vote against it, we cannot stop it. That is the problem, because of the qualified majority voting system. Even if we carry out 35 million checks a year, we would not have the capacity to handle about 100 million checks. If this situation emerges, it will cause a huge difficulty post-Brexit and inevitably damage trade, because the infrastructure is not there to do customs checks at ports.

Mr MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman will have probably seen the report published on the front page of the Financial Times perhaps four, five or six weeks ago that the UK might have some difficulty carrying out customs checks at ports and other such points. At the moment, we carry out 35 million checks a year. We will need to carry out up to 240 million checks a year, but the new system has the capacity to handle about 100 million checks. If this situation emerges, it will cause a huge difficulty post-Brexit and inevitably damage trade, because the infrastructure is not there to do customs checks at ports.

Sir William Cash: My response is quite simple: if we do not continue to have an efficient ports system because of the effect of the port services regulation, nothing that the hon. Gentleman says will make any difference.

The effect that the proposal will have is so obvious that legislation aimed at regulating less commercial ports on the continent does not cause unintended damage to the UK’s thriving commercial sector.

On that basis, there is a matter of principle that affects our whole import and export business that goes through the ports.

The effect that the proposal will have is so obvious that I need not even attempt to explain it. It aims to regulate market access to port services, port charges and financial transparency. The ports employers say:

“The text as a whole”

—this is some time ago, but I will catch up in a moment with what they have said most recently—

“even if heavily amended, cannot deliver on its states aims. Instead, it will create severe legal uncertainty, reduce investment and will ultimately be detrimental to the safety standards and working conditions which currently exist in EU ports. EU ports may have different ownership structures, but all require a high level of confidence in a stable legal and policy framework in the long term if they are to operate safely”,

which is for the benefit of the workers,

“and contribute to the EU agenda for jobs and growth”,

which is vital to everyone, whether they are employers or workers in the ports.
The UKMPG goes on to say:

“The Port Services Regulation proposal does not provide such confidence and risks leaving a legacy of legal and practical difficulties across the EU.”

The UKMPG

“supports a return to the previous EU ports policy approach based round application of the general provisions of the Treaty reinforced, where appropriate, by guidelines on state aids.”

We now have Brexit so, as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Flello) suggested in relation to the great repeal Bill, are we going to reach a point, as I think we must, where we transpose the legislation into UK law but then, through statutory instruments and our own decision within the framework of this Westminster jurisdiction, as a result of the decisions taken by the people of this country, including Government Members and Opposition Members—with the exception, I suspect, of SNP Members, but they will pay a price for this in their ports areas—[ Interruption. ] They may find this amusing, but there are people in the ports of Scotland who do not like the proposal and will resist it if they can. They will not be allowed to do so if the SNP can get away with it.

The bottom line is that this is an issue of great national interest. The European Scrutiny Committee has been following the matter for several years. We first recommended it for debate on the Floor of the House in July 2014—over two years ago. On 19 October, I wrote to the Minister:

“We understand that it is intended that the European Parliament will adopt this text for a First Reading Agreement at its 12-15 December plenary and we presume that this will be followed shortly by Council agreement.

You will understand, therefore, that the Committee expects that the Government will finally, after a disgracefully long delay”—which I underlined several times—

“schedule the floor debate on the proposal which it and its predecessor have recommended.”

In fact, there have been two debates, which have been aborted. One of them, I can assure the House, was so shambolic that the Chairman of the Committee had to suspend the sitting. I will not go into the details of that—they are all on the record.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I have been involved in the European Scrutiny Committee for several years. I did not intend to intervene, but I am concerned about this issue. The hon. Gentleman is saying that we will take into British law what now exists as EU law, but we will selectively disapply parts of the EU legislation that do not suit Britain, and this might be one of those.

Sir William Cash: That is absolutely right. It is essential that we disapply this, for that reason. The mechanics of it will be left to statutory instruments, but we must reassert our jurisdiction over our ports.

As recently as 17 November, I wrote again to the Minister, saying:

“The Committee has asked me to emphasise to you and the Leader of the House that this debate should take place before the European Parliament adopts the text for a First Reading Agreement and the Council’s subsequent endorsement of this text.

Failure to meet this timetable would suggest contempt for the House and its legitimate scrutiny requirements.”

Although the issue has been going on since July 2014, we still have not had that debate. There is just time for us to have such a debate. Although this is a general debate about exiting the EU, a specific debate is not only recommended but, in effect, demanded by the European Scrutiny Committee, backed by the sort of language that I have had to use, demonstrating the importance of the issue and the need to get on with it. The other point that I must make is this: I have had no reply to those letters. At its meeting today, I am afraid that the European Scrutiny Committee registered its deep concern about the situation.

I received my latest statement from the ports industry this afternoon. I want to read it out, because it is important that the House knows the latest position:

“One further point...is that the UK Government has insisted on pursuing the inclusion in the PSR of a “Competitive Market exemption” rather than the option of having an exemption for the privately financed ports on the face of the Regulation itself”, which is what the industry has been seeking.

“It is this Competitive Market Exemption provision that was finally agreed in the informal trilogue discussions between the Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission earlier this year and which is now in the final draft version of the PSR due to come before the European Parliament in December. However, this ‘Competitive Market Exemption’ is not an exemption—it is a process by which Member States may apply to the European Commission for an exemption”, as if they could expect to get it.

“Any application would be determined solely by the European Commission, may be limited in scope or time, and would relate only to certain Articles of the Regulation. In short, it offers no guarantees that the PSR would not be fully binding on UK ports.”

Mr Cooper, the spokesman at last week’s annual parliamentary reception of the United Kingdom Major Ports Group, who is also CEO of one of the largest port companies, also had this to say:

“I will not rehearse the arguments against this wretched piece of wholly unnecessary legislation, but, as the endgame approaches, it remains a totemic example of a Regulation imposed by Brussels which is a one-size-fits-all straitjacket that runs entirely counter to our national interest. In its present form the Regulation is significantly less damaging than it might have been—and, alongside the DfT, the port industry can claim considerable credit for that—but it is not a success that can be guaranteed over the long term. Many of the changes to reduce the scope and impact of the Regulation have been a function of short-term political expediency.

The problem is this. It is inherent in the procedures of the European Union—in the Council of Ministers, the European Parliament and the European Commission—that we are in this situation. We cannot stop it without leaving the European Union. As the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South says, the timetable in relation to the great repeal Bill is significant. However, this is a very good example. What is for sure is that if we repeal the legislation and follow Brexit to its logical conclusion—this applies to many other areas as well—the United Kingdom will be enabled to regain control: in this case, over its island ports and the business that goes in and out of them. It will do that under the Westminster jurisdiction, on the basis of a new ports Bill, after Brexit and after the great repeal Bill has gone through, for the benefit of people who work in the ports in an executive capacity as well as those working in the docks themselves—the workers, who deserve to be given a fair deal. The Government and the Opposition, recognising this, must appreciate that we need a proper debate about the issue. It is so important that we get this right for the benefit of the United Kingdom as a whole.
Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): We have heard from the Secretary of State for Transport that we should have confidence; he has reassured us that we should have optimism, but, of course, we have heard no details.

The impact of Brexit on the different modes of transport—aviation, maritime and road haulage—will be immense, but its main effect will be on all the people in our communities, with rising costs for goods and mobility. There are also those who want to do business with us or to visit us as tourists. It is wrong for Ministers not to have a full explanation of how exiting the EU will impact on businesses, consumers and passengers.

Nobody doubts that we are facing stormy seas, yet instead of a plan we are told by the Foreign Secretary that Brexit will be titanic. That is scary enough, but time after time, in terms of plans and answers, we find it is just an empty vessel. The Government’s model is less a ship of state and more like the Mary Celeste. So let us see the Brexit rhetoric cast overboard, and let us hear some definitive answers.

People will be affected; they and our businesses deserve to know what the plan is. This failure to provide a plan is simply a plan for failure. People face additional journeys for connections, more expensive tickets, fewer rights to challenge delays and cancellations, additional insurance costs and long queues at border controls. When they call home, their calls could cost more because they will not have mobile phone roaming protection.

The Chancellor said today that he wanted the UK to be the No. 1 destination for business. Well, how are people going to get here? Let us start with aviation. Leaving the EU could restrict operations by UK airlines in Europe, and by EU airlines in the UK, leaving our constituents and visitors to the UK paying the price for Brexit through higher fares. Analysis from the independent Oxera economists states that such restrictions could lead to UK passengers’ fares rising by 15% to 30%.

As an MP from the highlands, and as chair of the regional airports all-party parliamentary group, I am also extremely concerned about the increased cost pressure on regional airports. These airports have thrived with the increase in low-cost airlines, and the advent of cheap short-haul flights across Europe owes a large part of its success to the EU. As easyJet said:

“the single aviation area gives airlines freedom to fly across Europe and since its introduction passengers have seen fares fall by around 40 per cent”.

Without that agreement, fares will inevitably be higher.

Chris Grayling: Earlier this week, I met the proprietor of AirAsia, who has built an extraordinarily successful low-cost airline across south-east Asia. Countries there are not in a European Union-type institution. Can the hon. Gentleman explain to me and to the House why it is not possible to have a low-cost aviation set-up in Europe with us outside the European Union, but it is possible to have such a set-up in a part of the world where there is no such body as the European Union?

Drew Hendry: Let me answer that by giving the right hon. Gentleman the words of easyJet itself. EasyJet is now setting up a separate operation outwith the UK to ensure that it can continue to fly without restrictions after the UK leaves the EU. As its chief executive officer, Carolyn McCall, said, current EU flying rights might have to be renegotiated, and the new company will ensure easyJet can operate within the EU. She added:

“We are not saying there will be no agreement. We just don’t know the shape or form. We don’t have the luxury of waiting. But we have to take control of our own future.”

That is in no small part due to the lack of clarity from the UK Government over what aviation agreement the UK will eventually come up with. The Secretary of State and his colleague the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union have said:

“Market access remains a top priority, and we want to make sure we have liberal access to European aviation markets.”

Strikingly, however, there was no guarantee that the UK would stay within the open skies agreement. The UK Government need to explain to us now how this is going to work. When open skies was agreed back in 2008, the UK market was one of the key attractions for the United States. At the time, the UK accounted for a 40% share of the EU-US market. If the agreement ceases to apply, as was mentioned earlier, will the UK have to revert to the Bermuda II bilateral agreement, signed in 1946 and last amended in 1991?

Mr MacNeil: Perhaps there is an opportunity for the Secretary of State to come to the Dispatch Box and tell us whether we will be in the open skies agreement post-Brexit.

Drew Hendry: I am happy to allow the Secretary of State to intervene on that point if he wishes to do so, but obviously he does not.

The aviation market has changed considerably since the days of the Bermuda II agreement, and any reversion could cause disruption to UK airlines and transatlantic trade and passenger routes. If this is not the case, then what is the plan?

The implication of new border controls is negative in both ways. Ease of travel within the EU is attractive to our constituents and to those visiting the UK. Undoubtedly, passport checks and processing times for visitors from the EU will impact on our attractiveness to visitors. The fact that EU visitors will need to enter the UK through the non-EEA lines will require Border Force to commit significantly more resources at airports. Even with extra staff, queuing times for European visitors will still almost double to about 45 minutes. Those of us representing constituencies with a significant tourism economy find this extremely concerning.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Staying slightly on that topic, will my hon. Friend urge the Transport Secretary to engage with the US Government, who are currently considering Edinburgh airport for pre-clearance travel to the United States, as a positive way of showing the world that we are indeed open for business?

Drew Hendry: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; he has made his point and I will not follow it up any further.
One can imagine, under the future provisions, being a tourist from Europe, especially in the short break market, with the choice of going to the UK or somewhere else where there is a lot less hassle—somewhere more welcoming. Additional space will need to be allocated to immigration control operations in airports and other ports of entry. It is thought that the costs could spiral into tens of millions of pounds. This cost must be borne by airports and port operators, who then cannot invest that money in increased connectivity and improving the passenger experience. According to the Tourism Industry Council, if the 23 million EU nationals who visited in 2015 were to be subject to full border checks, Border Force would be required to increase resources allocated to this by 200%—on top of the problems that already exist. Manchester Airports Group says:

“Border Force provision at a number of airports is already inadequate, with a lack of long term planning meaning queue times for passengers can already be unacceptably long.”

So what is the plan?

Ian Paisley: Before the hon. Gentleman gets into the detail of the hypotheticals of border controls, does he accept that the single largest threat to ordinary travellers in the United Kingdom, and across the entirety of Europe, is none of the things he has mentioned but the package travel directive about to be introduced by the EU, which will put additional costs on every single traveller because they perhaps use sites like Expedia?

Drew Hendry: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. So many issues are facing us that it is very difficult to pick out the single most important item. There are a lot of unanswered questions.

Is the plan to reach an agreement with the EU that the EEA channel will continue to operate in the UK, and that EU member states will allow UK citizens to use the EEA channel in the EU?

Regional airports are vital for connectivity within Scotland, but the reckless gamble with our EU membership has caused great uncertainty for these airports that could have a seriously detrimental impact on our economy. Scotland has a large number of regional airports, many of which are reliant on low-cost airlines and outbound tourism to survive and to be an economic success. The International Air Transport Association predicts that a 12% reduction in sterling would result in a 5% decline in outbound travel, while Ryanair has said that it is scaling back its expansion in the UK.

Kelvin Hopkins: Is it not the case that since 23 June, there has been a significant depreciation of sterling and a surge of people coming into Britain to buy things, because everything is cheaper here? Is that not good for businesses in Britain, including those in Scotland?

Drew Hendry: I am happy to answer that. When I was a retailer many years ago, the UK Government introduced an increase in VAT. Before that VAT increase hit, there was a rush to the shops to buy goods. After that increase hit, things fell through the floor, and I think we will see a similar effect.

Scotland has a large number of regional airports, many of which are reliant on low-cost airlines and outbound tourism to survive and to be an economic success. As I have said, the International Air Transport Association predicts a reduction in outbound travel. Since the EU referendum, sterling is down 25%. For airports such as Prestwick, it is even more vital that we continue the open skies agreement to maintain the number of outbound passengers, so it is incumbent on the UK Government to give an unequivocal guarantee that the UK will stay in the single aviation market after we are taken out of the EU. With 76% of UK holidays abroad being taken in the EU, outbound tourism is key for the industry. Outbound tourism employs more than 215,000 people across the UK, and it is a key driver in ensuring that our regional airports are successful. Remaining in the open skies single aviation market is vital to ensure that our airports remain economically viable, and low-cost airlines are vital if regional airports are to be a commercial success.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): My hon. Friend has talked about airports relying on bringing in tourists. Aberdeen airport is heavily reliant on business traffic, but with the difficulties that the oil and gas industry has faced, the airport has redirected its efforts towards sun destinations in the likes of Spain and towards eastern Europe. What kind of message does the lack of clarity about the plans send to an airport that is looking to diversify its offering?

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and he underlines the theme that I am working on just now. This uncertainty is bad not only for business, but for consumers, passengers and everybody involved.

Kelvin Hopkins: The hon. Gentleman talked about exchange rates. I think that relative to the euro, sterling depreciated by far less than 25%. That is crucial, because that is where we have our serious trade imbalance. With the rest of the world, we have relatively good relations. The strength of the dollar has compounded the depreciation of sterling, but that depreciation will be beneficial to British industry, wherever we trade.

Drew Hendry: That is the kind of thing that somebody might want to put on the side of a bus. It has been a trait of previous UK Governments to take forever to make key transport decisions, but UK regional airports, including those in Scotland, do not have the luxury of waiting. For the sake of those airports, our businesses and our commuters, the UK Government need to provide a clear and unequivocal guarantee that any post-Brexit aviation agreement will not lead to a loss of investment and connectivity in Scotland if we end up outside the open skies agreement.

The current aviation policy framework sets out that airports cannot apply for a public service obligation or the connectivity fund because of the 60-minute rule, which means that a number of regional airports lose out. The Government’s EU gamble is putting potential investment in Scotland’s regional airports at risk. They need to think again and, in doing so, give regional airports a fighting economic chance.

The problems are not confined to aviation. Our maritime sector faces similar concerns. We have heard a fair bit about ports, but the maritime sector is worth £12 billion annually to the UK economy, and some 240,000 people are employed in the sector in the UK. Fifty-three per cent. of the UK’s imports and 45% of its exports are from the rest of the EU. It is estimated that approximately 3 million jobs in the UK are linked to trade with the rest of the EU. Currently, there is the freedom to trade.
OECD rules could preclude any change, in so far as we are talking about the ability of a ship to call at an EU or UK port and to load and unload cargo and passengers, regardless of its flag and regardless of the nationality of its owner. UK-flagged ships could, however, lose their right to operate in the domestic trades of EU member states that maintain flag-based cabotage restrictions.

The British International Freight Association has said that its main concern is potentially losing the benefits of free trade and customs harmonisation with the EU single market:

“A return to tariffs for UK merchandise exports and imports, if this is the outcome...will be detrimental to UK trade with the EU, and may result in a...reduction in UK-EU maritime volume.”

As we have heard, the UK’s port sector is largely privately owned and run in a competitive environment, and is thus very different from those of many other EU member states. Oxera has also said that changes to the costs of trade with the EU are “likely to affect the volumes and patterns of freight activity at ports, while the need for new customs checks on imports and exports is likely to cause considerable congestion at UK and mainland European ports.”

It suggests that any negative impact could be mitigated through EEA membership or free trade agreements, although delays in negotiations could mean a significant period trading under World Trade Organisation arrangements. Uncertainty will impact the industry and the people it employs, and drive up the price of goods, so what access arrangements will be in place?

Sir William Cash: I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but he will have heard what I said earlier. What is his answer to that with respect to the question he has raised about Scotland? Are Scotland’s ports not equally affected?

Drew Hendry: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that; I think we are making a very similar point from very different perspectives. There needs to be a plan for how ports are handled, going forward. The difference in the regulation and operation of UK ports as compared with EU ports provides a significant obstacle. The UK Government have to give us an answer on what they are going to do and how they are going to take forward a plan on that basis.

Sir William Cash: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: No, I will make some progress.

What access arrangements will be in place? What is the plan for the millions of people connected with this industry? Will UK companies have access to a single European market, with no taxes or duties payable on goods?

There are a lot of potential uncertainties for UK road haulage companies as a result of Brexit, particularly in terms of employment, drivers’ hours rules, access to markets and border controls. Transporting a lorry load of goods from London to Milan in 1988 required 88 separate documents; the internal market replaced them all with a single piece of paper. In response to the balance of competences review, the Freight Transport Association said that the EU had created “a market that logistics has served for nearly half a century”, benefiting British businesses; the Road Haulage Association, similarly, felt that for its sector the overall judgment was a fine one. It said that “competences in UK road transport are finely balanced in our sector. Although we have not got a 100% solution in terms of market access we have got the most of what we think the industry would want.”

That is largely a reference to cabotage, the practice whereby a haulier from the UK can carry goods between two other member states—for example, Spain and France. So, what is the plan?

Chris Grayling rose—

Drew Hendry: I am happy to give way to hear the plan.

Chris Grayling: Will the hon. Gentleman tell the House, first, what proportion of cross-channel traffic is carried by UK hauliers as opposed to hauliers based elsewhere in the EU, and, secondly, the balance of cabotage carried out in the United Kingdom by European hauliers, and vice versa?

Drew Hendry: The Secretary of State is trying to make an argument similar to that made during the Brexit campaign about how the EU has to buy cars made here because there is a bigger market for them. That does not square with the facts of what is happening in the European market. For example, what will happen when there is a shortage of drivers in the road haulage industry, as at the moment many of them are EU nationals, supplying our road transport network? We have not heard the plan, and I heard nothing in the Secretary of State’s remarks today to say that there was a plan in this regard.

“The EU single market has delivered significant economic and social benefits for Scotland. The four freedoms of the single market—freedom of movement of capital, of people, of goods and of services—have removed barriers to trade and opened Scotland to a market of more than 500 million people. The single market has also generated direct benefit, and there are now unanswered questions about funding. As of October 2016, some £350 million had been legally committed for transport funding, meaning a further £450 million is available as long as it is committed before the UK leaves the EU. Some £13 million of that went directly to Transport Scotland, with the agency being available to seek a further amount from the remaining £450 million. However, there has been not a peep from the UK Government or the Chancellor on whether the funds will be committed up to 2020. Will the UK Government seek to top up the funding to Scotland after we leave the EU?

I will conclude now, but there are many further issues relating to rail and bus networks, including vehicle standards and testing, disabled badges and a whole lot more. There are so many questions on transport in the light of Brexit that I think we will return to the subject again and again. Those questions are being asked not just by me or my hon. Friends, but by industry and the public. They deserve answers. They deserve “the plan”, but instead they see that, on issues relating to maritime, road or air, they have a UK Government who are all at sea, taking the road to nowhere, and booked on an expensive and uncomfortable flight from reality.
5 pm

**Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con):** It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). I am not sure if this is entirely parliamentary but, as I am following my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), we have had Bill and now we have Ben. I am not exactly sure, however, that we are in the same flowerpot right now.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on the effect of leaving the European Union on our transport sector. Like many colleagues, I would have preferred to have had a debate on the effect of exiting the EU on the single market or the free movement of labour. Nevertheless, this is still an important issue for a number of residents in my constituency and in the United Kingdom as a whole. I note the irony that the House of Commons Library briefing paper on this subject suggests that “transport post-Brexit may not look wildly different to how it looks now”.

However, given that much remains unclear as we head towards the negotiations, I would like to outline a number of priorities the Government should consider.

The European Union’s common transport policy is focused on a number of policy areas, most notably economic and social matters, environmental improvements and infrastructure investment. There has been a long-running debate on whether the benefits of European Union membership and access to a single market for transport services outweigh the relative burdens of regulation. It is my belief that the development of the common transport policy has benefited the United Kingdom by improving the health of our population and boosting economic growth, while ensuring we have the long-term infrastructure to compete in a global environment. We need to ensure that the UK continues to feel these benefits once we have left the European Union.

I would like to take this opportunity to change tack somewhat from the long conversations we have had about ports and to focus on two key areas: environmental improvements and infrastructure investment. I sympathise with the Government’s position that while Brexit negotiations are ongoing it is important not to make guarantees but, like many sectors, transport is an area that needs certainty. I am sure that we all agree about that.

First, I would like to concentrate on the environmental impact. Bath has a huge problem with air pollution. As colleagues will know, Bath is full of buildings constructed out of the famous Bath stone, which absorbs vehicle emissions. Sadly, high air pollution levels across the city mean many buildings are slowly blackening—hon. Members will be pleased to know that my home has been rendered, so it is not blackening at the moment. In some parts of Bath, air pollution levels far exceed the legal limit and cause problems to my constituents’ health and wellbeing. Of course, this is not a problem for just my constituency; it affects many constituencies of Members here today.

Ensuring that the transport system works in a way that does not have a negative impact on the environment—reducing the impact of noise, pollution, harmful emissions and greenhouse gases—is vital to the long-term health of our population. The transport sector accounts for almost a quarter of all greenhouse gas emissions in the European Union, making it the sector with the second highest level of greenhouse gas emissions, just behind the energy sector. Moreover, transport is the only sector in the EU whose emissions have risen since 1990—by a staggering 22% in total. The Transport Committee has been doing some work on this issue over a number of years.

Alongside our EU colleagues, we have committed to reducing emissions in our transport sector and meeting European emissions standards. It was the UK that pushed hardest on this very issue, so it would be a shame if Britain were to draw back now. It is crucial that such work continues after Brexit. This issue is not isolated in the UK—we share our air with the EU and the rest of the world—yet many are concerned that we will lose the collaborative approach that is critical to solving these pan-national problems when we leave the EU.

I recently visited the low-emissions vehicle research centre at the university in my constituency. Incidentally, it has benefited from £3.6 million of research funding and contracts from EU government bodies.

**Stephen Gethins: The hon. Gentleman mentions his university, and I am extremely concerned about research funding after 2020. Will he join SNP Members in asking the Chancellor and the Transport Secretary to give greater certainty to the university sector about the post-2020 world?**

**Ben Howlett:** Several of us raised that matter during our consideration in Committee of the Higher Education and Research Bill. The announcement that the last few years’ funding will continue after we leave the EU is, of course, welcome, but the university sector is very concerned, for example, about our leaving Horizon 2020, which we have been part of for many years. That would leave a huge hole in higher education funding and it is something that I hope the universities Minister will consider during the Bill’s passage through the other House.

Bath University’s prize-winning research centres are having a hugely positive impact on the measurement and understanding of air quality in not just the UK, but the EU. The Institute for Advanced Automotive Propulsion Systems, which is run and spearheaded by my university, will, I hope, receive some of the funding that the Chancellor announced earlier via the expansion of the local growth fund. This subject is obviously quite topical, given the recent Volkswagen scandal. Britain might end up with an opportunity to bring businesses such as BMW over to the UK to measure its air pollution levels, as Ford and other major international motor vehicle companies have been doing. It is important that, as we set out our position on exiting the EU, we remain committed to meeting our obligations on European emissions standards across the transport sector so that we improve the lives, and the health and wellbeing, of all our residents. I am sure the Government have that at the forefront of their mind as they consider transport policy after we leave the EU.

My second point relates to infrastructure investment. I would like to focus on the importance of maintaining adequate investment in our transport system and particularly in road, rail and aviation, many of which have already been mentioned. I welcome the Government’s
commitment to completing the incredibly important HS2 project and their recent announcement on Heathrow airport expansion. Both are vital to the long-term development of our country. In 2014, the European Investment Bank provided lending of more than £6 billion to support long-term investment for a broad range of infrastructure projects across the UK, some 26% of which were in transport and the telecommunications sector, so it is an important funding source for such projects. While we have been instrumental in the creation of the trans-European transport policy and the fourth railway package, which aims to remove the remaining barriers to the creation of a single European rail area, I hope that conversations will take place as we leave the EU to ensure that Britain still has adequate train links with the EU. By removing bottlenecks, building cross-border connections and promoting integration and inter-operability between different modes of transport, we can ensure that the UK benefits from an infrastructure plan that promotes economic growth and job creation.

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Gentleman talks about business growth. Does he agree that, just as transport improvements benefit business, so too does continued membership of the single market? Does he support our continued membership?

Ben Howlett: I have said on many occasions that I support membership of the single market. How achievable that is will ultimately be for the Government to negotiate with the EU but, fundamentally, businesses—not just in my constituency, but in the developed nations—would suffer from a reduction in access to the single market. It is the same with the customs union. One thing missing from the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone was a consideration of possible cost implications and of how ports might lose out if we leave the customs union.

Now is not the time to slow down any investment in our transport sector, as we heard today from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. With finance still needed for projects in my constituency such as the A36/46 link road and the completion of the electrification of the great western main line, the Government must commit to continuing any lost investment that currently flows from our membership of the European Union.

I hope that today’s debate will give the Government an opportunity to increase transport investment across the south-west as a whole. While there was welcome news in the autumn statement, there is a real opportunity over the next few years to address the imbalance. It was disappointing that a recent Institute for Public Policy Research report concluded that the south-west had the second lowest transport investment per capita and per commuter of anywhere in England. Without wishing to give too much credibility to counter-factual history, I question whether greater investment by the EU in transport infrastructure in the south-west would have led to more residents voting to remain part of the EU.

Transport is one of the EU’s most strategic common policies, and on many occasions we have been the driver for change in this area. Following our exit from the European Union, I hope that the Government will continue to invest heavily in the transport sector while maintaining our commitments to air quality and the environment.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): This is a welcome and timely debate. Transport is vital to all that we do, whether it be the functioning of our economy or people engaging in a good life. It matters to everything we do, but there has been little discussion in public or in Parliament about the implications for transport of our exit from the European Union. In this short debate, I want to flag up a number of issues where there are concerns, some of which have gone unanswered. I shall also seek some further information from the Minister about how these issues are being addressed.

At the beginning of the debate, the Secretary of State made some fairly anecdotal remarks about how he was dealing with some of the issues of concern that have been raised. He referred to meetings that he has had with Ministers at conferences and said that he hoped to meet the President-elect of the USA shortly to discuss some of these issues with him. However, there is a more basic question.

Yes, there are big questions about how the negotiations might be conducted and what the Government’s objectives might be, but one key question is whether the negotiations on transport will be conducted in their own right or only as part of much wider negotiations, so that nothing agreed for transport will be finalised until there is agreement on all the issues involved in our leaving the EU. I have not heard that question properly discussed, but it is an issue of concern. Some transport issues might appear to be negotiated, but they could somehow be lost or given away as part of some bigger negotiation where other factors are under discussion. That is a fundamental issue and I would like to hear more answers from the Government about that. Providing an answer to that question is not really giving away a negotiating position; it is telling us how seriously the Government view these negotiations as a whole view transport issues. It might provide a guide on how far we should pursue some of the matters that have been raised today and that are likely to be raised again.

Members have talked about how different sectors of transport—road, rail, air and sea—might be affected. I shall come on to some of those later. There are also important cross-cutting matters to which very little attention has been given when it comes to Brexit. What of passengers’ rights, for example? Complex compensation packages are being negotiated in Europe, and I believe that one of them was either finalised recently or is nearing completion. It is not at all clear how that would affect British citizens. Would they be covered by those compensation packages, now or in the future? We simply do not know.

What about security matters? Reference has been made to cross-channel transport, of which security is an important aspect. How will that be affected? We have heard little about it. Environmental issues are very broad, but they certainly include transport. How will that affect us?

During the Transport Committee’s recent investigation of the Volkswagen scandal, attention was focused on vehicle type approval, the European system for assessing emissions in terms of their environmental impact, performance and safety. Although the Volkswagen episode—the Volkswagen scandal—I must keep using that word, because a scandal is what it was—did highlight
some deficiencies in the system, it is important to recognise the importance of having a cross-European system for vehicle type approval. There might be a need to strengthen or change it in certain ways, but having it does matter. How would we be affected in that regard? Would the United Kingdom still be involved? Would we still be party to the system? Would we be partners in it, influencing what happened? Again, we simply do not know.

The question of accessibility to transport for disabled people has been raised briefly, in relation to the blue badge scheme. That scheme, which is very effective and very important here, has a European counterpart. What would happen to that? Has any thought been given to the issue, and has there been any discussion about it? There is a wider question. European directives call for proper access to buses, coaches and trains for disabled people to be implemented by 2020, and European legislation has driven improvements in their access to public transport. Will we still be involved in that, or will the United Kingdom decide that there is some get-out clause so that we do not have to continue to give proper attention to the matter? I hear little about that in the public arena.

Sometimes we are all so involved in talking about the major strategic issues—which are, of course, extremely important—that we forget about the practical issues, but they must not be lost. One way of ensuring that they are not lost in discussions about many other issues is to keep raising them in the House and, indeed, elsewhere.

A number of Members have drawn attention to the aviation sector, which in itself illustrates the importance of the possible impact on the sector of our exit from the European Union, and the importance of the sector itself. Aviation is vital to the economy as a whole, and to business and tourism specifically. In 2015, UK aviation transported 251 million passengers and contributed £1 billion a week to the UK economy, and it supports 1 million jobs. It is not just about transport, either. It is about skills, development, and a wide range of employment. It is literally a gateway to Europe and to the world. The UK currently has agreements to fly with 155 countries, 42 of which have air services agreements through our membership of the EU. That arrangement is critical. What will happen to it?

There are three broad areas of concern relating to aviation that require proper negotiation and a proper solution, rather than the uncertainty that currently hovers over the whole issue, causing great concern in the aviation sector and among the people employed in it. First, the single European aviation market allows EU registered airlines to have a base in another EU state and operate services between other member states and within them. It promotes growth and has reduced fares. It is critical. There may be an answer to what will happen to that as an alternative to our current arrangements. Are we going to consider joining the European common aviation area—we would be able to do that—or is the answer bilateral agreements? We simply do not know, and not knowing causes great uncertainty. It will affect business decisions being made by airlines now about where they want to locate. These are critical decisions about aviation and the people employed in the sector.

**Drew Hendry:** On business indecision, does the hon. Lady agree that businesses are openly saying that they are having difficulty now with their business plans and are absolutely terrified of getting no forward vision from the UK Government about how things are going to work in the future, which is impacting directly on investment?

**Mrs Ellman:** I do agree. That is a key area of discussion within the aviation sector. It is why it is so critical that this is addressed. There is great uncertainty. There might be a solution, but we need to move further on it.

The second area of concern within the aviation sector is the transatlantic aviation agreement, and particularly the EU-US open skies policy agreed in 2007. There are many aspects to that, including that EU airlines can operate to the US from any point in the EU. EU airlines can also lease aircraft to US airlines for use on international routes from the United States to any third country. That was opposed for a long time by the US authorities, but it is now agreed and it is extremely important not just for aviation itself but for this country and—I go back to the common theme of my speech—for employment in the sector and the retention of high-level skills. Will this agreement continue? The general view appears to be that it will, as it is too valuable and important to everyone for it not to continue, but again there is uncertainty. Is that being addressed?

The third aspect of concern is European airspace strategy. The use of airspace is critical and too often when we talk about aviation and runway capacity we do not think properly about airspace strategy. That matters, however; it matters in terms of efficiency and the environment. Capacity and efficiency have been added through having the single European sky. Will that continue in its current form? Will it be part of the negotiating process? Will the functional air blocks—UK and Ireland—be retained? How will this operate? It seems to be so critical that it has to carry on, but in what form, and how will the UK be involved?

I wanted to flag up those three areas of concern. They are well known—I am not saying they are being ignored—but my plea is that we need to know what progress is being made.

Ports are vital because 90% of the UK’s trade goes by sea, and the EU is the UK’s largest single trading partner. Yes, there are global markets and the maritime sector is global as well as European, but Europe is extremely important to it. It cannot be looked at in isolation. Access to the single European market is important to the maritime sector. What impact will discussions on that have on discussions about the ports and the maritime sector? How will changes in access to the single market affect shipping with Europe? Will there be new and complex tariffs? Will there be customs checks? How will transmodal movements be affected? Will there be complexity in paperwork, tariffs and customs? Nobody knows what is going to happen. Some solution has to be found as soon as possible, and the sector needs to know what is happening. We have had silence on these matters for much too long.

There are many other transport issues involved in our exit from the EU that are causing great concern. I have identified just these few issues today because they are critical to the UK’s future. They are important not just for trade, for jobs and for the retention of skills, and I urge the Government to get more involved in those sectors and give us more information about what is happening.
These transport issues might not be flagged up in the newspapers every day, but they matter a great deal to our economy and to the people of the UK.

5.25 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak in this important debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman). I have written in my notes the words “road”, “rail”, “aviation” and “the water”, and I feel that she and I have some common—perhaps watery—ground on these matters. We have heard from Members on both sides of the House that it is vital to address the issue of climate change, and I shall focus unashamedly today on how that affects my constituency. Anyone who enters Eastleigh will see the words “Tackling climate change” on the sign, but that feels like a strange irony for anyone sitting in queueing traffic there.

Today we are debating the importance of transport in relation to exiting the European Union. I have been contacted by the Irish embassy, as well as by the States of Jersey and Guernsey, about the vital role played by Southampton airport in trading links between those areas and the UK, and we must now consider how we will work with them in a post-Brexit environment.

Today’s autumn statement has sought to tackle infrastructure deficit and improve our productivity. We have heard from the Chancellor that Departments will—rightly, in my view—meet the Government’s objectives by working with Members, communities, local councils and the devolved Administrations to enable them to tackle key decisions on their priorities and projects locally. I welcome this. I have had meetings in my area to discuss what is affecting the gross value added there. I have already indicated to the Secretary of State that the missing infrastructure in my patch is affecting my productivity. My constituency and those of my fellow Hampshire Members are affected by missing junctions on the M27 and queues on the M3, for example, and I know that the Department would like to focus on working with Highways England to make the area a better place for commuting and for getting around.

This week, the Secretary of State spoke to people working with regional airports, and I welcome the feedback that I have had from Southampton airport on his energy and positivity for the sector and for regional airports, which came through very strongly. We have heard questions raised in the Chamber this afternoon about air passenger tax in relation to our exit from the EU. I ask the Secretary of State to continue to work positively in this area, because that does translate and it does matter. Air passenger duty is a key issue for those travelling through my constituency, whether on business or for leisure purposes. Better connectivity from Southampton airport is also key for heading up to Heathrow or Gatwick. I have also heard from the Irish embassy that Ireland is benefiting from the new route between Southampton and Cork, from where passengers can take transatlantic flights. A clearer future, given the opportunities at Heathrow, is important to that connectivity and to my constituency.

Some 50% of people in my patch travel out for work, generally making a journey of around 12 miles. One would think that that is a short journey, but it can often take about an hour and a half to get from Eastleigh to Southampton or to travel by train between the two cities of Portsmouth and Southampton. I ask Ministers to meet me in due course to look at roads such as the Chickenhall link road, which will tackle pollution and queues, unlock potential sustainable housing sites and provide the opportunity for Southampton airport to get a longer runway, so that bigger planes are able to travel from my patch and people are given a real choice when it comes to getting around.

I am delighted by the opportunities provided by the autumn statement’s infrastructure boost, including, on a basic level for getting around, the seventh successive freeze in fuel duty. Families in my area do not have a choice and must travel by car. East-west connectivity is a challenge and I welcome the continued negotiations on the new rail franchise. I have heard from the Chancellor that Departments will—rightly, in my view—meet the Government’s objectives for new businesses springing up in Eastleigh. We must continue to consider water safety as we exit the EU. People want to see marine patrols when they are out and about and to feel secure in the post-Brexit environment.

I look forward to working with the local enterprise partnership, Hampshire County Council and other local departments and areas to ensure that Eastleigh continues to grow and thrive given the opportunities provided by the £1.1 billion for local transport networks. I say to the Department for Transport that such funds could be deployed in my patch to help with much-needed connectivity, to battle air pollution and to increase productivity. I welcome this afternoon’s debate and the interesting points made around the Chamber about air passenger duty, ports and connectivity. I look forward to working positively with the Department based on today’s autumn statement and the opportunities for local infrastructure across Hampshire.

5.32 pm

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and other hon. and right hon. Members have made clear in this welcome debate, Brexit has huge implications for our whole transport network, but I want to focus on the rail freight sector. I was disappointed that the Secretary of State did not include rail freight as one of his priorities, and I suspect that the rail freight industry will be disappointed, too. When the Minister replies to the debate, I hope he will reassure us that the Government take the industry’s concerns seriously.

I have previously raised in the House the situation of DB Cargo UK, a company with headquarters in my constituency that has recently announced 893 redundancies. In a letter to the trade union ASLEF, the company said that as well as falling demand from the coal and steel industries, Brexit has caused a slowdown in demand for the movement of freight by rail. I have discussed the problems facing the rail freight industry with the relevant trade unions and also this week met the chief executive officer of DB Cargo UK, Hans-Georg Werner. I hope Members and the Minister will agree that rail freight is
a key service for those doing business in the UK, enabling the import and export of goods through ports and the channel tunnel and, crucially, the movement of goods within the UK. Rail freight depends on the total volume of UK trade as well as the modal share between rail and road. It is a good barometer of the health of the economy as a whole.

Andy McDonald: Does my right hon. Friend agree that sustaining the rail freight industry is vital for the maintenance of the infrastructure itself and that we neglect that issue at our peril?

Dame Rosie Winterton: My hon. Friend makes an absolutely correct point. That is why we need to use this debate to highlight some of the infrastructure issues we face and to try to tease out of the Minister what the autumn statement might mean for the rail freight industry.

At the moment, the Government are giving little clarity as to what they are looking for from future trade agreements, but it is clear that some options, particularly those with increased trade tariffs, could be challenging for the UK market as a whole and for rail freight in particular. We know that uncertainty about what trade agreements will be reached in those Brexit negotiations is having a detrimental effect on business. The rail freight industry has been especially affected by the slowdown in the construction industry, where there is a nervousness from investors; we wait for the Government to set out their negotiating position, investment decisions are being put on hold. Whether we are to remain in the customs union and whether we are to maintain access to the single market could have massive impacts on our customs union and whether we are to maintain access to the rail freight industry, especially workers' rights and protection are particularly important in this industry not least because of safety considerations—something of which we are too well aware at the current time. I hope that the Minister can assure me that he is discussing these issues with the relevant trade unions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), the Chair of the Transport Committee, made some very good points with regard to environmental legislation. Rail freight is vital in cutting emissions, and we need assurances that, once we have left the European Union, we will mirror agreements under the EU and work actively to help the industry by investing, through Network Rail, in projects that increase capacity, improve connectivity and encourage intermodal solutions to help cut emissions. I hope that, in the process of doing that, we will look across Europe for good examples. In Austria, for instance, I understand that subsidies are available for trains that carry road freight vehicles, and we need to consider whether we should be emulating such practices as we go forward. Will the Minister tell us what planning has been done to improve not only freight productivity, but that link with environmental targets?

On the autumn statement, will the Minister tell us what its implications are for the rail freight industry? I am not sure whether I heard the words "rail freight" mentioned during the statement. I know that the Chancellor said that it will be about departmental decisions, but, again, because the Secretary of State did not mention it in his opening remarks, can the Minister shed a little light on what he thinks the Department is looking at with regard to rail freight, and also what the process will be for coming to those decisions? Investment was talked about, but we need to see that applied to the rail freight industry.

As we have seen today, the process of leaving the European Union will be complicated, fraught with uncertainty and might have considerable unforeseen consequences for our economy’s productive capacity. The need to secure the most advantageous deal for business is understood, but of course the shape of that deal is what will be contested over the coming months. I hope that we can agree that there is an overriding need to reduce uncertainty for business as a whole and for the rail freight sector in particular. It is essential that the Government have serious discussions with the rail freight industry and the unions, which represent those who work in the industry, about the post-Brexit future, so that the best possible outcome of Brexit negotiations can be achieved. Again, I hope that the Minister, in his reply, will be unequivocal about his commitment to openness, transparency and the fullest possible consultation with all those involved in this vital industry.

5.43 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Well, here we are, four months on from Brexit—[Interruption.] My apologies, it is five months. That is
not a good start. We have heard from several Members about the many challenges that still face us, and I do accept that there will be some opportunities. Let us look at one element of the Government’s transport strategy and what they consider to be an achievement: the deal that they managed to secure with the car manufacturer, Volkswagen, following the emissions cheating scandal. The United States of America will receive around $1.5 billion in compensation from Volkswagen. Last week, the Minister stood at the Dispatch Box, with an enormous grin on his face, heralding the fact that he has managed to secure a miserable £1 million. Madam Deputy Speaker, do not lose heart in the Minister, because he also informed the House that he would receive the cheque in time for Christmas. If that is a success, I do not what a failure looks like. It does not exactly inspire confidence in me when these are the people charged with the Brexit negotiations.

Robert Flello: Did the Minister say which Christmas?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: One hopes that it will be this Christmas. I say to my colleague on the Transport Committee.

I wish to focus my remarks on emissions and the vehicle industry. Although there are challenges, there are indeed opportunities in this field, and I do not necessarily mean just in terms of trade, but in terms of the governance of the industry. For too long—I say this as someone who passionately voted to remain in the EU—the industry has been operating in an almost wild west-like culture, where money talks; and it talks quite a lot, particularly for German car manufacturers. For all that we are proud of the British car industry—of course we are—the German car industry has something that we will never have, or the French or Japanese car industry will never have: the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. If we look through the lobbying register, we see that the big German manufacturers spend more on lobbying in Brussels than all the other manufacturers put together—and, my goodness, they get what they are after.

Sir William Cash: Is there not a really serious problem with the manner in which the Volkswagen emissions disaster was handled? This is about not just efficiency but manipulation.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct, and that is what I am coming to. The Government now have the opportunity to get a new standards regime. They could create a new gold standard and bring confidence. They could do the same with a new safety standards regime. They could create a new gold standard that even countries such as the United States could aspire to. I guess that the proof of the pudding will ultimately be in the eating.

Members will be familiar with the Vauxhall car fire scandal, with more than 300 Vauxhall Zafira cars catching fire here in the UK. Many of them have done so within about 30 seconds of their engines failing. Let us think about that model of car. The Zafira is a family car. It tends to be used by parents on the school run, during the summer holidays and so on. The people affected tend to have children, and many of them have been in touch with me and other members of the Transport Committee, which has discussed the issue. The Government’s response, in public at least, has almost been to wash their hands of it. I am amazed that the Government are not required to take the issue more seriously. Perhaps we could have new consumer protections relating to vehicle standards, and better compensation standards for consumers. Perhaps we could aspire to standards that even the European Union could aspire to one day.

We do not want to continue with the same system—perhaps EU regulation-lite—whereby we become just another island that is manipulated by an industry in which money talks far too often, and public health interests and consumer interests take a back seat. In addition to all the challenges that the Government face in maritime, freight and air policy, this is one area where the British public are fed up with big business riding roughshod over consumer interests. They will judge the Government on how they respond to the opportunity that Brexit has delivered to put consumers first, rather than to those big vehicle manufacturers.

5.51 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): My constituency voted overwhelmingly—62.2%—to leave the EU, despite the fact that with its large agricultural hinterland it receives huge European farm subsidies, and with its manufacturing base it benefits from the opportunity to manufacture and export to the EU. It also has a huge travel base. It is a tourism mecca, and tourists need travel infrastructure. So it is engaged in manufacturing, travel, tourism and transport goods, but despite all that, it voted to leave the EU, and we must ask ourselves why.

Why would so many people in that set of circumstances vote to leave? It is because the EU is seen to be failing them. When we look specifically at transport issues, we can see why. Before we even discuss the EU, there are many things that we could do domestically to assist companies in the transport sector in our country. For example, in my constituency we manufacture buses. The Wrights Group manufactures a considerable number of the buses for this great city and for Scotland—indeed, it recently enjoyed a very beneficial order from Scotland, for which we say thank you to our Scottish cousins. It also manufactures for Singapore and a number of other Asian countries, and employs hundreds of people in Singapore in the assembly of those buses, and, importantly, in the maintenance of those buses. It is a significant local employer and a world employer.

The company can benefit more from domestic decisions taken here than it can from EU decisions taken in Brussels. For example, the Government’s Bus Services Bill currently going through Parliament will have a dramatic impact on transport orders for my constituency.
if it goes the right way. We also have—I say this very

gently to those on the Labour Front Bench—a new

Mayor of London. I appeal to him through his Front

Bench colleagues to come to Northern Ireland as soon

as possible to visit that bus company, which transports

his citizens around his city, and see the great work that it
could do to expand the bus offer in London. I understand

that between now and 2021 London will require another

1,000 buses. I hope that that transport infrastructure

will benefit from buses manufactured in my constituency.

I wanted to put that on the record before I turn to the

substance of the debate.

When the Secretary of State opened the debate, he

was full of confidence and optimism. I share that optimism.

We should approach the issue of transport and Brexit

with some optimism because there are opportunities

that can be beneficial to us.

There is one issue that could have been addressed in

the Chancellor’s statement today. I hope that the Transport

Secretary will continue to whisper “airport passenger
duty” in his ear between now and the Budget in April. I

hope he will keep pushing that little issue. We should

not be paying a pernicious, dirty little tax to the Chancellor

of the Exchequer just to transport ourselves from one

part of the UK to another. It is wrong. It is not the sort

of tax that our Government should be levying, and it

should be removed soon. I hope that the Chancellor will

hear that not just from me but from the Transport

Secretary between now and the Budget.

Many people, including our neighbours in the EU,

complain about Brexit. We hear it every day and read

about it in the newspapers, but those of us who voted to

leave the EU did so with a good intention—to bring

about good for our country, not bad. I have noticed that

those on the remain campaign and those opposed to the

action that the United Kingdom is about to take are
talking up crisis after crisis—whether a transport crisis

or a crisis to do with transport problems with our

border in Northern Ireland.

I commend the singular actions of the Secretary of

State over the recess. When a crisis emerged in Northern

Ireland relating to our one transatlantic fleet operator,

United Airlines, it was largely because the Secretary of

State got on the telephone to the United States and

spoke to the head of the airline and others, pressing

them to keep the flights operating in Northern Ireland,

that the service was saved.

As a result of the right hon. Gentleman’s conversation

with United Airlines and an emergency aid package put

in place by the Northern Ireland Executive, involving

multiples of millions of pounds, the service was indeed

saved—until two weeks ago. Someone in the EU then

complained that the actions of the Secretary of State

and the Northern Ireland Executive amounted to state

aid and were therefore wrong. They objected so much

that Europe has now told United that it must reject the

multi-million pound aid package. As a result, the airline

is now closing its service; the last flights from Belfast to

Newark in the United States of America will take place

in January next year. That shameful action needs to go

on the record.

Sir William Cash: In the ports sector, as in many

others, there are hidden subsidies. Ports over the whole

of Europe are publicly owned. Given the money pumped

into them, they also represent the lack of a level playing

field. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

I commend the hon. Gentleman for what he said and

what the Secretary of State tried to achieve.

Ian Paisley: I agree; the hon. Gentleman has put his

finger on the fact that the issue extends not only to

airports but to seaports as well.

Last week in the House, I pressed the Secretary of

State about the United Airlines issue. He kindly said

that the decision was “deeply unwelcome” and that a

fair amount of effort had been done by his Department,

working alongside the Northern Ireland Office and

Northern Ireland Executive, in trying to make sure that

this air route was sustained. He went on to say:

“The loss of the route because of EU action is deeply

unwelcome and precisely the kind of unnecessary
decision from Brussels that led this country to vote to


I say a hearty “Hear, hear” to those words. That action

was pernicious and should not have taken place. The

company should have been allowed to continue to operate

in Northern Ireland. Many people in County Antrim

who have seen the benefits of Europe have turned

against it because of such decisions. I am glad that we

as a nation have woken up to that.

We have also had the allegation that the Irish Republic—

our well-known neighbour—wants to be supportive of

Northern Ireland as it leaves the EU. Indeed, it has

written to many of the hauliers in Northern Ireland to

invite them to a tea party hosted by the Taoiseach in

Dublin. He has called it the all-island civic dialogue,

and he wishes to have a conversation about the implications

of Brexit for the Republic of Ireland. Now, I am quite

happy for the Taoiseach to do that, and for him to

understand the conversation that is going on, but if he

targets businesses in Northern Ireland with a view to

getting them to go to the south of Ireland and to crank

up opposition to the UK’s decision, that is where I draw

the line. I therefore commend the words of our First

Minister in Northern Ireland, who said that the Dublin

Government are poaching some of our businesses, and

that includes our haulage businesses. It is right that this

House understands that, while we welcome the opportunity
to work with our southern neighbours, we can also see

when someone speaks out of both sides of their mouth—on

the one hand saying they are concerned about our

relationship, but on the other hand doing everything

can to undermine that relationship and poach businesses

from us. I think we should put that on the

record.

It is also important that we identify those EU transport

regulations that hurt British businesses. In an intervention

on the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon.

Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey

(Drew Hendry), I mentioned the package travel directive.

Expedia is an American company that employs over

2,000 people in call centres and outreach centres in the

United Kingdom. It is based in England and Scotland,

and it will hopefully soon be based in Northern Ireland.

That company employs thousands of people, but it is

now faced with the package travel directive. Ordinary

business and tourism travellers who use sites such as

Expedia or trivago as a one-stop shop for their airline

ticket, their hotel, their car rental, the shows they wish

to attend or other things they wish to book, such as

restaurants, will find that this package travel directive,

which comes from the EU to protect huge monopolies,
[Ian Paisley]

will try to pass on a major charge to the companies—Expedia, trivago or others—or, more than likely, to the customer, because they are using a one-stop shop, when they should apparently be encouraged to use several different operators to place their orders. That package travel directive is wrong, and it should be opposed. That is another reason why many people in the United Kingdom see that, in terms of travel arrangements, we would be better off out of the EU.

Drew Hendry: On the point about additional costs to the travelling public, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the absence of the European health passport would mean an increase in insurance costs for UK customers travelling in Europe?

Ian Paisley: I do not know whether that is the case, so I cannot say whether it would or not. I would certainly be happy to look at that, but we need to encourage our own insurance industry—perhaps we will have a debate about the insurance industry and Brexit—to pick up those issues to determine whether there is a way in which we can address them.

Companies such as Expedia are faced with this package travel directive. We need to be alive to the fact that Europe is not a great benefactor of the travel sector and that it is actually doing an awful lot to hinder it.

Sir William Cash: On the general principle that the hon. Gentleman is addressing—the extent to which directives have an adverse effect on certain industries and the national interests of particular countries—is he conscious, as I certainly am, of what is called regulatory collusion? This has been written about by Professor Roland Vaubel of Mannheim University, who makes it clear that a system is employed in the Council of Ministers and through COREPER whereby decisions are made that benefit certain congregations of countries in a way that is detrimental to others, and that this is not a benign system, but actually the pursuit of national interests in another name.

Ian Paisley: I agree with the hon. Gentleman and thank him for making that point. This is about not only helping congregations of countries, but assisting cabals within certain sectors of the industry. For example, the package travel directive helps people who do not use computers to buy their tickets and encourages people to use only shops. I have nothing against travel shops, but they should not be assisted over the heads of people who wish to use the internet to make their bookings. There is a very deliberate attempt to try to destroy that business on the internet.

On road haulage, the Government need to address exporter freight charges. Many of our competitors outside the EU, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and countries in Asia, including India, have opportunities to assist the trade in their manufactured goods by reducing the cost of exporting them around the world. In essence, this is about freight charges, not just internally within their own countries, but externally. Our Government need to decide what assistance that system gives and how, when we eventually leave the EU, our companies can have a similar type of assistance or, more importantly, can be encouraged to get round the advantage that those other countries are given.

Let me give the House a few examples. In Australia, the freight equalisation scheme allows for goods shipped around the world to be subsidised when going to their final destinations. That means that a similar good manufactured in New Zealand, for example, suddenly becomes more expensive because its freight charges are included in its shipping, whereas the Australian good has its freight charge subsidised or, in many instances, wiped out. New Zealand opposed Australia when it introduced that scheme, but it is still in place. India has a freight assistance scheme, as well as an enterprise promotion policy, which is about assisting with freight charges.

If these issues of transport costs are not addressed, when we finally leave the EU and have wider export opportunities, we will find that if we try to get our goods—manufactured goods, foods or drinks—to certain markets, they will be disadvantaged because we do not give them a freight subsidy. I know that the Government do not like the word “subsidy” and that they will have to look at this further, but something should be done to assist with those transport costs. It is important that the Government have that in their mind.

I welcome the debate and the comments by the Secretary of State. It is useful that we continue to prod and examine these issues.

6.8 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Thank you for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sorry, but I am feeling a wee bit dizzy because I am not usually so high up the speakers’ list. It is also confusing that there is no limit on our speaking time. Clearly one of the reasons why I have been called so early is the real lack of Back Benchers in the Chamber. Given how many people have told us how bad Europe is and about all the wonderful opportunities that there will be following Brexit, I should have thought that Members would be queuing up to tell us about those opportunities.

Sir William Cash: I understand that the hon. Gentleman is about to become a member of my European Scrutiny Committee, so I simply say that I entirely endorse what he has said. Furthermore, many of the remainers, and the doomsters and gloomers, are not here defending the positions that they were taking before—I am not just referring to SNP Members. That is where a lot of the problems lie.

Alan Brown: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that helpful intervention. Clearly we are part of the remainers, and we represent our constituents. The majority of our constituents across Scotland voted to remain, so we must represent them.

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) made a bit of a play of highlighting opportunities, but really he highlighted some of the problems with the European Union rather than proper opportunities. He seemed to put a lot of faith in the myth that the Government will invest the money that will not be going to Europe. He trusts the Conservative Government to invest that money. He used the word “subsidy”, although he knows full well that no Tory Government ever volunteer to pay money for subsidies.

This has been a wide-ranging debate. I will focus on road transport, but just before I do, I want to go back to the open skies debate. Prestwick airport, which is in one
of my neighbouring constituencies, is a big employer for my area as well as for the constituency it is based in. It would be good if the Minister confirmed that Brexit will not affect Ryanair’s flights from Prestwick and tell us what the Government will do to mitigate any effects. I will throw out one opportunity for Prestwick—to be fair, this is not to do with the European Union—which is its potential as a spaceport. It is high time the Government made a decision about that.

As I said, I will focus on road transport. The Secretary of State said quite correctly in his opening speech that road transport affects us all. Given the proportion of goods that are transported by road to shops, road transport is fundamental to the price of goods. According to Government figures, almost three times as many goods are moved by road as are moved by rail and water combined, which shows us that road is the transport king.

That brings us to the question: what has the EU done for road transport? Apart from the harmonisation of licensing, the harmonisation of vehicle design, European Union-wide regulations for the transport of goods, workers’ rights legislation such as the Working Time Regulations 1998, the Road Transport (Working Time) Regulations 2005, the Agency Workers Regulations 2010 and the Fixed-term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2002, and funding for road schemes in Scotland, the EU has not done much to help road transport.

What else has the EU given us? Apparently, as the guys who are not here continually tell us, the EU has given us endless red tape and regulation. Let us look at how the EU has actually meddled in the pan-European transport of goods by road—this point was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). In 1998, a lorry travelling from Milan to London required 88 separate documents. The EU got involved, and after much wrangling, the number of documents now required is one. The number has gone from 88 down to one—that is the red tape that the EU has created for the transport of goods across Europe. In the 1980s, there were 100,000 sets of technical regulations across the member states. Thanks to the EU, they have been consolidated, and there is now one EU-level regulation.

We heard about ports earlier. Ports are integral to the import and export of goods for road haulage. As we have heard, ports handle 90% of the UK’s trade. Leaving the EU means that there is a risk that instead of a seamless journey on and off a ferry, there could be extended customs checks, which will slow progress. As we have heard, the infrastructure is not geared up for that, which could mean that ports will require additional parking. Some of the checks need to be repeated for each country that a lorry traverses. Given that the World Bank estimates that the customs clearance process for a single freight container adds around a day to the import process, it is clear that we could face a massive cost and logistics nightmare. Will the Minister therefore confirm that he is fighting for access to the single market and the customs union?

According to the Treasury’s figures, EU membership is estimated to increase trade with EU members by between 68% and 85%. I know that there has been a whole debate about how inflated the figures might or might not be, but even if they are inflated, they still show that there is huge benefit from our membership of the single market.

Has the Secretary of State and/or the Minister discussed the customs union with the automotive industry? At the moment, car components criss-cross the continent before returning for use in final assembly in Scottish car plants, so the customs union is a major positive for the automotive industry. The industry is completely appalled by the lackadaisical argument that simply claims that no tariffs will be applied because of the importance of the UK market. It has confirmed that tariffs are its No. 1 concern, so will the Minister touch on that when he sums up?

Nearly 300,000 HGV drivers were employed in the road haulage industry last year. In April 2015, only 1,165 jobseekers recorded their standard occupation as HGV driver, so it is clear that a HGV driver qualification is a pathway to full employment. Even so—we touched on this earlier—the road haulage industry is having to take advantage of EU nationals, using licence harmonisation, to plug the skills gap. There is a predicted shortage of 40,000 HGV drivers by 2020 and the Government do not challenge that figure. That situation will only get worse unless there is a post-Brexit reciprocal licensing arrangement.

I have repeatedly called for the Government to implement a grant scheme to allow small haulage companies to train new HGV drivers. Such a scheme would pay for itself from welfare savings. To date, I have heard nothing from the Government. The Secretary of State said that the idea was with the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), who is responsible for skills in the Department for Transport, but it is time we started hearing some concrete plans.

The last key topic I will touch on is road funding, which is particularly relevant to Scotland. Another dividend of the UK Union that we suffered from in Scotland for many years was a lack of investment in our road systems. It has taken an SNP Government coming to power to really push that agenda, in particular with the new M74 and M80 motorways, and the ongoing £500 million M8, M74 and M73 upgrades. It is ridiculous to think that there has never been a continuous motorway connecting Edinburgh and Glasgow; the SNP Government are having to rectify that.

Drew Hendry: It is not just the motorways my hon. Friend mentions that were neglected for a long time; many connections to rural Scotland such as the A9 were given no attention. The Scottish Government are now dualling the entire A9 between Perth and Inverness.

Alan Brown: I welcome that example and will come on to another shortly.

Investment for the current motorway upgrades came from the European Investment Bank, which drew in other international investment. Will such avenues for investment still be available at affordable rates to the Scottish Government in the future? It would be good if the Minister provided some clarity on that.

Anyone who has travelled to the highlands will know how many roads there are still single track, with passing places for oncoming vehicles. Those roads are lifelines. One example is the Fort William-Mallaig road, the road to the isles, which was completed as a two-lane carriageway only in 2009; previously, it was known as the worst trunk road in Europe. That shows the lack of investment
that came to us from Westminster. The upgrade was completed partly with European funding. The allocation included £3 million from the European regional development fund, as well as European transitional fund assistance. That is proof that the EU managed to get money to Scotland that would not have come from direct funding.

Scotland secured a total investment of £941 million from the European structural fund in the 2014 to 2020 programming period. Of that, £14 million has been allocated to the low-carbon travel and transport strategic intervention programme, which helps to fund low-carbon transport hubs and active travel hubs, and £10 million is being invested in the smart cities strategic intervention. ERDF money has also been allocated to Strathclyde Partnership for Transport for various strategic intervention. ERDF money has also been allocated to the low-carbon travel and transport programming period. Of that, £14 million has been allocated to the low-carbon travel and transport hubs and active travel hubs, and £46 million of EU funding each year. Much of that money goes to local transport-related projects.

I mentioned travel in the highlands earlier and my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) touched on it, too. One common sight is busloads of tourists traversing the country. Many rights of passengers, particularly in relation to disabled passengers, are incorporated in regulations covered by EEA membership. Tour operators entering Scotland and the wider UK may choose not to enter the country in the future because EU passengers might not want to have to apply for a visa as part of a tour package.

It can be argued that many of these issues are not insurmountable, but the fact is that 8% of all travel in the EU in 2014 was attributed to buses and coaches, with 6.5% to rail. The Department for Transport gave very little consideration to buses in its “Balance of Competencies” report released ahead of the referendum, despite the volume of regulations in place to protect coach passengers within the EU.

It is clear that EU directives have made our roads safer and protected the rights of HGV drivers. They have made the transport of goods easier, and therefore cheaper, within the customs union. The free movement of goods and people in conjunction with the licence harmonisation process has been vital for the haulage industry. Without it, there would have been market failure by now. There has even been harmonisation of the blue badge system for people with disabilities. Will that be reciprocated post-Brexit? As I outlined, the EU has contributed funds for much-needed road upgrades in Scotland. It is high time the Government understood that Brexit means a lot more than Brexit, and that we want clarity.

6.21 pm

**Robert Flello** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I am delighted that my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), is back in his place, as I just want to point out to him that the much-thumbed Library briefing paper I have been referring to is from 29 June, rather than the one in the Library now.

This issue, on a critical industry, is of great importance. I normally find, when I am called to speak so low down on the list, that almost everything I want to say has already been said. However, one thing that has not been said so far is that we are approximately five-and-a-half weeks away from Christmas. The logistics industry makes Christmas happen. It delivers everything. Yes, of course Santa has his part to play, but without the logistics industry the turkeys, the presents and everything else would not happen. We should put on record what we owe to the people in the industry.

During an intervention earlier I talked about staffing. I am concerned about the level of staffing available in the Department for Transport to consider these important issues. The Freight Transport Association, the Road Haulage Association, magazines such as Motor Transport and others are doing a lot of work on the implications of Brexit for some, if not all, of the industry, and I believe they stand ready to help the Department.

As the Minister is in his place, I want to pause to thank him again for the wide-ranging roundtable discussion on skills the other day—a really positive sign for how we can move the whole agenda forward.

I do not want to miss an opportunity to taunt the hon. Member for Stone one more time, so let me say that what has come out of discussions with various sectors of the industry is that a lot of EU legislation is legislation that we wanted in the first place, and, if Members will pardon the pun, it is legislation that we drove forward. The great repeal Bill will not be a great repeal so much as a great domesticisation—if that is a word. It is now.

I will just make a couple of points, rather than delay the House by repeating what has been said many times. The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency needs more teeth, particularly when we are exiting the EU. At the moment, there are issues with non-UK hauliers. The Minister kindly wrote to me recently about cabotage and access to the database for the DVSA. The response, with the greatest respect, is not clear. At the moment, a lot of vehicles stopped are not flouting cabotage rules. The DVSA does not have sufficient access to the database to spot the right hauliers. It is just a bit random at the moment.

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes):** I am very happy to continue that dialogue and the roundtables, mindful of what the hon. Gentleman has said.

**Robert Flello:** I am very grateful. I know that the Minister takes these issues seriously. The DVSA needs more powers to tackle non-UK hauliers, particularly post-Brexit.

Several colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), the Chair of the Transport Select Committee, have talked about vehicle standards, and the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) talked about standards shopping. It is important that we have a common standard, but it is also important that we stop standards shopping. We should also revisit HGV licensing. Rather than the over-complicated system of C+E licences and all the rest, perhaps it would be better...
to go back to class 1 and class 2. The certificate of professional competence is another issue that has caused the industry a lot of concerns, problems and difficulties. It is now much more embedded in its culture, but much more work needs to be done in the context of post-Brexit.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun—I have been waiting hours to say that, although I do not know whether I have pronounced it anywhere near correctly—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Have another go: Kil-marn-ock and Loud-oun.

[Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman tried very hard. It is not his fault he did not get it quite right.

Robert Fello: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown)—[Laughter.] Thank you.

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): It's not Welsh!

Robert Fello: I’m an eighth Welsh actually. But I am conscious of time and do not wish to go down this cul-de-sac any further.

The point about the 88 documents in one is a good one, but there is no reason post-Brexit why we cannot do our utmost to make sure that it is still only one document. That is an important point.

On HS2, I am afraid that I am not such a great fan. [Interruption.] I know it’s hard to be believe. One of my concerns is that, as I understand it, rail freight will not be allowed on the tracks currently being used for HS2. I also have great doubts about whether we can free up enough capacity on other lines, such as the west coast main line. How, for example, will people get from Stoke-on-Trent to Bournemouth? It will be a tortuous journey if they have to take HS2 into London, only to get another train out, rather than using the current service, which will be cut to free up capacity.

There are big issues on road worthiness and tachos, as they relate to the DVSA. It is also important to note that many firms are hiding behind Brexit over things such as fuel costs and blaming Brexit and the dropping pound for keeping the price of fuel artificially high. I urge the Government to take on board the concerns from organisations such as FairFuelUK about the price of fuel.

I will not dwell on the port services directive. It has been dealt with more than is necessary already. On the security of our border, there have been issues around Sangoate at Calais and, more recently, the Jungle at Calais. This problem might well recur in the future so we need to make sure that we have a good relationship with the French, particularly in northern France.

Members have raised a host of other things, but, you will be delighted to know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I do not wish to repeat them. I do, however, wish to draw attention to the issue of state aid. In the past, we have seen many airlines funded by other European counterparts to flout state aid rules when it suits them get the desired outcome and then face the consequences, when, frankly, it is irrelevant, because the issue has been resolved.

I will not detain the House any longer. I am keen to hear the Front-Bench responses, and I think there is one more speaker before that. I go back to my opening comments: the logistics industry is not just important or fairly fundamental to the UK; it is the UK. Without the logistics sector, the UK would cease to exist, nothing would happen: the clothes we wear, the food we eat—it would all end. So we have to accept the fact that transport is absolutely at the heart of the UK. We need to make sure that, post-Brexit, we get the best possible deal for the transport sector.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister says in his winding-up speech. I hope that, like me, he takes to his heart the fact that the transport sector—and, for me, logistics in particular—is the UK’s first and foremost industry. We have to make sure that it is protected. Let us get to work on it, taking help from wherever it is offered.

6.30 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Having sat through this debate, it has to be said that, once again, we are not much further forward. That applies to transport as it does to every portfolio area. To be fair, it was good to hear the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) providing an all too rare progressive view from the Conservative Benches on maintaining membership of the single market. After all, that is critical for Scotland’s economy and for the UK’s economy, just as the four freedoms are critical for future success. These areas are vital for growth when this reckless gamble is putting our country at risk.

I give credit where credit is due, and it has been good to see in his place the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) standing up for his beliefs as usual. Seeing him in his place is all too rare these days, as it is for others who backed the campaign to leave. It is very much a tale of two Governments in these islands. North of the border we have had a Government making clear their plans on membership of the single market, freedom of movement and the status of European nationals who contribute so much to our economy. That compares with the continued nothing that we have seen from the United Kingdom Government.

The Secretary of State, who is not in his place—I apologise, he seems to have returned—has to bear some responsibility. He was a member of a Government who backed the campaign to leave. It is very much a tale of two Governments in these islands, North of the border we have had a Government making clear their plans on membership of the single market, freedom of movement and the status of European nationals who contribute so much to our economy. That compares with the continued nothing that we have seen from the United Kingdom Government.

The Secretary of State, who is not in his place—I apologise, he seems to have returned—has to bear some responsibility. He was a member of a Government who campaigned to leave the European Union, yet did absolutely no preparation for the decision that was eventually taken. That was an act of gross irresponsibility during the campaign, and it continues because he has nothing to say five months on.

I have in my hand an example of what preparation looks like—670 pages of a White Paper prepared during the independence referendum.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con) rose—

Stephen Gethins: I knew the hon. Gentleman would not be able to resist.

Alberto Costa: Would the hon. Gentleman like to tell the Secretary of State and other Members what currency Scotland would have used had it voted for independence?

Stephen Gethins: Here we go! We were so well prepared that that is not just in the White Paper—I know the hon. Gentleman has read it—but we even had a fiscal
commission working group. We had 670 pages of the White Paper and a fiscal commission working group setting out three options, including sharing the currency, which one Minister said that we would, of course, be able to do—[Interruption.] As my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) said, that compares to tumbleweed—absolutely nothing—from the Government.

The Secretary of State might want to take notes, because there were 15 pages on transport alone in our White Paper. As the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Flello) will be pleased to hear, it set out the areas for high-speed rail. It makes much more sense if high-speed rail goes through to Edinburgh and Glasgow, rather than just to Birmingham. The benefits of specialist transport organisations were mentioned, too.

Ian Paisley: How many of the 600 and more pages started with the words “could”, “maybe” or “might”?

Stephen Gethins: To be fair, a lot more than in the Government’s plans about the EU referendum. The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point on that, as usual. There were a lot more “couds”, “woulds” or “maybes” than in the Government’s preparatory documents.

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) will be pleased to hear that the Government must have been reading our White Paper, because there was talk about the benefits of transitional agreements. Clearly, on the basis of recent press reports of the Government’s plans, they are taking to heart ideas about transitional agreements, which have come straight from the White Paper on Scottish independence. There is also talk about working with our European partners and the EU, where it has responsibility. Of course, Government Members told us that if people voted for Scottish independence, we would not be in the European Union and that the only way to guarantee membership was to vote no. What happened there? The point is that co-operating with Europe is vital.

I am glad to see that the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) has returned to the Chamber. She raised the critical issues of climate change and greenhouse gas emissions. In the context of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, we have many reasons to be grateful for co-operation with our European partners. Everyone who has survived this debate so far continues to benefit from the European Union air quality directives every moment of every day. As for climate change, Scotland’s world-leading Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, which smashed its targets when Conservative Members said we could not achieve them, is much closer to Brussels in policy areas. We have allies and friends who take a similar view.

There is also an important point to be made about the single market. As the Member of Parliament representing, for instance, Pittenweem, Oban and Peterhead, I notice that articulated lorries from European Union countries take fine Scottish seafood to markets across the EU. Driver licensing for EU nationals is especially important in rural areas, be they in the borders, in North East Fife, in Northern Ireland or in the highlands. We want to make those people feel at home, because they contribute so much. Will that licensing continue? Will we continue to have the harmonisation that we have enjoyed?
are fully involved in all future negotiations to ensure that the wider interests of the regions are not overlooked. Will the Minister confirm that this will happen?

On our railways, there is a danger that funding gaps will not be filled. UK rail projects receive EU funding as direct funding or as loans. Will the Government commit to match this funding penny for penny? In response to a series of interventions from my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), we watched the Secretary of State twitching on the end of a line, and I advise him that my hon. Friend is unlikely to let this issue go. I can guarantee that the Secretary of State will not hear the end of it.

**Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op):** On the Welsh context of what my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) raised and also on road infrastructure, EU funding has been a huge asset for heads of the valleys roads and roads across south Wales. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that the Department for Transport secures that funding for road infrastructure so that the Welsh Government can continue to deliver those improvements for roads across the south Wales valleys?

**Jenny Chapman:** That is completely right, and I think the First Minister for Wales—my hon. Friend will correct me if I am wrong—has requested that the funding promised be matched penny for penny. Or will this cash go the same way as the £350 million a week for the NHS, and disappear like a smoke ring from one of Nigel Farage’s cigars?

Rail fares have gone up by over a quarter since the Tories came to power in 2010, which is more than twice as fast as wage growth. There is a danger that the economic consequences of Brexit will mean yet another fare hike for commuters. What are the Government prepared to do to stop fares becoming even less affordable for passengers?

I am going to give credit for this next statistic to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Flello): over 90% of UK international trade in weight passes through UK ports. UK ports directly (Robert Flello): over 90% of UK international trade in weight passes through UK ports. UK ports directly

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[Mr David Jones]

We have engaged successfully with the European institutions to prevent our being penalised in that way, and the near-final text of the regulation is considerably less onerous that what was first proposed. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stone said, this is a good example of how Brexit will enable us to regain control over issues that are important to the UK economy. We must also remember that we will be promoting the great repeal Bill. When enacted, it will absorb the entire corpus of EU law into the body of British law, which will enable us to review that law and repeal or amend it as appropriate. I imagine that he will regard this particular regulation as being ripe for repeal.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Will the Minister tell us how many of them will relate to transport?

Mr Jones: That will of course be a matter for this Parliament. This is about the entire issue of regaining control, which we do not have at the moment. Once we regain control, it will be this Parliament that makes such decisions.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) exhibited a nice line in transport-related puns, for which I compliment him. He raised the important issue of the effects of leaving the EU on business and travellers. My Department is currently engaging closely with businesses right across this sector and 50 others with a view to gauging their concerns and the opportunities. I apologise that I cannot respond to all the issues he mentioned, but trans-Atlantic routes was an important one. I recently had an interesting discussion with Airlines for America, which clearly has an equal interest in the matter from the other direction. That is an example of the fact that third countries will also play a part in the process. As part of the Department’s consultation, we are engaging with interlocutors not only from Britain but from the continent and third countries.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) raised several issues, including vehicle emissions. EU environmental law will be fully absorbed into our own corpus of law and we can then decide what arrangements we make with regard to that legislation, including confirming it if necessary.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), who chairs the Transport Committee, referred to several important matters, some of which I will touch on. She asked what would be the future arrangements for setting standards for new vehicles, and the Department for Transport is focused on that question. Many vehicle standards are actually shaped in United Nations bodies, and the EU absorbs them into EU law. That process would therefore be absorbed into our domestic law as part of the great repeal Bill process. She mentioned access to the single market, which remains a top priority for the Government. We want to secure the best possible access to the single market—consistent with our other priorities as a Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) raised several important constituency issues, including Southampton airport. She welcomed my right hon. Friend the Chancellor’s infrastructure announcements, which will provide a major boost for this country’s transport infrastructure.

The right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton) focused her remarks on rail freight. We recognise that rail freight is an important part of the issue that we are considering today, and I can tell her that representatives of the rail freight industry have participated at round-table discussions held with the rail industry more generally by my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary.

Dame Rosie Winterton: Are Ministers also having meetings with the trade unions who represent members in the rail freight industry?

Mr Jones: What I can say is that the Department encourages the trade unions, as it does every other part of the community, to contribute to the consultation that we are currently holding. I suggest that the right hon. Lady encourages them to contact us.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), who pronounced himself to be a passionate supporter of the remain campaign, made a remarkably Euro-sceptic speech, in which he raised the issue of Volkswagen and what he described as a “scandal”—many in this House would agree with that. As I have said previously, when the great repeal Bill comes through, the EU legislation will be absorbed into our own body of legislation and we can then amend it. It will be up to this Parliament to decide whether it wishes to improve on the current arrangements, and I discern from his remarks that that is something he would welcome.

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) made an upbeat speech, in which he identified a number of opportunities arising from Brexit. He raised the issue of the package travel directive, and all I would say in response is that we are aiming at a new state of affairs, under which this Parliament can make decisions such as that and not simply accept the directives that come from the EU.

Ian Paisley: Is the Minister at a point yet to make a commitment that that directive will never come into force?

Mr Jones: Forgive me, I did not hear the question.

Ian Paisley: As a person called Paisley, I have never once been told that no one can hear me—I apologise profusely. Can the Minister make a commitment at this point, or at some time in the future, that that directive will never come into force?

Mr Jones: I think the answer to that is that it depends on how quickly we complete our withdrawal from the EU and on what this Parliament decides to do. I have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman will be a strong advocate for its non-acceptance of that directive.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) made a contribution relating, inter alia, to the spaceport that he hopes will be located at Prestwick. I had ambitions for north Wales, but I am sure we will both be happy wherever it is located. He also raised the issues of road freight and customs checks, both of which are certainly being taken into account by my Department and by the Department for Transport in the context of our EU exit negotiations.
The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Flello) raised the issue of the importance of logistics. I understand that he is the chairman of the all-party group on freight transport, and he has raised a number of these issues in round-table meetings that have been arranged by the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), who has undertaken to maintain that dialogue.

Finally, we heard a contribution from the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), who spoke about the Scottish referendum.

This has been an important and valuable debate. As I say, it has helped to inform the consideration of my Department and the DFT, and we will continue to hold similar engagements both within this Parliament and with stakeholders from outside the EU.

I make no apologies—I hear the catcalls from Labour Front Benchers—for the fact that this Government are undertaking to maintain that dialogue.

Jenny Chapman rose—

Mr Jones: No, I will not give way. Forgive me; I am near the end of my time.

Jenny Chapman: There is loads of time.

Mr Jones: No, nevertheless. Today’s announcements have demonstrated the commitment of this Government to investing in transport in the UK to help deliver growth and economic security for the whole of the UK. This will remain the case after we leave the EU. The UK remains open for business and industry continues to invest in the UK, as demonstrated by recent announcements such as Associated British Ports’ investment of £50 million in vehicle-handling facilities at the port of Southampton. We will do our best to ensure that transport remains central to our consideration of the issues that arise in the context of our departure from the EU. Once again, I thank hon. Members for their contributions today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered exiting the EU and transport.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance in relation to a matter, notice of which I have given to Mr Speaker and, indeed, to the Foreign Office. Yesterday, during Foreign Office questions, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), in answer to the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), concerning the demolition in the Negev of Umm al-Hiran in Israel, said:

“I will be looking at this particular announcement and making a statement on this later today.”


At about half-past 6 yesterday evening, my office made an inquiry of the Minister’s office and was told that a statement would be issued as soon as possible. We were told the same thing this morning. We were then told that, in fact, it would be a media statement. At about 5 o’clock, when my office phoned again to give notice that I intended to raise this as a point of order, a very short press release was put on to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website.

The point on which I seek your guidance is this: is a Minister in compliance with his or her duties to the House by saying that he or she will make a statement and then issuing a press release, given what Mr Speaker has said in the past about the House being told first before the media?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He and the House know that it is not a point on which I can make a ruling from the Chair, because, of course, the way in which statements are made by Ministers is ultimately a matter for the Minister himself or herself, but I appreciate the point that the right hon. Gentleman makes. He has effectively drawn the matter to the attention of the House and, I hope, rather more widely, because it is a sensitive and important matter. Mr Speaker has said many times in the past that, when a Minister has something to say, it ought to be said first to the House. I cannot make a judgment or a ruling about the issue that the right hon. Gentleman raises, but one would hope that if a Minister has given an undertaking to come to the House with certain information, he will do so at some point. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this sensitive issue to the attention of the House.

PETITION
Norfolk Island

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I rise to present a petition to the House for no fewer than 866 of Her Majesty’s most loyal subjects who live in the Australian external territory of Norfolk Island. I know that you support Norfolk Island, Madam Deputy Speaker, having visited the territory some years ago. Today’s petition coincides with this year’s visit to Norfolk Island by me and the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) and my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski). We visited the island to see what is happening about the right of self-governance being removed from the people of that territory.

As hon. Members will know, we cherish the fact that territories and dependencies should have the right of self-determination. As we uphold that for our territories, so should Australia uphold it for the people of Norfolk Island. The petition also coincides with the visit to the United Kingdom of the former Chief Minister of Norfolk Island, the Hon. Andre Nobbs, and the President of the Council of Elders of Norfolk Island, Mr Albert Buffett.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that on behalf of residents of Norfolk Island, there is an identified historical, cultural, legal and constitutional relationship which Norfolk Island and the Norfolk Island people have celebrated since 1856 with the United Kingdom and the British people.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Her Majesty’s Government to support the people of Norfolk Island to be able to uphold their right of self-determination in accordance with the United Nations Charter specific to decolonisation and humbly request the same right of self-determination as afforded to the people of the British Overseas territories.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn. — (Andrew Griffiths.)

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Flood Defences

1. Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): What estimate has her Department made of the number of properties that will be better protected by the Government’s investment in flood defences up to 2021?

Andrea Leadsom: Absolutely. Of course, it is important that we take into account the protection of new homes being built—that is what the Environment Agency does, as a key stakeholder in all planning decisions—and it is absolutely our intention to make sure that new developments are better protected.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Given that more than 5 million homes are at flood risk in Britain, is it not important that the Department continues its excellent work, not just in building flood defences with concrete, steel and earthworks, but in looking at how nature and land managers can be incentivised to create greater protection for households?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, my hon. Friend is quite right. There are concrete barriers, which are very important, and we have had 130 new schemes since January, better protecting 55,000 homes. However, natural flood management—slowing the flow, and looking at ways to work with the contours of our environment to improve protection—is also vital. I can announce that we have been given £15 million to invest in further projects to do just that.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Through the Secretary of State, may I thank the Environment Agency in the west midlands? Its regional director told me last week that 34 more homes will be protected in the Blythe valley in my constituency. Will she confirm that the agency is constantly updating its modelling in response to rainfall records constantly being broken?

Andrea Leadsom: Absolutely. Of course, it is important to contain an enormous amount of remodelling of the resilience review, which we undertook across Government, contained an enormous amount of remodelling of the likely impacts of increasingly extreme weather events. Of course, the Environment Agency is always looking not just at what schemes can protect people better, but at where the best types of flood protection can be developed, whether through concrete barriers or natural flood protection.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I have just returned from being with my family in Devon, so I have personally experienced the floods caused by Storm Angus, and I would like to join the Secretary of State in thanking the emergency services and everybody who helped so quickly with the clean-up and with supporting people.

Yesterday’s autumn statement gave little hope to the residents of the 5 million properties at risk of flooding. In the March Budget, an additional £700 million of capital expenditure for flood defences and prevention was announced, but just how many schemes have seen a spade in the ground?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have already mentioned, this Government have in fact committed £2.5 billion to new flood defences in the six years to 2021. Just this year,
since January 2016, we have had 130 new flood schemes completed, protecting a further 55,000 homes. We have also enormously increased our temporary flood defences and all our infrastructure capabilities, including incident control vehicles, light towers, pumps, sandbags and so on, to try to deal with the unpredictable nature of these extreme weather events, but we are committed to doing more.

**Twenty-five-year Food and Farming Plan**

2. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What progress she has made on publishing the 25-year great British food and farming plan.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We remain committed to publishing a 25-year food and farming plan. However, the context has changed significantly following the decision to leave the EU, which creates many new opportunities to do things differently and better. We will therefore develop the 25-year food and farming plan alongside our plans for leaving the EU, and we will consult with both industry and the public.

Liz McInnes: I thank the Minister for that response, which fills me with concern. I hope that he will bring the report forward as soon as possible, given that the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs recommended that it be published in April this year. Can he give me some indication of when we will see this important report?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady is wrong to be concerned, because as I have made clear, we are committed to publishing the plan. It is a manifesto commitment. There was no commitment to publish it in April; there is a commitment to do so in this Parliament, and as I have said, the context has changed significantly. It is right to develop the plan alongside our plans for leaving the EU, and we will consult with both industry and the public.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The great British breakfast cereal Weetabix is made in Burton Latimer in the Kettering constituency, and the wheat for Weetabix is grown on farms within a 50-mile radius. What proportion of the nation’s food do we grow ourselves, and what proportion would the Minister like us to grow ourselves?

George Eustice: With regard to the food that we can produce in this country, my hon. Friend will be aware that we produce around 74% of what we consume. If we include foods that we are unable to grow here, the percentage is slightly lower. We have a commitment to having a vibrant, profitable farming industry. We want to grow more, sell more and import less, and if we achieve all that, our self-sufficiency will improve over time.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Given the impact that Brexit will inevitably have on the 25-year food and farming plan, which has yet to be published, what discussions will the Minister have with the Northern Ireland Executive about how the plan will accommodate Brexit, particularly when it comes to agricultural exports, on which we rely for the development of our economy, as he will realise?

George Eustice: I have already had meetings with Michelle McIlveen, and I recently visited Northern Ireland, where I met the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association and spoke at its dinner, so I am already in close engagement with the Northern Ireland Executive, and indeed the Northern Ireland industry, on these issues.

13. **Mr Andrew Turner** (Isle of Wight) (Con): The Wight Marque scheme, which is supported by partners Red Funnel, Taste of the Wight and the Isle of Wight County Press, is doing great work to promote truly local produce. This is an example of a small amount of money doing a lot of good for a growing and important part of the island’s economy. What steps are the Government taking to highlight the benefits that such schemes have in rural areas?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Wight Marque, which the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs’s rural development programme helped to establish, celebrates the Isle of Wight’s brilliant food culture by accrediting local produce. DEFRA fully supports accreditation schemes. They are an opportunity to showcase local and sustainable food, they can make a real contribution to local economies, and they are completely in line with DEFRA’s approach to strengthening our brand.

Rural Economy: Leaving the EU

3. **Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the UK’s decision to leave the EU on the rural economy.

My right hon. and hon. Friends are well aware of this issue, which is not unique to the hon. Lady’s constituency. She will recognise that this will be part of ongoing discussions within Government and, of course, with the EU.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: Scotland’s food and drink exports are worth more than £2 billion to our national economy, and businesses in my constituency of Ochil and South Perthshire contribute significantly to that total. However, many in the agricultural workforce are seasonal workers from other EU states who take advantage of the single market’s free movement policy. Given that, can the Minister provide a guarantee to rural businesses in my constituency and beyond that those seasonal workers who come to Scotland for produce-picking and food and fish processing will still be able to work here after the UK has left the EU?

Dr Coffey: My right hon. and hon. Friends are well aware of this issue, which is not unique to the hon. Lady’s constituency. She will recognise that this will be part of ongoing discussions within Government and, of course, with the EU.

14. **Charlie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con): Does the Minister agree that in addition to the effect on the rural economy, leaving the EU will enable us to take back
control of animal product imports without the EU wildlife trade regulations impinging on us? Will she look at stricter regulations for lion trophy imports?

Dr Coffey: I attended the convention on international trade in endangered species in September this year, when we secured greater scrutiny of trade in trophies to ensure the sustainability of lion exports. We already have suspensions in place for some countries where hunting cannot be considered sustainable at the current time. For example, we are refusing imports of lions and lion trophies from Mozambique, apart from animals hunted in the Niassa reserve, where hunting is considered to be well managed and sustainable.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): One of the characteristics of European structural funds has been support for post-industrial areas. Areas such as mine in west Wales have been huge beneficiaries of structural funds to boost training and businesses. What assurances can the Minister give that west Wales will continue to have access to such funding streams post-2020?

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has already given an assurance that schemes signed in advance of the autumn statement would be honoured in full. He has also continued to give the assurance that as long as funding schemes that are being developed offer good value for money, we will continue to support them in all parts of the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: Will Ministers confirm that in the Brexit negotiations, the Government will focus on promoting efficient and competitive British farming, enabling farmers to reinvest in the countryside and the environment, rather than funding what my Cheshire farmers call costly and complicated bureaucratic schemes?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right to point out that by leaving the EU, we have the chance to design policies that are bespoke to the needs of this country. My right hon. and hon. Friends are actively engaged in developing those options right now, with my support, and at looking at what potential environmental schemes could be at the heart of any future agricultural support.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Agricultural and fisheries businesses right across Scotland businesses to plan for the future? Which would clear up the uncertainty and allow those that people will have their rights protected post-Brexit, the single market. Why will Ministers not simply guarantee that our infrastructure works—and that includes the internet? Small businesses in rural areas would be able to thrive if it did.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right to stress the importance of access to the internet, and to other mobile network operators. That is why the universal service obligation has been enshrined in law through the Digital Economy Bill, and will be in place by the end of this Parliament.

Food and Drink Sector

Mr Speaker: Ah, young Gove. Where is the fellow?

4. Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): What steps she is taking to encourage innovation in the food and drink sector.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): The Prime Minister has set out our vision for making the UK a world leader in innovation, which includes spending an extra £4.7 billion by 2020-21. Food and drink is our largest manufacturing sector—bigger than cars and aerospace combined. Our £160 million agri-tech strategy is taking forward brilliant ideas, such as monitoring crops using the latest satellite data.

Mr Speaker: It is an indescribable delight to see the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove). My surprise was merely at the fact that he has perambulated to a different part of the Chamber from that which he ordinarily inhabits. I am sure that we will enjoy the same eloquence as usual.

Michael Gove: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. As a migratory species, I am glad that you have noticed the different habitat that I am now in.

The Secretary of State will be aware that 80 years ago, the number of fish landed at British ports was 14 times the number we land now. The fishing industry has suffered grievously under the common fisheries policy. Now that we are leaving the European Union, can she say a little more about how investment, growth and innovation in the fish trade will ensure that we bring prosperity back to our great fishing ports?

Andrea Leadsom: I can reassure my right hon. Friend that we will do everything possible to preserve his habitat. I know that he has great knowledge of fishing. Just last week, in China, I signed a memorandum of understanding on seafood that is worth £50 million to UK fishermen, and I have met a number of fishing groups to hear their ideas about what we can do to ensure that our fantastic fishing sectors develop in a positive way once we have left the EU.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What steps she is taking to encourage innovation in the food and drink sector.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Such innovation will be enhanced, and indeed is necessary, in order to restore the water meadows of the lower Avon valley. Will the Secretary of State visit the area to see what we can do?

Andrea Leadsom: I am, of course, delighted to accept my right hon. Friend’s invitation. We will certainly revisit the area to look at that scheme in the new year.
Milk

5. Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): What steps she is taking to support the milk industry.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Although there are limits to what Governments can do when there is a global downturn in commodity prices, we have implemented a number of measures over the past two years. We made a crisis payment to farmers at the end of last year, we have extended tax averaging to make it easier to offset tax from good years, and we have supported intervention and private storage schemes. Looking to the future, we are working with industry to develop risk management tools such as futures markets, supporting new producer organisations, and opening new export markets.

Chris White: I welcome efforts to increase exports of food and drink, but there is still concern about the domestic market in milk. What efforts are being made to ensure that farmers obtain fair prices from supermarkets, and what assistance could the Groceries Code Adjudicator provide?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend has made a good point. These have been two very difficult years for the dairy industry. However, I think we should give credit where it is due, and acknowledge that many of the major supermarkets offer their farmers aligned contracts that are linked to the cost of production. Those farmers have continued to obtain good prices over the last two years. Nevertheless, they are a minority, so we are investigating ways of strengthening the negotiating position of farmers in the supply chain, such as reviewing the operation of the Groceries Code Adjudicator, strengthening the voluntary dairy supply chain code, and strengthening recognition of producer organisations.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What assessment has the Department made of the importance of the provision of school and nursery milk in supporting dairy farmers?

George Eustice: As the hon. Gentleman will know, there is a small European Union scheme to support school milk, which is worth a few million pounds, but it is dwarfed by the much larger, much more important nursery milk scheme run by the Department for Education and the Department of Health, which is worth some £60 million a year.

Mr Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con): The Government’s proposal to withdraw operating licences for approved finishing units with grazing in culling areas is causing great concern to dairy farmers in the south-west. Has the Minister assessed the impact that that measure will have on dairy farmers’ ability to sell their calves, and generally on the market for livestock in the south-west? I urge him to think carefully about it before introducing it.

George Eustice: I can reassure my hon. Friend that I consider such issues very carefully. Approved finishing units do have an important role to play as we try to tackle the long-term challenge of bovine tuberculosis, but if we are trying to roll back the disease, the risk associated with grazing on approved finishing units is greater. It is still possible to have a licence for housed finishing units, and there will still be finishing units in other areas where there is no cull.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): The Department’s farm business survey for last year shows that dairy farm incomes fell by 50%, largely owing to lower milk prices. Will the Minister consider introducing a statutory code to safeguard the dairy sector, and will he agree to expand the role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator to cover the primary producers’ relationships with their suppliers and provide more stability for those producers in the market?

George Eustice: A consultation on the Groceries Code Adjudicator is in progress and is, I believe, open until 10 January. We have issued a call for evidence from the industry, and from others who may have ideas about how we might be able to extend the adjudicator’s remit or consider it further.

Fishing Industry: Recruitment

6. Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to encourage young people to take up a career in the fishing industry.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We predominantly deliver training for new entrants and young people through the levy body Seafish. Since 2011, Seafish has run 97 courses and trained more than 850 new fishermen. There has been a renewed interest in fishing as a career in recent years.

Oliver Colvile: The fishermen in Plymouth are very positive about the future of the fishing industry post-Brexit. They want to improve the commercial fishing facilities at Sutton harbour. Will my hon. Friend find a date to visit Plymouth Trawler Agents, which manages the fish market, and learn of its plans to build a fishing academy to train the fishermen and women of the future?

George Eustice: As we prepare to leave the EU, the mood in the fishing industry is certainly lifting, and there will be opportunities to do things differently and better. My hon. Friend’s constituency has a very proud maritime heritage. Last year I visited the Marine Biological Association and I would of course be more than happy to visit Sutton harbour to discuss the scheme he describes.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Many of our coastal communities have suffered heinously under the common fisheries policy. Will the Minister look at the idea of an investment pot for the under-10 metre fleet to enable it to get up to speed when we leave the EU?

George Eustice: As my hon. Friend knows, we have the European maritime and fisheries fund, one of the EU structural funds, which will run until 2020. Looking beyond 2020, we will be developing and working to establish how best to support the industry. We have also
top-sliced some of the uplift of quota linked to the discard ban this year to give the under-10s more quota than they previously had.

Winter Flooding

7. Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): What steps she has taken to minimise the risk of winter flooding. [907459]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): We have completed 130 new flood schemes this year, protecting over 55,000 households. All but three of the 660 Environment Agency flood defences damaged last winter have now been repaired and the three remaining assets have contingency plans in place. The Environment Agency recently launched its flood awareness campaign and last month we launched the property level resilience action plan on how householders can protect their homes from flooding. It also details measures that will allow them to get back into their home more quickly if they are, unfortunately, flooded.

Mary Creagh: This year, after the devastation caused by storms Desmond, Eva and Frank right across the country, the Government announced an extra £700 million of flood defence spending, but apart from saying £12 million of that would be spent on mobile flood defences to protect electricity and infrastructure assets, there has not been a clear plan from the Government about how the money is going to be spent. The Environmental Audit Committee made strong recommendations on the protection of roads and railways, and with Devon and Cornwall, the north-east and Scotland suffering landslips and ballast washaways in the recent flooding, is not now the time to set out a proper transport infrastructure resilience plan for the whole country?

Dr Coffey: About half of the money has already been allocated, but the hon. Lady may not yet be aware that the autumn statement included the announcement of a package of £170 million to be deployed, £150 million of which is specifically to tackle road and rail.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Minister may recall that in December 2013 there was a tidal surge that affected the Humber estuary. Many of my constituents had their homes flooded, and throughout the Humber hundreds were affected. Can the Minister reassure me that there will be no slippage in future flood defence spending on the Humber?

Dr Coffey: The 2013 tidal surge affected the entire east coast, including my constituency. I can assure my hon. Friend that the schemes already planned will continue given the record £2.5 billion investment this Government are making in flood defences.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I learned recently that water companies are not a statutory consultee, despite companies such as Severn Trent Water wanting to be and having a great deal of knowledge not only about flooding areas, but also about, for example, whether storm drains can cope with additional water created by new building. Will the Minister have a conversation with her opposite numbers in the Department for Communities and Local Government about changing things so that water companies can be a statutory consultee?

Dr Coffey: I recognise that water companies are not currently a statutory consultee, but that does not stop them having conversations. The Environment Agency continues to provide advice on all planning applications, and in 98% of planning applications across England its advice is accepted.

Farmers and Environmental Groups (Funding)

8. Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that the level of funding for (a) farmers and (b) environmental groups is maintained after the UK leaves the EU. [907460]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): My top priority on becoming DEFRA Secretary was agreeing with the Treasury continuity of support for farmers. We are guaranteeing that the agricultural sector will receive the same level of pillar one funding until 2020, which has provided vital certainty, but we are also guaranteeing agri-environment and rural development schemes under pillar two, which are vital to making sure we take every opportunity to improve our environment.

Lucy Frazer: Many farmers in my constituency have been signed up to agri-environmental schemes for many years. What contribution does the Secretary of State think that the schemes, and our farmers, are making to improve our environment?

Andrea Leadsom: I join my hon. Friend in applauding the efforts of farmers across the country. In the past five years, our agri-environmental schemes have delivered excellent long-term benefits, including 150,000 acres of habitats, the planting of more than 11 million trees and the restoration or planting of 950 miles of hedges. All of this supports our long-term pledge to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better place than we found it.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Welsh farmers face a future of unprecedented uncertainty. Will the Secretary of State commit to devolving agricultural funding according to need, rather than through the unfit-for-purpose Barnett formula?

Andrea Leadsom: I can absolutely assure the hon. Lady that we will consult in great detail on future policy with all the devolved Administrations once we have left the EU, to ensure that we focus on what is best for our UK food and farming producers rather than for 28 EU member states.

Topical Questions

T1. 907471 Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): Flooding is devastating for anyone who experiences it, and I have spent a great
deal of time recently ensuring that we have the best possible preparation for the winter weather. There will be opportunities for all colleagues to play our part in ensuring that our constituents are as well prepared as possible—for example, by getting them to sign up to the Environment Agency’s free Flood Warnings Direct service or to visit the Floods Destroy website, which enables people to check their own flood risk. The Environment Agency will also be hosting a drop-in session for parliamentarians next Tuesday from 1 pm to 5 pm in Committee Room 9, where we will be able to hear more about winter preparedness.

Ian Austin: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but I would like to ask her about her Department’s UK food and drink international action plan, which suggests that the Department will seek foreign direct investment to fill existing gaps in skills and production. How will she ensure that food standards, production rates and manufacturing skills will be maintained in the event of foreign takeovers of existing companies, as we have seen with Mondelez and UK biscuit production?

Andrea Leadsom: The UK has some of the highest animal welfare, food safety and food traceability standards in the world, and we will always seek to maintain them, notwithstanding our international food export action plan, which seeks to promote great British food abroad as well as to take advantage of foreign direct investment to fill existing gaps in skills and production. How will she ensure that food standards, production rates and manufacturing skills will be maintained in the event of foreign takeovers of existing companies, as we have seen with Mondelez and UK biscuit production?

Andrea Leadsom: The UK has some of the highest animal welfare, food safety and food traceability standards in the world, and we will always seek to maintain them, notwithstanding our international food export action plan, which seeks to promote great British food abroad as well as to take advantage of foreign direct investment to fill existing gaps in skills and production. How will she ensure that food standards, production rates and manufacturing skills will be maintained in the event of foreign takeovers of existing companies, as we have seen with Mondelez and UK biscuit production?

T3. [907473] Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Is the fisheries Minister aware that the shell fishery in the Wash is now the most prolific in Europe? We have recently seen record catches of shrimp, much of which is exported. However, this part of the fishery is at risk because of a permit system. Will he look into the situation, intervene and do his best to ensure that the fishery continues to thrive?

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): My hon. Friend has raised this issue with me before, so I am well aware of it. I am also aware that it is a matter for the local Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Agency, although DEFRA does have a role in working with IFCA and signing off any proposals. I understand that this particular case is at the consultation stage, so local fishermen should make their views known at this point.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The pound has fallen, the cost of imports has risen and Brexit is costing the wine industry £413 million in imports alone. From Marmitegate to the Toblerone gap, we have seen rising prices across the food industry. Customers are paying more for food while those working in farming and food production have been hit even harder. And it is getting worse. What is the Secretary of State doing to mitigate these factors?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that we have an incredibly thriving food and farming sector that employs one in eight of us. It is worth more than £100 billion a year to our economy. Our food innovation is second to none: we produce more new food products every year than France and Germany combined. Food inflation continues to be low, and our thriving sector’s exports are improving. They have gone up this year and we are doing everything we can to create a sustainable environment for the future.

Rachael Maskell: The reality is that food inflation is at 5%. This is happening on the Secretary of State’s watch. It is her responsibility and her crisis. People are struggling now. The sector is calling for security: security of labour; security in the market; security of trade; and security in knowing the plans for the sector on leaving the EU. Labour can provide the sector with confidence today—we have a clear plan. Why will the Secretary of State not share her plan? Is it because there is no plan?

Andrea Leadsom: If I may say so, that was nonsense. Food prices have been dropping after peaking in 2008, and they do move up and down. On the hon. Lady’s point about the resilience of the food and drink sector, exports this year are well up on last year and growth in the sector is booming. We are doing everything we can on food innovation and getting young people into apprenticeships in increasingly high-technology jobs. This is a well-organised sector with great potential.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): In several conversations with the National Farmers Union and farmers in south Wiltshire, complaints have been made to me about how the Rural Payments Agency has been working. Edward Martin and Will Dickson complain of unilateral changes to agreed eligibility calculations. What will the Minister do to ensure that such issues are sorted out so that I do not have any more complaints from my farmers?

George Eustice: Having ironed out some of the difficulties we encountered in 2015, we are in a stronger position this year. The RPA reports that over 80% of basic payment scheme claims were submitted online, meaning that the number of cases requiring manual data-entry was significantly reduced. If my hon. Friend would like to give me further details of those two cases, I will ensure that they are investigated and will personally get back to him.

George Eustice: Having ironed out some of the difficulties we encountered in 2015, we are in a stronger position this year. The RPA reports that over 80% of basic payment scheme claims were submitted online, meaning that the number of cases requiring manual data-entry was significantly reduced. If my hon. Friend would like to give me further details of those two cases, I will ensure that they are investigated and will personally get back to him.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State tell us how much it will cost to replace the agricultural subsidy when we leave the EU?

George Eustice: We have committed to continue to make all payments up until 2020, and we are already engaging with the industry and others to devise future agriculture policy. Those plans will be announced well in advance of 2020.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): In my fishing town of Filey, only seven boats have been licenced by the Environment Agency and all licences will expire by 2022, ending heritage fishing in the town. Will the Minister meet me to seek a solution to secure the future of fishing in Filey?

George Eustice: We have committed to continue to make all payments up until 2020, and we are already engaging with the industry and others to devise future agriculture policy. Those plans will be announced well in advance of 2020.
used along the shoreline in his constituency, and I am more than happy to meet him.

T4. [907474] Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): In the weeks immediately after the floods that devastated my constituency and others last year, the Government were able to argue that there was no evidence of market failure to deliver affordable insurance for businesses affected by the flood. Since then, however, I have had case after case of businesses being denied insurance or offered unaffordable packages. What are the Government doing to ensure that such businesses can secure affordable insurance?

Andrea Leadsom: I would be delighted to do that. We have some amazing products. We have taken gin out to the Chinese, which was a great experience, and just look at the beers from the UK that the Vietnamese are drinking already. We are seeing market access and greater exports, and just yesterday we saw the beers at the “Taste of Cheltenham” event. My right hon. Friend is right to highlight produce from his constituency and I would be delighted to share in a knees-up with him any time.

Mr Speaker: I have always thought of the right hon. Gentleman sitting and reading Proust, rather than having a knees-up, so one’s imagination is challenged a bit—but there you go, it is probably good for us.

T6. [907476] Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): Further to the question from the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh), may I argue the case for Wales and ask the Secretary of State what discussions she has had with Assembly Ministers on the case for post-2020 funding that both respects devolution and gives us a fair funding settlement for Welsh farmers?

Andrea Leadsom: I am meeting a Welsh Minister just today to discuss that very subject, and my colleagues have met a number of Welsh Ministers in recent weeks. At official level there are constant discussions, we have had informal stakeholder meetings and, as we have pointed out, formal consultations will be taking place, starting in the near future.

T7. [907475] Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Last month, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union could not offer an answer when asked whether powers over agriculture and fisheries would be devolved to the Scottish Parliament. However, DEFRA Ministers say that the UK Government will be devising a UK-wide policy framework for those industries. When the UK leaves the EU, will responsibility for agriculture and fisheries be devolved to the Scottish Parliament—yes or no?

Andrea Leadsom: I am meeting a Welsh Minister just today to discuss that very subject, and my colleagues have met a number of Welsh Ministers in recent weeks. At official level there are constant discussions, we have had informal stakeholder meetings and, as we have pointed out, formal consultations will be taking place, starting in the near future.

Dr Coffey: I think we have all just felt the effects of slow broadband in that question! Nevertheless, I am aware of the plans and I can assure hon. Members that conversations have already been had with the Treasury.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Thanks to the Minister, the sheep dip sufferers group now has access to documents including medical records from the poisons unit at Guy’s hospital, which show what many sufferers have known for years: there were long-term health impacts of using sheep dip. Will he meet us again so that we can act for those who still suffer?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady will be aware that I met her and others about a year ago, when we looked at this issue in depth. I subsequently went back through all the submissions that came from the chief veterinary officer in the early 1990s to establish precisely why we stopped using sheep dip, and it was not because of health concerns; it was because of a belief that it was not possible to tackle the disease. I note that she has now got the documents, but I simply say that the
committee on toxicity looked at this issue exhaustively, examining 26 different studies over a period of more than a decade, and concluded that in the absence of acute poisoning there would not be meaningful long-term effects.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Traffic hotspots in the Broomhill area of my constituency create unacceptably high levels of nitrogen dioxide. The council is doing what it can, but it is frustrated by the Government on issues such as the deregulation of taxi licensing. We need joined-up action across government, and as the High Court said earlier this month, we need it urgently. So when will the Government produce an effective and comprehensive air quality plan?

Dr Coffey: We have accepted the Court’s judgment and we now have a new timescale for revising the plan. We have already said that we would update our plans on the basis of evidence on vehicle emissions. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will contribute to the clean air zones consultation, which was launched on 13 October. More than 100 councils applied for an air quality grant and these decisions will be made in due course.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The World Breastfeeding Trends Initiative published a report card in the Broomhill area of my constituency create unacceptably high levels of nitrogen dioxide. The council is doing what it can, but it is frustrated by the Government on issues such as the deregulation of taxi licensing. We need joined-up action across government, and as the High Court said earlier this month, we need it urgently. So when will the Government produce an effective and comprehensive air quality plan?

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Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The World Breastfeeding Trends Initiative published a report card on the UK last week which awarded zero points out of 10 to the Government’s plans for protecting infant and young child feeding in emergencies such as flooding. Will Ministers work with their colleagues in the Department of Health to ensure that when flooding or power cuts occur during the winter there are plans in place to protect infant and young child feeding?

Dr Coffey: I have already had discussions with officials from various Departments on our preparedness for winter. There is an inter-ministerial group meeting next week at which the Department of Health will be represented, and I will make sure that it is aware of the hon. Lady’s question.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Gainsborough, Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, was asked—

National Audit Office: EU

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the hon. Gentleman wishes to group this question with question 4, does he not?

Sir Edward Leigh: I do.

Mr Speaker: Very good. Well done.

Sir Edward Leigh: I apologise. I am not used to being a Minister. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: It does not show. “Honourable” is the hon. Gentleman’s middle name.

1. Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What assessment the National Audit Office has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on its work.

4. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What assessment the NAO has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on its work.

Sir Edward Leigh: The National Audit Office uses its resources to provide direct support to Parliament and stands ready to support parliamentary scrutiny of Brexit. In my humble view, there should be more, not less, parliamentary scrutiny of Brexit. The NAO is keeping close touch with Departments as their preparations for exiting the EU develop. This will be a major task for Departments and is likely to include additional work for the NAO, not least the audit of the new Department for Exiting the European Union.

Pauline Latham: What value-for-money aspects of Brexit does the NAO intend to examine?

Sir Edward Leigh: The NAO’s scrutiny will focus initially on the capacity and capability of Departments to deliver an effective and efficient exit process. The NAO will work with all Departments to assess the potential impact of exiting the European Union on their financial performance and position. The NAO is already the auditor of the new Department for Exiting the European Union and will work with it and the Treasury to ensure efficiency.

Martin Vickers: Following the rather over-pessimistic forecast that we heard about yesterday from the Office for Budget Responsibility, does my hon. Friend agree that it would be interesting to have another independent assessment from the NAO, which might show a more optimistic post-Brexit forecast?

Sir Edward Leigh: The National Audit Office will not actually assess any economic effects of exiting the EU, but what it can do is ensure that the civil service carries out its task with due diligence and efficiency. I am confident that our civil service, which is one of the most efficient in the world, will do the job properly. The NAO is certainly one of the best auditors in the world, and we will make this process work efficiently and smoothly as best we can.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Persecution of Christians

2. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What recent representations the Church of England has received on the persecution of Christians overseas.

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church of England remains concerned about a number of religious minorities across the world, not just Christian ones. Recently, the Lord Bishop of Coventry travelled to northern Iraq to visit the Christians in Mosul because it is clear that questions remain about their continued safety and the need to make their homes and businesses safe if they are to sustain themselves there.
Henry Smith: Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the Open Doors organisation, which does so much to raise awareness of the persecution of Christians around the world and often courageously defends communities?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Yes. There are a number of excellent organisations such as Open Doors, Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Aid to the Church in Need which are working to support the Christian community overseas. I plan to attend a reception for the launch of the 2017 World Watch List in January, and I encourage hon. Members also to attend.

Fiona Bruce (Con): What discussions did the Archbishop of Canterbury have during his recent visit to Pakistan about religious persecution there?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Archbishop of Canterbury made his second pastoral visit to Pakistan last weekend and met the victims and the bereaved of the recent suicide bomb attacks in Islamabad and Lahore. He also met the adviser to the Prime Minister of Pakistan, where the conversation was warm and constructive on a range of matters, including the contribution of the Christian community in Pakistan and the suffering of many Muslims and Christians in the struggle against terrorism.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What representations has my right hon. Friend received in relation to the persecution of Christians in Iran? Last week, we had a conference attended by several bishops, and the concern there was that Christians cannot even congregate and are subject to military rule.

Dame Caroline Spelman: As I mentioned, the Lord Bishop of Coventry made a recent visit to Iraq, precisely to look at the terrible oppression that religious minorities, including Christians, are suffering. There is no question for any Member of this House that safety and security are paramount issues, and we look to the Foreign Office to help us in our support for persecuted religious minorities in the region.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If we made it a criminal offence in this country for a Christian to become a Muslim, there would be outrage across the world. Yet people in many Arab countries face legal persecution and prosecution if they convert from Islam to Christianity. What representations is the Church making to these Arab countries that have such rules on apostasy?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Obviously nations are sovereign, and we know that in this country there is an appetite to respect sovereignty, but that does not preclude Government Ministers and Church leaders from speaking with force to the Ministers of countries where religious minorities are oppressed, to ensure that there is tolerance towards those minorities in their society.

Church Conservation

3. Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): What advice the Church of England makes available to parish churches on building conservation.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church of England does provide advice and support to parish churches in the following ways: diocesan advisory committees, which give free advice; specific officers to advise parishes regarding the care of historic churches; the national ChurchCare website, which provides guidance; and grant schemes operated by ChurchCare.

Oliver Colville: Earlier this autumn, the Ministry of Defence announced that the Royal Citadel, which includes a royal chapel, will be released back to the Crown Estate. I suspect it will need significant restoration and investment. Who shall I speak to about the restoration, and what will be the status of St Katherine once the royal chapel and the barracks are fully released?

Dame Caroline Spelman: That is a specific question about a specific type of church, but I can assure my hon. Friend that if he takes up direct contact with me, I will take up that specific case on his behalf to see how we can assist this transition. However, the community that worships at that church is able, of itself, to look at the ChurchCare website to see what is available in theory to assist the church. My hon. Friend has seen for himself the way in which the Church has assisted St Matthias Church in Plymouth to transform itself to meet the needs of the student community, with services that are appropriate for that age group and with a style of worship it would enjoy.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): When I was a curate, which was obviously in another millennium, one of the biggest problems that faced the Church in relation to conservation was not only meeting the cost, particularly for beautiful elderly churches, but finding the people who had the craft skills to do the work. Now that the head of the Church’s Buckingham Palace is going to be done up, at the same time that this Palace and many churches around the country are going to be done up, would it not be a good idea to have a joint industrial strategy to make sure that we get lots of young people trained up in these skills?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, during his curacy, knew what a struggle it is to maintain these ancient buildings. That is why the Church is participating in the ongoing review by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to examine the sustainability of Church of England churches. However, I am sure he will join me in once again thanking the Treasury for its assistance with the world war one centenary cathedral repairs fund, which helped 42 cathedrals around the country to make significant repairs and created jobs for many young people in the crafts he would wish to see flourish.

Red Wednesday

5. Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to support the Red Wednesday campaign against religious persecution.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church of England welcomes very much the Red Wednesday initiative from Aid to the Church in Need. This is a multi-faith initiative. I would particularly like to thank you, Mr Speaker, for
agreement that the Palace of Westminster should join Westminster Abbey, Westminster Cathedral and Lambeth Palace in lighting their buildings in red yesterday to stand in solidarity with those facing persecution for their faith.

Robert Flello: May I join the right hon. Lady in thanking all those who lit church and other buildings, including, as she said, our own Parliament? While I live in hope that religious persecution will diminish and one day end, will she join me in encouraging those responsible for all buildings to take part next year to make a public statement of our solidarity with all those suffering persecution on the grounds of their religious faith?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Yes, I very much hope that other significant buildings will join in with this. The fact that students from schools in many parts of the UK marked Red Wednesday by wearing an item of red clothing and holding prayer services is an example of how we extend the acknowledgment of the suffering and persecution of religious minorities. That is important, and I hope that this will catch on.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend will join me at 11 o’clock this morning in the Grand Committee Room, where I am sponsoring an event for the wonderful organisation, Aid to the Church in Need. Indeed, I hope that all Members might consider turning up. Three quarters of the world’s population now live in countries where there is some sort of religious persecution. This is such an important issue that I hope we can all unite behind my right hon. Friend, the Speaker and everybody else to voice our concerns.

Dame Caroline Spelman: I had meant to mention myself that this event is being held just after this session of questions, so if hon. Members would like to divert to the Grand Committee Room they will indeed find the report being launched. We would all do well to read it.

Anti-Semitism

6. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to tackle anti-Semitism.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church of England takes anti-Semitism very seriously and is supporting the work of the Chief Rabbi and the Holocaust Memorial Trust to counteract the growing anti-Semitic and extreme language evidenced in a report by the Home Affairs Committee.

Diana Johnson: With the incidence of anti-Semitic attacks rising by 11% in the first six months of this year, and the documented rise in hate crimes since the Brexit vote in June, what more could the Church of England, as the established Church in England, do in its leadership role in communities throughout the whole of England?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I could not commend strongly enough to all Members the Home Affairs Committee report recording the very disturbing rise in anti-Semitism. That is precisely why, last week, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi launched In Good Faith, a twinning arrangement between rabbis and priests in local neighbourhoods around the country. It is in its early stages, but it will involve a commitment to work together to counteract anti-Semitism.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Electronic Voting: House of Commons

7. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): When the Commission last made an estimate of the cost of introducing electronic voting to the House; and what that estimate was.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The Commission has given no formal consideration to a move to electronic voting in the House. Its responsibility in this matter is limited to any financial or staffing implications of any change to the current system, were a change to be agreed by the House. The Procedure Committee, of which the hon. Gentleman has been a member since 2015, will be well placed to inquire into the matter and come up with proposals.

Patrick Grady: It is a pleasure to ask a question of a spokesman on the same side of the House. During the Report stage of the Higher Education and Research Bill on Monday we spent nearly an hour trooping through the Division Lobbies. Has the Commission ever made a calculation of the cost to the taxpayer of that dead time in terms of staff, security and utilities? If we are to be decanted as part of a restoration process, surely that presents an opportunity to devise a pilot for electronic voting if we are not going to replicate every last detail of where we are now.

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those two questions. On the time it takes Members to vote, he may not be aware that back in 1997 this House did consider substantial changes to the way in which we voted, and I am afraid it voted to keep things exactly as they were. I hope that by, perhaps, early next year we will have a substantive debate in this place on the restoration and renewal issue, and that would be the appropriate opportunity for him to raise his point.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the current system affords Members an opportunity to noble Ministers when they are bereft of their heavies and spin doctors?

Tom Brake: It is indeed true that when trooping through the Division Lobbies there are opportunities to lobby Ministers, but clearly those opportunities are more frequent for Government Members than for Opposition Members.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Does not the right hon. Gentleman agree that it gives Opposition Members an opportunity for team building, which is extremely important? Will he do everything he can to keep the issue at the bottom of his in-tray?
Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, which gives me the opportunity to underline the importance of team-building opportunities in the Lobby, particularly for her party.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Christmas

8. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to use technology to promote its values and beliefs over the Christmas period.

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his timely question as we prepare for the arrival of Advent this weekend. The Church of England will launch a new website—www.achristmasnearyou.org—on 1 December to help the 2.7 million members of the public who attend church over Advent, and the 2.5 million people who attend at Christmas, find their nearest church service or celebration.

Nigel Huddleston: How are churches being encouraged to use social media to share the message of Christmas, and what is the take-up of social media by churches in constituencies such as mine?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Some 23,000 services have been added to the website by more than 5,000 parishes. It might interest hon. Members to know that it has filters, so, for example, disabled parishioners can find out how easily they can access a church, and there is a filter for those who wish to know whether mince pies and mulled wine will be served. The social media campaign also includes a video in which Mr Speaker’s very own chaplain makes her important contribution under the hashtag #joytotheworld. I recommend that we all watch that.

Mr Speaker: That is very good news, because she is an excellent woman, as everybody in the House can testify, and, if I say so myself, a fine appointment by me.
Business of the House

10.31 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): The business for next week is as follows:


Tuesday 29 November: Second Reading of the Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill, followed by opposed private business for consideration, as announced by the Chairman of Ways and Means.

Wednesday 30 November: Opposition day (14th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party. Subject to be announced.

Thursday 1 December: Debate on a motion on transgender equality, followed by a general debate on the future of the UK fishing industry. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 2 December: Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 5 December will include:

Monday 5 December: Second Reading of the Children and Social Work Bill [Lords].

Tuesday 6 December: Remaining stages of the Health Services Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill.

Wednesday 7 December: Opposition day (15th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

Thursday 8 December: Debate on a motion on UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, followed by a general debate on the cancer strategy one year on. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 9 December: The House will not be sitting.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 8 December will be a debate on the fourth report of the Scottish Affairs Committee on post-study work schemes.

In view of yesterday’s conclusion of the trial of the man who murdered our late colleague Jo Cox, I hope that you will allow me, Mr Speaker, to say that I believe that the entire House would wish, first, to express our thanks to the police and the Crown Prosecution Service for the work that they did in bringing this man to trial and securing his conviction, and, secondly, to send our solidarity and our love to Jo’s family, who have shown unbelievable grace, dignity and courage in the months just past.

Thirdly, I hope that we can all agree that perhaps the best tribute that we here, whatever our party politics, can pay to Jo and her memory is to recommit ourselves, whether as constituency Members or as holders of various offices, to do all that lies within our power to ensure that this country remains a place where people of different ethnic origins and faiths can live together in mutual respect, goodwill and harmony, and celebrate together our common citizenship and our shared institutions, values and traditions. We will also continue unflinchingly to stand for the truth that it is through parliamentary democracy that we can seek to secure change and find a better future for those who sent us here, rather than through violence or extremism.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House for what he has just said. The power and beauty of those words will resonate with all of us.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for those words. He shows what a great parliamentarian he is, and I associate myself absolutely with everything he said about those who have brought the murderer to justice.

I need to ask the Leader of the House again, because he has not mentioned this, about the dates for the recess after February. The Prime Minister has said that she will trigger article 50 in March, so we need to know whether we will be away in recess if we will have a debate. What is the mechanism? Will the Prime Minister make an announcement on the steps of Downing Street, or will she make a phone call? She relinquished the presidency of the EU by telephone. May we know what the mechanism is? The British people need to know the framework. The Government might not want to show their position, but according to a Library note, as soon as article 50 is triggered, the European Council will draw up a negotiating mandate—the guidelines—without the UK’s participation.

The Ministry of Justice is a troubled Department. Hardly 24 hours have gone by since the autumn statement and we have the first concession. It turns out that the figures in the Government’s proposals for whiplash reform are out of date and will be updated during the implementation process. The consultation apparently referred to the 12th edition of the judicial guidelines as the basis for the figures instead of the more generous position in the 13th edition, which significantly increases the guideline damages for whiplash. That is what happens when the Government have a policy and then find the evidence for it, rather than implementing evidence-based policy. It takes a riot and a breakdown before money is given to the prison service, despite numerous calls for that.

The Department of Health is a troubled Department. I do not know whether any representations have made by the Health Secretary, but he is nowhere to be seen. Last Friday, every former Health Secretary from the past 20 years signed an open letter to the Government urging them to honour the pledge to ensure that there is parity of esteem for mental health, but there was no money for that in the autumn statement. Will the Leader of the House tell us what the response was to that letter, and could he place it in the Library?

Could we also have a statement on the crisis in cancer diagnosis? According to Cancer Research UK, there are long waits for test results, even though getting an early diagnosis is vital for treatment. There is a shortage of consultants, radiologists and endoscopists. Some Members of the House are undergoing treatment for cancer; we wish all of them and their families well. We wish everyone who is touched by cancer a speedy recovery.

The autumn statement was a statement for the elite. The Chancellor said that the Oxford and Cambridge expressway would become
“a transformational tech corridor, drawing on the world-class research strengths of our two best-known universities.”—[Official Report, 23 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 904.]

Again, that elitism is not based on evidence, because the 2017 university league tables put Oxford and Cambridge third and fourth. Imperial is first and the London School of Economics is second. Cardiff is fifth, and King’s, Warwick, University College London, Queen Mary and Edinburgh are in the top 10. May we have a statement on what will be available for the other universities that do not have the historic wealth of Oxford and Cambridge?

In a previous outing at the Dispatch Box, I asked for money for local government. Local government is in desperate need, but the money has now gone to unelected local enterprise partnerships rather than elected local authorities. The Minister responsible for the northern powerhouse, the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), has said that areas with directly elected mayors will have the “main share of funding”—that is power in the hands of one person. May I draw the Leader of the House’s attention to another letter? It is from county councils, mainly of the same party as the Government, which have said that funding should not be made on an “arbitrary prioritisation of specific governance models”.

Everyone on the Labour Benches agrees that money should flow according to need.

This was not an autumn statement for women, so may we have a debate on its impact on women? Women are not satisfied by a passing reference to Pemberley; we want more. Increasing the personal tax allowance will do nothing to help those earning too little to pay income tax, 65% of whom are women. My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) has already said that the £3 million for women’s charities is just the balance from the £15 million raised under the tampon tax, £12 million of which has already been given away by the previous Chancellor.

Despite 74 written parliamentary questions on social care in November, there was no extra money for social care—indeed, there was no mention of money for social care—in the autumn statement. Cuts to social care hit women especially hard because the majority of those needing care and of those providing it, paid or unpaid, are women. “Just about managing” is of the women needing care and of those providing it, paid or unpaid, are women. “Just about managing” is of the

Finally, tomorrow is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. I thank MP4 for organising an event and playing in memory of Jo Cox. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and Ian Cawsey, a former Member, spent a lot of time last Thursday recording “A Song for Jo”, which I think is coming out in January. Her love, values and example live on in all of us. Government is not just about fixing the roof; we are about transforming lives. Let us dedicate ourselves to that task in her memory.

Mr Lidington: I will try to respond fairly briefly to the many questions that the hon. Lady has put to me. I understand the impatience of colleagues on both sides of the House to know recess dates, particularly the Easter recess dates. Although I have not been able to announce them today, I hope to be in a position to do so very soon. She asked about the process for triggering article 50—there has to be a formal notification to the European Council.

The hon. Lady asked about the Ministry of Justice. Frankly, I would have hoped that she welcomed the action that the Government are taking on whiplash, because I thought that it commanded widespread support on both sides of the House. We are now embarking on the consultation with a view to legislation at some stage afterwards. I hope that we can build a formidable cross-party coalition in support of such measures. The hon. Lady was unfairly dismissive of the ambitious vision for the transformation of our prison service in the White Papers on prisons, which was launched by my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary just a fortnight ago.

The hon. Lady asked me about the Department of Health, but the Secretary of State for Health answered oral questions in the House earlier this week. She inquired about mental health in particular. This Government not only have invested more in mental health than any of our predecessors, but have for the first time written into law a requirement for physical health and mental health to be given equal priority. She asked about cancer treatments. Despite the demographic and other pressures that there undoubtedly are on the national health service, since 2010—in part because of the money this Government have put in, but also because of the reforms that we have undertaken—there has been an increase of some 822,000 in the number of people seen by a cancer specialist, and an increase of 49,000 in the number of people who are commencing cancer treatment. Yes, there is more work to be done, but that is not a bad track record to be getting on with.

On the Oxford-to-Cambridge expressway, the hon. Lady fell into the trap of believing the rather stale and antiquated class war rhetoric that she gets from the leadership of her party. The expressway will benefit places such as Milton Keynes and Bedford, where at some stage in the more distant past the Labour party once hoped it might win constituencies or local councils—it is a sign of the times that it appears to have given up on such communities. That expressway corridor offers opportunities for economic growth and the chance to unlock significant new housing development in areas of high demand. The Labour party has been calling for more house building.

Similarly, on infrastructure funds, Labour local authority leaders, particularly in the north, argued for the model of devolution we have precisely so that there could be an allocation of central Government funds to devolved authorities to enable strategic planning and expenditure. If the hon. Lady looks at the detail of the autumn statement, she will find the housing investment infrastructure fund, which is targeted at local authorities that are able to bid for infrastructure funding in areas where that will unlock significant new housing development in areas where that will unlock additional housing supply.

I happily acknowledge, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister did yesterday, that there are indeed pressures on social care—we see that in our constituencies. This Government have therefore introduced the better care fund and the social care precept to put extra money into the system to help local authorities to cope with those demands.
I turn finally to what the hon. Lady said about the position of women. More women are now in work in this country than ever before. This Government have increased support to families through childcare more than any of our predecessors. Those things work very much for the benefit of women in all walks of life. If the hon. Lady looks at the distributional analysis published by the Treasury, she will see that the measures the Chancellor announced yesterday provide a modest but positive improvement in the incomes and living standards of all deciles in our society apart from the richest, who will experience a modest loss.

I completely endorse and associate myself with the hon. Lady’s remarks about the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, as well as her tributes to our hon. Friends who have played a part in work on that. I hope that, in turn, she will agree that we need to stand firm against violence against women and girls in all its forms, both here and globally. The work initiated by my right hon. Friend Lord Hague as Foreign Secretary to awaken the world’s conscience to the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and to try to secure the extirpation of that vile practice continues under this Government. I hope that it will continue under all future British Governments.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): May I associate myself with the Leader of the House’s remarks about our colleague Jo Cox? She was indeed a parliamentarian who, in such a short time, made a big impact on our country and our society.

As the Leader of the House will know, the Paralympics started in our country—in Stoke Mandeville in his constituency. We were terribly impressed by the achievements of our Paralympians, which will be to the credit of our country.

Mr Lidington: I had better declare an interest as a patron of the National Paralympic Heritage Trust, which seeks to maintain the heritage of Stoke Mandeville, the birthplace of the Paralympic movement. I am concerned by what my right hon. Friend has said and I will certainly take it up with my colleagues in the Treasury and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to see what can be done.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week’s business and fully associate myself and my hon. Friends with his remarks about yesterday’s trial, which finally saw a conviction for this appalling act. As the Leader of the House, he spoke today on behalf of the whole House, and I think everyone will have been moved by his eloquence. I hope that his words will help us all to recover, reset ourselves and move forward.

It is barely 24 hours since the Chancellor sat down following his autumn statement, and already Conservative Members are fighting among themselves over just how big this Brexit disaster is going to be. Today, the Office for Budget Responsibility—the doomy and gloomy OBR—is the villain of the piece, after predicting that we will pay a £60 billion premium for this clueless Brexit. Can we have a full debate about the economic consequences of Brexit, and can the Leader of the House help us out? Whom should we trust—the OBR or the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and his hon. Friends?

Can we have a debate about Ferrero Rocher, or perhaps about how the Government appoint their ambassadorial class? For the life of me, I cannot understand their problem with an Ambassador Farage. For goodness sake, the EU referendum was won on his terms and conditions, and we are practically living in the early days of UKIP UK, so come on! The bad Baron Boot-Them-out-of-Here, his excellency the ambassador to the United States, going to Trump Tower—what could possibly go wrong?

We have learned that, in his latest escapade in trying to evade scrutiny of his clueless Brexit plans, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union is not prepared to come before the Select Committees of this House. He has twice refused to come before my Committee, and I understand from its Chair that he has refused to come before even the Treasury Committee. In correspondence with me, the Secretary of State said that he was not prepared to come before any Select Committees other than the Brexit Committee. We have detailed questions for him about Scotland’s place in Europe, so will the Leader of the House convince his right hon. Friend that proper scrutiny must be in place and that he must come before the Select Committees of this House?

Mr Lidington: First, may I thank the hon. Gentleman for his opening words?

On the hon. Gentleman’s first point, the OBR was deliberately set up as an independent body in order to remove any suggestion that the economic forecasts were being tampered with on political grounds by the Government of the day. The OBR forecasts yesterday are its own, but it is sensible for the Government to work on the basis that they are accurate—and they are not out of kilter with the mainstream of other independent forecasters. The Bank of England’s current predictions are actually a little more pessimistic than the OBR’s.

There are many uncertainties. For example, will the fall in the value of sterling against other currencies be maintained and, even if it is, will importers be able to pass on the price impact through the prices charged to customers? It is perfectly sensible, in the light of the OBR forecast, for the Chancellor to have steered the course he has. He was completely honest with the House and the country yesterday in saying, quite plainly, where the uncertainties and the difficulties lay and in not trying to wish away any of the problems that clearly guided his Budget judgment.

On the question of the accountability of Ministers from the Department for Exiting the European Union, we had another debate yesterday and it is out of the EU—this time on transport policy—and I can give the hon. Gentleman the promise that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and his entire team will be
here next Thursday, 1 December, for oral questions, when he and his colleagues will have the opportunity to interrogate them.

If I can turn to the question of the appointment of ambassadors, let me say to the hon. Gentleman that, if he goes to residencies and embassies now, it will not be Ferrero Rocher, although he will be glad to know that British ambassadors are keen to offer a selection of malt whiskies as the digestif of choice when they are entertaining officially on behalf of the country. We have an excellent ambassador in the United States of America; there is certainly no vacancy there. The last time I checked, Mr Farage had a very well paid job as a Member of the European Parliament, although regrettably he also had one of the worst attendance records at the European Parliament of any Member, which suggests to me that to head up a UK embassy might not be a job for which he is particularly suited.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Yesterday in the autumn statement we had the welcome news of additional finance for the development of housing and £3.5 billion for 90,000 homes in London alone, as well as a doubling of the money to combat rough sleeping in London and the abolition of letting fees for tenants. Can my right hon. Friend therefore find time for a debate on housing? I understand that there will be a White Paper next month, but surely we should have a debate on housing in this House, to ensure that the money is well spent and that much needed housing across the country is provided, and to give all Members the opportunity to have an input, so that we get those ideas and use the money effectively.

Mr Lidington: There will be questions to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government next Monday, which will provide one opportunity for housing issues to be raised. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his tireless work in pressing forward his Homelessness Reduction Bill and for winning Government support for it. I am glad that he paid tribute to the measures on rough sleeping and the scrapping of letting fees for tenants that the Chancellor announced yesterday. Although it is a good idea that we should have a debate on housing policy, that probably ought to await the publication of the White Paper, which will give Members in all parts of the House the opportunity to comment on Government proposals, rather than guessing what they might be.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): May I add my thanks for the obviously sincere and deeply heartfelt words that the Leader of the House expressed about our late colleague Jo Cox? I am very grateful to him for that.

The Leader of the House announced that on 8 December we will have two debates, on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and on the cancer strategy, one year on. That demonstrates how important it is for Members who wish to make a bid for time-sensitive debates to make their applications to the Backbench Business Committee in a timely fashion, so that we can plan ahead and get the dates slotted into the diary.

May I also make a plea? The Clerk to our Committee tries to get the offers that the Committee wishes to make out to Members as soon as possible, but would also ask that Members respond to them in a timely fashion, so that we can get the business sorted out. A number of Members have been made offers and are sitting on a response, so I would appreciate it if Members could make their feelings known to the Clerk as soon as possible.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s kind words. The Backbench Business Committee is playing an important and constructive part in enabling Members in all parts of the House to raise important issues that matter to our constituents that might not otherwise get an airing, and I would endorse the advice that he gives to colleagues.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): This month we have seen another remarkable poppy appeal in Corby and east Northamptonshire. Not only have we seen enormous sums of money raised, but thousands and thousands of people turned out on Remembrance Sunday to pay tribute to our brave armed forces. It was absolutely fantastic to see so many young people involved in the parades. Can we therefore have a debate next week to pay tribute to the Royal British Legion for all the work it does, but also to say a big thank you to all those in our communities who work tirelessly to make our poppy appeal so successful?

Mr Lidington: Although I am unable to offer my hon. Friend a debate, I wholeheartedly endorse the tribute he has paid to the Royal British Legion and the thousands of volunteers who work to make the poppy appeal a success each year—the appeal in England and Wales and the appeal in Scotland, which is run by the Royal British Legion Scotland. It is important that we all remember that, although in these years it is the veterans of the second world war who tend to be particularly in our minds in November, the revenues from the poppy appeal support ex-servicemen and women and their families from much more recent conflicts. Often, very young people have suffered shocking physical and mental injuries as a result of their service. We should remember that this work is still relevant and important today.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I, too, thank the Leader of the House for his eloquent remarks about Jo and her legacy.

BBC research has reported that investment in infrastructure per head over the next five years will be £6,457 for London, £5,771 for the north-west, but only £1,684 for Yorkshire and the Humber. With last week’s Government decision not to back the electrification of the line to Hull and yesterday’s autumn statement making no reference to the Humber at all, may we have a debate on the northern powerhouse and whether the Government really are serious about rebalancing not only north and south, but east and west?

Mr Lidington: As hon. Members on both sides of the House examine the detail of the autumn statement, they will find that all parts of the United Kingdom are going to benefit from the infrastructure spending that the Chancellor of the Exchequer identified. I do not blame any Member in any part of the House for making a particular plea on behalf of their own constituency, or the greater area that they represent. From memory, I know that, although it is not actually in Humberside,
there is an important slug of funding for a significant motorway junction improvement around the Beverley area, which I think should benefit Hull and the area that the hon. Lady represents. If she looks elsewhere in the statement, I think she will find that Yorkshire and the Humber is going to benefit in a number of different ways.

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Shortly before the summer recess, the all-party group for excellence in the built environment, of which I am the chairman, published its report on the quality of new-build housing. In my own Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport seat, there has been a significant amount of new build, but I fear that some of the quality has been a little shoddy. May we have a debate or a statement on that issue, please?

Mr Lidington: As far as the Government are concerned, we want all new homes to be well designed and delivered to good-quality standards. Home buyers are entitled to expect nothing less. There needs to be an effective complaints procedure, for example, through the consumer code, where people are dissatisfied with the quality of their home. The particular report that my hon. Friend mentioned raises some important issues. My colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government and particularly the Minister for Housing and Planning, are studying this closely and will respond in due course.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I had a small but perfectly formed private Member’s Bill on adding mothers’ names and occupations to marriage certificates, which did not get anywhere. The hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) has taken up the mantle, but he is last on the list tomorrow, so there is not much hope there. Therefore, may we have a statement or a debate in Government time to see where we are going on that issue, so that we can see a bit of action before my daughter Angharad gets married in February 2018?

Mr Lidington: I know how frustrating it is for hon. Members who are low down in the list on a private Member’s Bill Friday. I will have a word with the relevant Minister and see whether there is anything we can do on this matter.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): May I associate myself with what the Leader of the House said about Jo Cox, and pay tribute to the tremendous work that she did on behalf of poor people all over the world?

In May, Lord O’Neill launched a vital report on antimicrobial resistance in which he said that the global cost of no action would be $100 trillion a year; and, more important, the loss of 10 million lives a year. May we have a debate on the issue in Government time, given that the report was commissioned by the previous Prime Minister? I know that my hon. Friend the Members for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) and for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), as well as many other Members, would be pleased to contribute to such a debate.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend has raised an extremely important point. Since Lord O’Neill’s global review, the Government have been supporting research efforts both in the United Kingdom and abroad. That has included £51 million for research in the UK, £265 million through the Fleming Fund to support surveillance in lower-middle-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa and south-east Asia, and a £50 million British contribution to the Global Innovation Fund. I hope my hon. Friend will also welcome the fact that, in a landmark declaration at the United Nations General Assembly in September, following an intense campaign led by the Health Secretary and the chief medical officer, 193 countries agreed to combat antimicrobial resistance, which was identified as the biggest risk to modern medicine. That international agreement was a vital first step towards the effective action that we all want to see.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): May I associate my party with what was said earlier by both the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader? The memory of Jo Cox will indeed endure for years.

Following the tragic death of my 21-year-old constituent Miriam Briddon at the hands of a drink-driver in March 2014, her family committed themselves to campaigning for the reform of drink-driving sentencing guidelines and policy. That recently culminated in the presentation of a 100,000-strong petition to Downing Street. May we have a debate on the need for such reform, in memory of Miriam and the many other people who are afflicted by drink-driving crimes throughout the country?

Mr Lidington: This is an unspeakably tragic experience for any parent or family to have to go through. The hon. Gentleman may wish to seek an Adjournment or Backbench Business Committee debate on the subject, but the e-petition system that we have introduced provides an additional route by which subjects of this kind can be raised and debated in the House, and he may wish to suggest that to his constituents.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Last night, in my capacity as chairman of the all-party group on retail crime, I attended an event organised by the National Federation of Retail Newsagents. It is evident that those who work in the retail trade are very concerned about the level of not just theft, but violence against them. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate in Government time to investigate the matter?

Mr Lidington: I understand the point that my hon. Friend has made. No employee working for a retail outlet, large or small, should be going to work fearful that he or she may become the victim of violence. I think the trend is partly due to the growth of the gang culture that we have seen in London and some other big cities, and, as my hon. Friend knows, the Government are working with chief constables to try to defeat that threat. I cannot promise a quick, easy answer. Determined work by the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice, and local police forces and their chief constables and police and crime commissioners will be necessary to ensure that the response is right and the problem is properly addressed.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House provide Government time for a debate or statement on VAT arrangements and Brexit? The announcement in the autumn statement yesterday of an additional £3 million for Comic Relief from the tampon
tax fund was, of course, welcome, but we would like to know the total amount to be disbursed this year. We would also like to know what the Chancellor will do to ensure that there is secure, long-term investment in vital services, and to be given a clear date by which the tampon tax will finally come to an end.

**Mr Lidington:** My answer to the hon. Lady’s point is that that will depend in part on whether there is agreement first at EU level, while we remain members, on changes to EU law on value added tax; secondly, if that has not been dealt with by the time we leave the EU, there is the question of how rapidly we can then make that change of our own volition. I will ask Treasury Ministers to contact the hon. Lady with the particular information she seeks.

**Alex Salmond** (Gordon) (SNP): When the Leader of the House brings forward the resolutions to approve the spending of billions of pounds on this royal Palace and hundreds of millions of pounds on Buckingham Palace, will he arrange for a special screening of the film “I, Daniel Blake”, so that people can remember those who are being unjustly sanctioned, and those with disability losing £30 a week? I do not care about the reputation of this Government, but as a member of Her Majesty’s Privy Council, I cannot think of anything more damaging to the cause of constitutional monarchy than a “let them eat cake” attitude that prioritises the rebuilding of royal palaces while the people are struggling for bread.

**Mr Lidington:** I think that the right hon. Gentleman is in danger of going over the top here, not for the first time. Buckingham Palace is a public building that is used by the monarch to exercise her functions as Head of State. It is also a place that thousands of tourists visit and enjoy each year. The reason why the royal household is facing this bill that shocks the right hon. Gentleman is that these decisions have been put off and a backlog of repairs has been allowed to accumulate. I think that what was decided and announced a few days ago is perfectly justifiable. In respect of sanctions, I ask him to bear in mind that fewer than 4% of recipients have received any sort of benefit. The number of jobseeker’s allowance who have received any sort of benefit is fewer than 1%. Officials can sometimes make mistakes, but we need to recognise that the proportions involved are very small.

**Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): My I also associate myself with the Leader of the House’s moving tribute to our late colleague, Jo Cox? She is greatly missed.

Figures released yesterday by the Office for National Statistics show that over the past five years there have been a staggering 152,740 excess winter deaths, and 24,300 people died last winter alone. The rate of excess winter deaths in our country is almost twice that of Norway and Germany. We are experiencing a quiet crisis that is, by its very nature, avoidable, so will the Leader of the House consider granting a debate in which the matter can be more fully discussed?

**Mr Lidington:** Any unnecessary death is clearly a tragedy, and everything possible should be done to avoid them. In fairness, I need to point out that, partly due to the NHS’s extensive preparation for winter, excess winter mortality last winter was down on the previous year, and earlier this month NHS England and Public Health England launched their Stay Well This Winter campaign, which last year reached 98% of the over-65s. The NHS is very much alive to these risks, and is taking action to alert elderly people to what they can do to keep themselves warm.

**Ms Margaret Ritchie** (South Down) (SDLP): May I also associate myself and my Social Democratic and Labour party colleagues with the comments of the Leader of the House on our late colleague, Jo Cox? We must all respect different religions, politics or ethnicities.

Yesterday, the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) and I launched the first report of the all-party group for the visitor economy. It was about supporting skills and apprenticeships in the hospitality and tourism industry. Many different types of evidence were submitted to us. The report said that there were core issues affecting apprenticeships in the fourth-largest service industry, involving the school curriculum, lack of proper career guidance, and lack of encouragement to people to go into cheffing and the catering industry. May we have a debate on this significant industry, which is important to tourism in many constituencies, and has a direct relationship with the economy?

**Mr Lidington:** I was glad to hear about the report that the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) have prepared, and she has highlighted an important issue. The Government’s commitment to 3 million apprenticeships needs to include tourism as one of the sectors to be assisted. She is right to draw our attention to the need for those apprenticeships to have proper preparation and the right content, so that the young people concerned can be seen to be readily employable. I have talked to directors and senior managers in the hospitality industry, and I find it troubling that they often find it difficult to recruit UK citizens who are properly skilled for the work on offer, which is why they often look to people coming in from other countries. As a country, we need to address that challenge.

**Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): You might recall, Mr Speaker, that I raised the question of tax treaties a few weeks ago. This week, another double taxation relief order, covering Turkmenistan, was approved. We are likely to see many more as a result of Brexit. May I again ask the Leader of the House if he will look into how Members can be given better notice of when such treaties are to be considered, and how he might ensure that the House has more opportunity for scrutiny of the UK’s tax arrangements with other countries?

**Mr Lidington:** Double tax treaties are a standard form of international agreement, and have been negotiated by British Governments of all political colours. As the hon. Gentleman knows, they are designed to ensure that our citizens and those of the other country concerned cannot be taxed twice on the same income by two separate jurisdictions. I will draw his points about scrutiny and parliamentary process to the attention of Treasury Ministers, and perhaps I can write to him with some thoughts.
Mr Lidington: On freedom to travel, and with everything else, it is certainly the case that this Government will stand firm on the principle that citizens of the United Kingdom should be treated on an equal basis, regardless of their religion or ethnic origin. It is a truth in law that the United States, like every other nation state, has the responsibility to determine for itself its rules on whether people are allowed to enter its territory. It is important that we work with the elected President and his Administration, and ensure that we have the best possible bilateral relationship that works in the interests of all British citizens.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for his moving words earlier. Given those words, may we have a debate about whether Britain First should be proscribed as a terrorist organisation and banned from standing in democratic elections?

Mr Lidington: I cannot offer an immediate debate. As the hon. Lady probably knows, the Home Office brings forwards orders for the proscription of particular organisations, but it must do so on the basis of evidence. There have been cases in which organisations that have been so proscribed have gone to the courts and successfully won a judicial review to say that the evidence on which that action had been taken was not sufficient. I will ensure that her proposal is reported to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, but there has to be clear evidence of terrorist involvement for the terrorist proscription to be applied.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Tory Back Benchers rightly lambast the Labour party’s legacy of private finance initiative debt, and Ministers on the Front Bench usually fully agree, so why does paragraph 3.27 of the Green Book outline that a “new pipeline” of PFI projects will be announced? Can we have a statement explaining that, or even better, a debate on the benefits of PFI versus conventional investment?

Mr Lidington: I will ask Treasury Ministers to write to the hon. Gentleman in more detail on that.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): It has already been mentioned that the Government published a northern powerhouse strategy report yesterday, but I cannot see in it any mention of Cumbria or nuclear energy. Given that west Cumbria will physically put the power into the northern powerhouse, I support the request of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for a debate on the issue, so that the Government can appreciate how much the whole of the north of England has to offer, and why Cumbria must not be an afterthought.

Mr Lidington: I completely agree that Cumbria must not be an afterthought, and I am confident that the leaders of the northern powerhouse locally would make sure that the decisions that they took worked to the advantage of everybody living in that area. I am aware of the importance of the nuclear industry to the hon. Lady’s constituents, and I would have hoped that there was common ground between her and this Government, because we have taken the difficult and controversial decision to go ahead with a new generation of nuclear
power stations, which I think is generally supported by Members on both sides of the House who have experience of nuclear power plants in their constituency.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Every day in the UK about 2,200 babies are born—babies including my new granddaughter, Saoirse Grace, who was born in Glasgow yesterday. May we have a debate in Government time about the impact of the measures announced in the autumn statement on new families, and how we can support all new families at this joyful but often vulnerable time?

Mr Lidington: First, let me congratulate the hon. Lady—or, more particularly, her daughter or daughter-in-law; I do not know which it is. A new child is a source of joy for any family. I suspect that we will have a number of opportunities to debate the various questions that arise out of yesterday’s autumn statement, as well as to put questions to Ministers in the Departments affected by the Chancellor’s announcements. As I said earlier, if she looks at the distributional analysis of the autumn statement, she will find that it works—modestly, yes—to the benefit of all income groups in society, save for the very richest; it is they who suffer a loss. I hope that she would agree that all families benefit more than anything else from having parents who are in work and able to work. The record number of people in employment is helping to drive the reduction that we have seen in the number of children who are living in workless households, and the introduction of universal credit means that people, including many mothers of young children, who may take on part-time work, will still always find that work makes them better off than staying on benefits.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I thank all Members for their kind words about Jo Cox; her legacy of love lives on. Yesterday, the Chancellor announced additional broadband infrastructure funding. The Government’s current subsidy goes only to rural areas, but this is equally a problem for my constituents in Rotherhithe, and for people who live in former dockyards across the country. Will the Government provide time to debate in detail how they plan to improve broadband access speeds for all areas?

Mr Lidington: The additional money that the Chancellor announced yesterday as part of the £23 billion that he is borrowing to provide for strategic infrastructure investment is additional to the current programme of connecting up people to high-speed broadband. That current work will continue, and what was announced yesterday is additional to it.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I, too, thank the Leader of the House for his kind and thoughtful words about our colleague Jo. May I also pay tribute to Jo’s incredible staff, who have shown such strength of character throughout this period? I know that she would be incredibly proud of what they have achieved in her absence.

In 2012, the Government axed funding for careers education, and instead put £2 million into an online jobs website called Plotr. It went into liquidation at the end of October; the chief executive officer said that the website had run up debts that meant it had “lost control of what it could do”. May we have an urgent statement from the Government on how this waste of taxpayers’ money was ever allowed to happen?

Mr Lidington: First, may I associate myself with the hon. Lady’s tribute to Jo Cox’s staff? I know that the hon. Lady had to undertake a number of the constituency duties between the time of Jo’s murder and the recent by-election, so she, more than anybody else in the House, will have personal knowledge of how hard those staff have worked.

On the particular point that the hon. Lady raises, I am not aware of the details of the case. If the situation is as she describes and there has been a serious misuse of public money, she might want to have a word with her hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, as that would probably be the appropriate parliamentary means to investigate the matter further.

Justin Madders (ELlesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): May I associate myself with the tributes paid to our friend and colleague, Jo Cox? Yesterday we heard an awful lot from the Chancellor about increasing productivity in this country. May we have a statement, please, on increasing ministerial productivity? I refer in particular to the Government’s review of employment tribunal fees, which has been sitting on the Minister’s desk for over a year and appears not even to have been read, let alone acted upon. Thousands of people are being denied access to justice, yet the report still has not been acted upon. When will something actually happen?

Mr Lidington: I will have a word with the relevant Minister. I cannot promise that the reply will necessarily be the one that the hon. Gentleman is wishing for, but let us get the relevant Minister to write to him so that he can see what the current thinking is.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): May we have a ministerial statement addressing the rare but traumatic issue experienced by my constituent, a transgender woman? She has reached female retirement age and is seeking a Department for Work and Pensions pension. Her case is with the Courts and Tribunals Service. She transitioned 17 years ago and underwent surgery when gender realignment certificates were not available. Both her passport and her driving licence recognise her female status, yet Government Departments are forcing her to undergo excessive and upsetting requirements to prove that she is living as a woman.

Mr Lidington: As I said earlier, there will be a Backbench Business debate on gender equality that may give the hon. Gentleman the opportunity to raise this case. If he is having any problems corresponding with Government Departments, I am always ready to try to help any Member to get a prompt reply.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Yesterday I asked the Prime Minister how she could justify the scrapping of the Navy’s heavy duty surface-to-surface missiles with no replacement. The Prime Minister replied that she did not recognise the situation I described, but it is the case that at the end of 2018 the GWS 60 Harpoon Block C anti-ship missile will be scrapped and there will
be no replacement. This is against the very strong advice of the Navy. May we have a debate about naval defence in the Prime Minister’s post-truth era?

Mr Lidington: Although the Ministry of Defence has a significant budget in Whitehall terms, it still has to take difficult decisions, including decisions at times to phase out and to replace particular weapons systems or weapons platforms. I will make sure that Defence Ministers are aware of the hon. Gentleman’s concern, but this subject may be an appropriate Backbench Business debate or he may wish to raise it on the Adjournment.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): On 18 October in our debate in Westminster Hall on the future of shipbuilding, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), who is the Minister responsible for defence procurement, said that “the national shipbuilding strategy will report by the autumn statement.”—[Official Report, 18 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 318WH.] The autumn statement was yesterday and we still have not seen the national shipbuilding strategy. Can the Leader of the House ensure that the Secretary of State for Defence comes to this Chamber and makes a statement on exactly what is happening to the national shipbuilding strategy?

Mr Lidington: I had noticed that this matter was raised on a point of order yesterday so I checked out the current position with the Ministry of Defence this morning. My understanding is that Sir John Parker has now submitted his independent report. He did so just before the autumn statement. That is being considered by Ministers. Defence Ministers intend to publish Sir John’s report soon, and they will provide a more considered response to the detail of that report at a later date.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The chaotic sustainability and transformation plan in west Cheshire—more commonly known as the slash, trash and privatise programme—is now being compounded by persistent reports that our general hospital, the Countess of Chester, is to be closed, merged and moved. If we cannot have a debate on STPs in the health service in Government time, could we perhaps have a debate on the Health Committee’s report, to demonstrate how the Government are bamboozling the public with false claims of money for the NHS that they are not actually providing?

Mr Lidington: I simply do not agree with the hon. Gentleman’s final comments. The Government have provided £10 billion to the NHS over the period of the current five-year plan plus the preceding financial year. In giving evidence to the Health Committee, the chief executive of the national health service in England said that the Government had provided the up-front funding that he was seeking.

When it comes to the STPs, the important thing is that they are being determined locally; they are not simply being imposed from on high. The hon. Gentleman will also find that the health oversight committee of his local authority has the right to challenge proposals presented under an STP for a significant change in service provision and, if it feels sufficiently strongly, to refer that to the Secretary of State for a second look. However, it is important not just that the Government, as they are doing, spend more money on the national health service, but that the national health service looks at the way in which it is operating, so that it is getting the best possible value for patients out of every penny that is being spent.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): A key tenet of the Better Together campaign was that the people of Scotland should vote no to Scottish independence to protect their pensions. Yesterday, the Chancellor suggested that the triple lock may be set to go. May we have a debate in Government time on the future of state pensions to discuss the prospect of future cuts and this potential betrayal of the people of Scotland?

Mr Lidington: The Chancellor was very clear yesterday that the triple lock is going to remain in place for the duration of this Government’s lifetime. At the next general election, in 2020, it will be for all political parties to put forward whatever proposals they wish on pensions, as on anything else. The biggest threat to the wellbeing of pensioners in Scotland would come from a vote for separation, which would plunge Scotland into the kind of economic instability where pensioners and others relying on fixed incomes would be likely to lose out heavily.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): People living close to recreational airfields such as Hibaldstow do not have the same protection from noise and nuisance as people living close to recreational activities that stay on the ground. May we have a statement from the Department for Communities and Local Government on this issue, its impact on local people and what the Department is going to do about it?

Mr Lidington: I refer the hon. Gentleman to DCLG questions next Monday, and I hope he is lucky in attracting your eye, Mr Speaker.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Dee Valley Water is a valued independent business in north-east Wales, supplying water to Wrexham and Chester. Its independence and the many jobs at the business are threatened by a takeover by Severn Trent. If local decision making is important, what say can local people in my area have about who sells them the water they drink?

Mr Speaker: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman wants a statement or a debate on the matter.

Mr Lidington: Clearly, this is a commercial decision for the two companies concerned. While I can understand the concerns the hon. Gentleman has expressed, there may be a question—I do not know the details—about whether a larger company would be able to provide more capital investment for his area, so that people might be able to benefit. I suggest to him that this is probably a suitable subject for an Adjournment debate.
Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The new Administration have been quick to jettison just about every aspect of their predecessor’s legacy, so when will they get rid of the farcical English votes for English laws procedures? In the Legislative Grand Committee on Monday night during the debate on the Higher Education and Research Bill, nobody had a clue what was going on. There were no Divisions and no English votes cast for any English laws. Whatever the answer is to the West Lothian question, surely the Leader of the House agrees that it is not the current mess left to him by his predecessor.

Mr Lidington: I am absolutely confident that the Chair certainly knew exactly what was going on at all times. If Monday’s events raised any concern about the technical operation of the EVEL procedures, then I remind the hon. Gentleman that I am currently carrying out a review of those procedures embodied in our Standing Orders, and he is welcome to submit evidence where legislation affects only England and the matter is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, then English Members here should exercise a veto on whether that legislation passes.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): I am sure, Mr Speaker, that you were watching as avidly as I was last Sunday as Andy Murray won the ATP world tour finals and in so doing retained his position as the world’s No. 1 tennis player in the singles, joining his brother, who is the No. 1 player in the doubles. These brothers are the pride of Dunblane. I wonder whether we could have a debate on the tennis legacy and the wider benefit that sporting excellence can have in getting the next generation of sporting heroes.

Mr Speaker: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I did indeed watch both Andy and Jamie several times last week. He will not be surprised to know that I bellowed loudly and regularly in their support, albeit, as he would expect, in an entirely orderly manner.

Mr Lidington: I am very happy to add my congratulations to Andy and Jamie Murray. While I can see that the people of Dunblane, and people in Scotland more generally, will take an especial pride in their achievement, I think that pride is shared by everybody in all parts of the UK. I hope that the lawn tennis authorities will use this achievement as a springboard to intensify their efforts to improve the opportunities available through grassroots tennis and coaching schemes for the most able players so that we produce a new generation of tennis players, both men and women, to follow in the Murrays’ footsteps.

Mr Speaker: What is more, if the hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) wants a debate on the matter—

Chris Bryant: You can’t take part.

Mr Speaker: I cannot take part, as the hon. Gentleman rightly observes from a sedentary position, but if the hon. Member for Stirling wants an Adjournment debate on the matter, I have a hunch that he might secure it.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Flawed neoclassical theoretical assumptions combined with methodological problems are enshrined within the model of the UK economy that is used by both the Treasury and the Office for Budget Responsibility. I would call into question how independent that makes the OBR. When can we have a debate on this important matter?

Mr Lidington: It is up to the OBR to decide how it makes its own forecasts and the assumptions on which it makes them. It does, of course, publish with its reports a statement of the various assumptions that it makes. If the hon. Gentleman is not happy with the OBR, there is a plethora of other independent forecasts using methodologies that differ to a greater or lesser extent. I think this is a question of “Let 100 flowers bloom.”

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): As the last Member to be called, may I join others in ensuring that our thoughts and prayers are with Jo Cox’s family and her former staff members? I thank the Leader of the House for his comments.

As you predicted yesterday following my point of order, Mr Speaker, I do wish to push the Leader of the House a little further on the national shipbuilding strategy. Will he ensure that we have a debate on this strategy and the Government’s response to it, and feed back to Ministers the fact that many of us want that debate? This is an iconic and highly skilled industry, and one that needs to be talked up. Those of us who represent shipyards would be obliged if the Leader of the House were amenable to that.

Mr Lidington: I understand the importance of the industry to the hon. Gentleman’s constituency and to others in all parts of the UK. The position is as I described it earlier. The first thing that the House will want is to see Sir John Parker’s report, on which Members will form views, but I will certainly relay to Defence colleagues the importance that the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members attach to the matter.
Points of Order

11.44 am

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During business questions, the Leader of the House, in answer to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), seemed to suggest that there was a question mark over whether a money resolution will be tabled to the boundaries Bill, the Second Reading of which was passed overwhelmingly by this House last Friday. Mr Speaker, you are obviously well versed in the proceedings of the House, so you will remember that there was, I think, one example of that happening in the last Parliament—I was not here at the time—due to the incoherence of the coalition Government, who were not able to agree among themselves. Many previous Leaders of the House have been on record many times saying that such a procedural device would not be used as a means of impeding the progress of a Bill such as that which we debated last Friday.

Leaders of the House prosper in their posts by commanding the support of the whole House. The present Leader of the House, in his short tenure, has had that, as exemplified by his magnificent statement earlier, but may I say through you, Mr Speaker, that if a Leader of the House loses support across the Chamber through such procedural shenanigans—if, indeed, that is what he meant—he will not be long for his tenure?

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. We all like the Leader of the House and we take him at his word. Only a few weeks ago, he told the House that if not enough Members turn up to vote for a private Member’s Bill—that was in relation to the Alan Turing Bill—it should fail, and that was fair enough. We all turned up last week: large numbers of us took him at his word and the vote was carried by 257 votes—including several Conservative Members—to 35. Surely, by the Leader of the House’s own logic, the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill should now go into Committee. Plenty of Members turned up to vote for it, and those who did not might be those who do not want it.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I intend to ask the Leader of the House if he wants to say anything. He is not obliged to do so, but he might choose to do so, because these are essentially political matters. I have some comments to make to the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) in due course, but not before we have heard from Mr Peter Bone.

Mr Bone: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Members on both sides of the House are concerned about the issue. By convention, it is a tradition of this House that money resolutions follow Second Reading. The Library tells me that there has been only one example to the contrary, and that has been referred to by the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond). In fact, the majority by which this House passed last Friday’s Bill was the biggest such majority other than that given to the other Bill that did not get a money resolution. I hope that the Leader of the House will make a statement that a money resolution will be tabled as speedily as others have been tabled.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I’ll help matters. I want to make it clear that all I was saying earlier is that there is a process to be followed when a private Member’s Bill receives a Second Reading. First, the Government, particularly the Treasury, have to consider whether a money resolution is needed and what its scope should be, and then it has to be drafted. That is the process that is being gone through at the moment, and I was saying no more than that.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the Leader of the House. I think it might be helpful, both to the right hon. Member for Gordon, who raised the original point of order, and to all who have subsequently taken part in this brief exchange, if I say the following. Ministers are, of course, responsible for what they say, as are other right hon. and hon. Members. Let me, however, confirm two things. First, the decision as to whether a Bill requires a money resolution is for the Clerk of Legislation, not the Treasury. I understood the meaning of the Leader of the House’s remarks to be to the effect that it was for Treasury Ministers to decide on tabling a money resolution. He may not have said precisely that, but that is what I interpreted as being his meaning, and I confirm that it is, indeed, for them to decide upon the tabling. The question of the requirement is determined, as I have said, by the Clerk of Legislation. I hope that that response helps both distinguished Privy Counsellors in this matter.

Chris Bryant: In that case, I just wonder whether the Clerk of Legislation has decided yet whether the Bill needs a money resolution.

Mr Speaker: The short answer is yes. The Clerk of Legislation has so decided.

Chris Bryant: So it is now just for them to tell us.

Alex Salmond rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are not going to have an extended conversation on the matter—at least, no more extended than the one we have already had. I think I have made the position clear. People can seek advice from whomsoever they wish, and the Government may choose to seek advice from the Treasury. In my experience, the Treasury is invariably ready to offer its advice, whether its advice is wanted or not. The Treasury may very well offer its advice, and people in the Government may want its advice, but the fact is that it is the Clerk of Legislation who decides whether a money resolution is required. Thereafter, let me go so far as to say that it is overwhelmingly the norm that the tabling then follows. I do not think that the Leader of the House has sought to gainsay that.

Mr Lidington indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: The Leader of the House confirms, by a very helpful shaking of the head, that he has not sought to gainsay that. I hope that that will suffice for the purposes of the right hon. Member for Gordon.

If there are no further points of order—if the point of order appetite of hon. and right hon. Members has been duly satisfied, at least for today—we will move on.
Backbench Business

Contaminated Blood and Blood Products

11.51 am

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes the Government’s recent announcement on the reform of the support schemes for people affected by contaminated blood and blood products; recognises that the contaminated blood scandal was one of the biggest treatment disasters in the history of the NHS; believes that those people affected should have a reasonable standard of living and not just be removed from poverty; is concerned that bereaved partners of people who died with HIV/AIDS and those reliant on regular top-up payments will be worse off; is concerned that the new payments for people infected with Hepatitis C are not commensurate with the pain and suffering caused; notes that people who were infected with other viruses, those who did not reach the chronic stage of Hepatitis C and bereaved parents are not mentioned in this announcement; and calls on the Government to use the funds from the sale of Plasma Resources UK to bring forward revised proposals that are properly funded and which provide appropriate support to all affected people.

I thank Members of the Backbench Business Committee who, since the Committee was established, have always been very generous in recognising the importance of this issue to many of our constituents. This is the third Backbench Business debate that we have had on the subject.

It is more than 45 years since the first people were infected with HIV, hepatitis C and other viruses from NHS-supplied blood products. Their lives, and those of their families, were changed forever by this tragedy. The contaminated blood scandal is now rightly recognised as a grave injustice—the worst treatment disaster in the history of our country’s health service—but those affected are still waiting for a proper financial settlement that recognises the full effect that the scandal has had on them and on their families. This group of people have campaigned for far too many years for justice, at the same time as dealing with illness and disability.

The current financial support for those affected is simply not fit for purpose. That stark fact was laid bare in the inquiry of the all-party group on haemophilia and contaminated blood in January 2015. This quote is on the first page of our report:

“You can’t give us back our health. But you can give us back our dignity. This tortured road has been too long for many of us. But for the rest of us, please let this be the final road to closure.”

Thankfully, we all now agree that the current support arrangements cannot continue, and that we need to create a scheme that gives this community back their dignity.

I welcome the efforts made by the former Prime Minister when he was in office. I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), to her new post and I welcome Lord Prior of Brampton to his new position. I was happy to meet him last week, alongside other APPG members, to discuss the new support arrangements.

Although we are all agreed on the need for a reformed scheme, I cannot agree with the Department of Health that its proposed settlement is sufficient. The purpose of this debate is to highlight the aspects of the new support scheme that will not provide the support that these people need, following the hasty announcement made by the former Prime Minister as he left office in July 2016.

In my speech, I want to stress five key issues that the Department of Health urgently needs to address. The first issue concerns the differences between the country schemes in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. We need to know what support people in all four countries of the United Kingdom will get. While Scotland and England have set out their own separate support schemes, in Wales and especially in Northern Ireland people desperately need some certainty about the help they will receive.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate along with other right hon. and hon. Members. I have been in touch with the Minister for Health in Northern Ireland and there has been no progress on the matter. I and other hon. Members from Northern Ireland have constituents who have suffered from the ill effects of contaminated blood for over 45 years.

Diana Johnson: It is very worrying to hear that there has not been any progress on what is happening in Northern Ireland, so the Minister needs to explain to the House what work is going on.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on being one of the leaders of this campaign. It is clear that the Scottish scheme is more generous than the one in England. Does she agree that at the very least the Government should ensure parity, and in particular that nobody should be worse off under the new scheme than they were under the old scheme?

Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend makes that point very well. Later I will compare and contrast the Scottish scheme, which is more generous.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The difference between the two schemes is important because hon. Members representing constituencies across the UK may have one constituent getting compensation under the English scheme and another getting compensation under the Scottish scheme, involving, as is currently the case, different amounts of money and different levels of compensation.

Diana Johnson: Yes; the hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. One of the unintended consequences of this devolution is that we are ending up with such a mishmash of schemes, and that is of concern for the people affected.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): One of my constituents, Mr M, makes exactly that point: it is unfair that the Scottish settlement is so different from the settlement for him in Stratford-on-Avon. Most importantly, one of my constituents, who is in the Public Gallery, wants to remind the House that there are fewer than 300 primary beneficiaries left, and it is vital that they are not forgotten.

Diana Johnson: Absolutely. That is a very important point. I will come on to the primary beneficiaries in a while, but I will now make some progress.
My first concern was about the different schemes that are available. The second issue, which is also important, is that we know the five existing trusts will be amalgamated into a single body to administer the scheme at some point in 2017. I am deeply troubled by the fact that the administration of the new body looks likely to be done by a profit-making private company. I know that Atos and Capita have attended meetings with Department of Health officials about the new contract. Formal tender submissions will be due soon, with a decision on the contractor set to be made in 2017. No Health Minister has had the courtesy to tell the all-party group of these plans, nor were the beneficiaries asked for their views about this in the survey done in January. Even the Department’s response to the survey, which was published in July, made absolutely no mention of such a prospect. Alongside hon. Members on both sides of the House, I cannot support proposals to contract out provision to Atos or Capita.

Let me remind the House how many in this community were infected in the first place. Many contracted HIV and hepatitis C from American blood products supplied by profit-making private companies. The United States, unlike the UK, has always allowed the commercial purchase of blood products, and those products were often donated by people who desperately needed money and were willing to be less than honest about their chances of infection. This is the reason why so many in the affected community harbour such distrust of private companies.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): I want to place on the record that I have been contacted by constituents in Dudley who have told me how grateful they are to my hon. Friend for the lead she has given and for the campaigning she has done on this issue. One constituent has written to me about allegations of impropriety in relation to doctors being encouraged by pharmaceutical companies to use plasma concentrates instead of cryoprecipitate in blood transfusions. Does she agree with my constituents that that should be investigated?

Diana Johnson: I am very happy to agree with my hon. Friend. That should certainly be investigated.

I return to people’s concerns about the use of private companies. We know that, over the past six years, there has been a huge sense of mistrust of the disability assessment regime operated by Atos before it walked away from its contract with the Department for Work and Pensions. If there is one thing that could fatally undermine progress towards a better support scheme, it is the plan that the new scheme be administered by a private company. I strongly urge the Government to look again at that plan and show empathy for the people affected.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her dogged and tireless work on this issue. Does she agree that there is a big issue of trust here, in relation not just to the potential new providers but to what happened previously? Some survivors and families who survive victims who have passed away believe that senior health professionals knew about the contamination but decided to continue with their interventions for cost reasons.

Diana Johnson: Yes. One point I will come to later is the need for some form of inquiry.

To continue my point about why who runs the scheme is so important, a big criticism of the new scheme is the continuation of discretionary payments. Department of Health officials are still not listening to the concerns raised about that. The APPG inquiry uncovered huge issues with the highly conditional and poorly managed discretionary support scheme. One respondent told us:

“The whole system seems designed to make you feel like a beggar”.

I also believe that the trust’s current administrators have not fought hard enough for their beneficiaries, which legally they could have done. Instead, they saw their role as dispassionate managers and conduits to the Department of Health. They left the affected community alone to fight for themselves. If the new support scheme ends up being managed by Atos or Capita it will do nothing to address those fundamental issues, and could even make the situation much worse, adding insult to injury. I call on the Minister to do the right thing and announce that she will scrap plans for a private profit-making scheme administrator, and will replace the current scheme with a more beneficiary run and focused organisation that has no profit motive.

Will the Minister set out exactly what kind of discretionary support the new scheme will provide? It remains unclear whether any or all of the current support will continue. That contrasts starkly with the Scottish scheme, where the financial review group agreed that no one should receive less financial support under the new scheme. Will the Government urgently provide the same guarantee and publish full details of any obligations that the new scheme administrators will be subject to?

There are also issues with the current welfare benefits reassessment regime that many people are having to go through—for example, moving from disability living allowance on to the personal independence payment. Those issues need to be addressed urgently, so that individuals can be passported straightaway on to new benefits. I hope the Minister will agree that that is a sensible way forward for the people affected.

My third concern relates to the families of those affected, who need better support under the scheme. Under the new English proposals, widows and widowers will continue to be eligible for discretionary support—whatever that means; I have raised my concerns about that already—on top of a new £10,000 lump sum, provided their loved ones died at least partially as a result of contracting HIV or hepatitis C. However, many clinicians have already told me that that could mean many people are excluded from assistance simply because their partner’s death certificate does not include mention of HIV or hepatitis C, sometimes at the family’s request. The new proposals could also still be considerably less generous than the support that some widows already receive, because there is a huge question mark hanging over what discretionary help they will get under the reformed scheme.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for leading this debate. Many people around the country are hugely grateful to her, me included. Two of my constituents—Mike Dorrickott and Neil Howson—sadly passed away as a consequence of contaminated blood and the diseases that they contracted. Their loved ones have exactly the concern that the hon. Lady indicated: that the dependence on potential
discretionary payments is insufficient. The fact that the one-off payment is not backed up by the generosity, regularity and dependability of an annual payment means that such people often have to give up work, lose the ability to have a pension of their own and find themselves in immense hardship.

Diana Johnson: That leads me to my next point, which is on the Scottish proposals. As we have heard, they offer a better settlement, particularly for the bereaved, who are guaranteed 75% of their partner’s previous entitlement in addition to continued access to the Scottish discretionary scheme. That gives them much-needed security in a way that the proposed English scheme does not. I ask the Minister to look again at adopting the Scottish model and at providing more guarantees on non-discretionary support for widows and widowers.

My fourth point is about support for primary beneficiaries, which was raised in an intervention. The APPG asks the Government to look again at some groups of primary beneficiaries who need better support than is proposed under the English scheme. I received an email this morning from someone who contracted hepatitis B through contaminated blood products. Under the scheme, they are not eligible for any help, but they have obviously suffered and are suffering still. I hope that the Minister is willing to look at a very small group of people who are not covered.

The APPG believes that if more assistance were provided in the form of non-discretionary, ongoing payments, it would reduce the need for discretionary support and allay a great deal of our constituents’ worries. I urge the Department of Health to consider the contrast with the support announced in the Scottish scheme and whether more non-discretionary, ongoing payments could be made.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I applaud the hon. Lady for bringing the debate to the House. Although I recognise that the new payments scheme is an improvement, I want to speak up for one of my constituents, who does not want to be named. He is among the 256 out of the 1,250 haemophiliacs who were infected with multiple viruses—those who were co-infected. Their lives have been devastated—absolutely blighted—and they feel that they are not being fairly treated under the new arrangement. Will she expand on whether we can help those people a little bit more?

Diana Johnson: I will come on to the ways in which I think the funding that the Government have put together could be used more effectively to assist more people who have been affected by receiving contaminated blood, including the hon. Lady’s constituent.

I will talk a little about the overall funding of the new scheme. There is much that the Government could do to improve the scheme without any additional cost to the public purse. Even if the Scottish proposals, particularly those for widows and primary beneficiaries, were adopted in England, they would fall within the budget that has been allocated for every year save 2016-17. That is set out in an analysis conducted by the Haemophilia Society, which was presented to the Department of Health at last week’s meeting. I hope officials will consider that carefully.

Any need for additional funding could easily be met from two identifiable sources. I think the £230 million from the sale of our 80% stake in Plasma Resources UK should be made available, as should any reserves left in the accounts of the three discretionary charities when they are closed in 2017. Further, I ask the Minister to promise that any money that is not spent on beneficiaries in each year will be rolled over to support beneficiaries in the next year. At last week’s meeting at the Department of Health, it appeared from what officials told us that any unspent money would have to be given back to the Treasury. That would be a gross act of betrayal towards those affected.

In conclusion, unless the Department of Health accepts that its new scheme still has substantial issues that need to be addressed, the new support scheme will not command the full confidence of the people it needs to satisfy. Indeed, in some crucial respects it will be worse than the system it replaces.

The APPG still believes that people should have the option of a lump sum payment as part of any new scheme, to give them the opportunity to decide for themselves what is best for them—either a regular payment or a one-off lump sum payment.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Why cannot lump sum payments be an alternative to regular payments? Why must the Government be grudging on these matters? This and previous Governments owe these people a huge debt of obligation. This should be a properly funded scheme and we should have a proper investigation to get to the truth of this terrible scandal, which is a stain on our country.

Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend puts the point very well. The APPG and the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) have spoken to people about what they want from the revised scheme, and they have said they want the option of a lump sum payment, if that would be better for them than regular payments. It is important that we give people the ability to make those decisions for themselves.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) just alluded to, the APPG still believes that we need a Hillsborough-style panel inquiry to allow people to tell their stories and to say what happened to them and how it affected them.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Diana Johnson: I am happy to give way to my right hon. Friend, who has great knowledge on this point.

Mr Howarth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is making a very powerful case, as she always does, and I congratulate her on the way she is doing it. She is right about the potential of a Hillsborough-style inquiry—I note that the Prime Minister is a great fan of that process, and has said so previously—but we need to take care that such an inquiry does not put all the important and urgent issues she has raised into the shade while the process takes place. The two things need to be separate.

Diana Johnson: I agree with my right hon. Friend, who makes his point very well. We need to make sure that any new support scheme moves quickly. We need to get on with this. The previous Prime Minister, when he apologised on behalf of the nation 18 months ago, also allocated £25 million, but none of that has been spent yet, as I understand it. We need to make sure that
[Diana Johnson]

a scheme is introduced as quickly as possible, although obviously with our concerns having being addressed. But absolutely the two things can run in parallel, and a Hillsborough-style panel inquiry would give people the opportunity of a truth and reconciliation inquiry. I still think it a key requirement if there is to be any real sense of justice and closure.

Catherine West: Families who have suffered a loss following this terrible scandal have expressed a desire to get hold of certain documents and to find out what happened and who knew what. They really just want a sense of justice.

Diana Johnson: I will now conclude. I know that in later speeches hon. Members will want to raise the deeply moving stories of their constituents. It is those stories that have led me to campaign on this issue over many years, and I am always mindful of the struggles faced by my constituent Glen Wilkinson. Glen was diagnosed with hepatitis C after a routine tooth operation in the 1980s, when he was just 19. He has had to live with the virus all his life and is still waiting for proper recognition of how it has affected him. I hope that the Minister and the Government will now work to ensure that Glen and others can live the rest of their lives in dignity.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I am going to impose a 10-minute limit to start with, and then we will see how we get on.

12.14 pm

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I begin by congratulating my friend, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), on her consistency on this issue and the work that she and the all-party group have done over a long time. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the debate to be held. I also welcome my hon. Friend the Minister to the Front Bench. We know that this matter is not among her responsibilities— it belongs to our noble Friend Lord Prior—and I know how difficult it is to deal with something that is not in one’s own portfolio, but I am sure that she will communicate faithfully to the Government the points raised in the debate, although she will not be in a position, I think, to answer all our questions. However, the fact that we are again raising these questions in the Chamber is an important point for her to take back to the Secretary of State and other colleagues.

I want to pick up on a couple of points arising from the speech made by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North. I agree with her about who should administer the scheme. This is not an area in which we should be looking to outsource for ideological reasons. There is an important concern at the heart of this issue. Given everything that we have learned from the United States, we know that the profit motive involved in selling the blood in the first place was a primary source of everything that has happened since. It is really important that we recognise that and show some sensitivity to the fact. I actually think that Government can run some things, and it is good to run some things publicly. We have to choose. In our political lives, we have lived through the Government running British Telecom, British Airways and so on. Things have changed, but it is important that some things be publicly owned, run and dealt with, and this is one of them. I therefore join her absolutely in saying that the Government should think again about how the scheme is administered. They should keep it in public hands where there is at least some democratic accountability. Above all, as she said, we need a group that will act on behalf of the beneficiaries, rather than solely in the Government’s interest. It would have to be very carefully put together.

Tim Farron: The right hon. Gentleman is making some really important points. Does he agree that one area in which the private sector could and should be playing a part is in contributing to the compensation? Is there not an analogy—an off-the-shelf scheme we could consider—in how the thalidomide victims were supported through a composite of public funding and funding from the drug companies responsible? Like the Scottish scheme, that system has introduced annual payments and allowed people struggling with conditions that they contracted because of thalidomide to have some security throughout their lives. The same could be afforded to the survivors or the loved ones of those who passed away because of contaminated blood.

Alistair Burt: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will develop that point in his own speech. Of course, the thalidomide compensation was based on a clear line of accountability as the company admitted responsibility. The situation has not been quite the same in this case, for reasons that we all know, but perhaps I can come on to financial matters in a second. I will now move on from the speech made by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North, the majority of which I supported wholeheartedly.

It is a matter of some despair that we are here again. I remember those friends who came to the public meetings in the House of Commons a couple of years ago saying they were actually sick of coming here as they had done so so often over the years. I would be grateful if the Minister could relay to the Government—I have not been able to get this point across—that this drip, drip approach over the years is just not working. The Government can find money at various times for some big affairs. If there is a natural disaster, a dramatic crisis or a banking collapse, vast sums suddenly appear. We have not been able to give this issue the same priority, but it cries out for it. That is what we are here again is proof that these concerns are not going away and cannot be dealt with drip by drip. Somebody has still not grasped the fact that, for the many reasons that I know colleagues will raise, a settlement is of the highest importance.

I will not rehearse the history, because colleagues indulged me when I raised it in a Back-Bench debate a couple of years ago, so I will not go into it at such great length again. Neither will I cite the accounts of individuals who have come to use because, frankly, I find it too difficult to read them into the record. I have done that before, but I am not able to do so again. Instead, I want to make a couple of personal points and three comments about where we might go from here.

I campaigned on this issue for many years—in government and in opposition; and when I was a Minister and not a Minister. I was pleased that the hon. Lady
mentioned David Cameron, because his response to my contribution at Prime Minister’s questions in October 2013 began the current chain of events and continued the progress made over many years. I was grateful that he met me, a constituent and a dear friend of ours. He seemed to understand where we were going, and more money has come into the scheme, which I appreciate.

In June 2015, I was re-invited by the then Prime Minister to join the Government in the Department of Health, at which point I went quiet on campaigning as far as the public were concerned. I know that some people misinterpreted that. My position in the Department of Health was not conditional on the fact that I had been involved with contaminated blood, and neither was my position in the Foreign Office or my decision to leave the Department of Health of my own accord earlier this year. However, the ministerial convention is clear: Ministers say only what the Government’s position is. We cannot have two colleagues firing away on the same issues, so I did indeed go quiet publicly for a period. Inside the Department, I made my representations to the then responsible Minister, and I want to put on record my appreciation for what my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison) sought to do with the scheme. She worked extremely hard, saw a lot of people and tried to do her best.

I think that I made a mistake when the original proposals that the current scheme is based on came forward in January this year. I sat beside my hon. Friend on the Front Bench and while I understood the general thrust, I had not fully grasped the detail, which became clear only in the consultation. My mistake was to think at that time that we had solved the problem—we clearly had not. I got that wrong, but I hope that I have tried to contribute to the debate since, both inside and outside the Department, as we try to deal with the present proposals. As the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North said, they move us on from where we were, but we are not yet there, so perhaps I could say a couple of things about where I think we might go.

First, we got the issue of discretionary payments wrong in the original proposals. A number of discretionary payments have effectively become fixed and people have become dependent on them. That should have been known to the Department, but clearly it was not known in enough detail, which has accordingly led to uncertainty and to people feeling that they might not be financially compensated to the extent that they are at present. That cannot be the case, and I am certainly not prepared to support anything that will make my constituents worse off than they are at present. That was not the intention, so we must make sure that those discretionary payments are included in the new scheme.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North for unusual circumstances.

Alistair Burt: Yes, I will. I will turn to those who are co-infected, but staying on discretionary payments for a moment, I just think that the position was not clear enough. As the trusts were administered separately and not by the Department, I do not think that there was full awareness that the discretionary payments had become a fixed part of people’s income. There is much more awareness of that now, and dealing with this is essential because people are extremely worried as they do not see such payments specifically included in the scheme, and I hope that they will be part of it.

I would also like a small amount of money to be made available for some of the things thrown up through the system that are not recognised. I am thinking in particular of a family in which two young boys lost their father and two uncles, and were taken into care. Their lives were changed hugely because of that. There is no part of the scheme that fits the agonies that they went through, so I wonder whether there could be some recognition of that, with a small part of the fund kept for unusual circumstances.

I must reiterate my determination that there should be some form of inquiry into what has happened. We know—it is on record—the sense of scandal about this. We have heard from former Ministers, including Lord Owen, who made a speech relatively recently in which he was very clear about what happened. He spoke about ministerial documents being “scraped” and said:

“I have become convinced that there has been a cleaning-up of documents”,

and that

“there was a decision to clean up all the files and stop some of the incriminating evidence”.

Given that this major issue has led to so many deaths and so much misery, and that people know that something went wrong, it cannot be right that there is still not a public space so that the people affected can know what happened.

The inquiry process worked well for Hillsborough and Bloody Sunday, although we know that the position is currently clouded by what is happening with the child abuse inquiry. I do not think that a full public inquiry is necessarily the only vehicle to deal with this, but there needs to be some way for the Department to answer in a way that it has not done up to now, which it cannot do through the mere revealing of documents. It remains essential that we press for such a process.

Mr George Howarth rose—

Alistair Burt: I will not give way, if the right hon. Gentleman will allow me. I have taken two interventions and will not get any more time.

I now want to raise specifically the issue of those who were co-infected. The majority of those infected by contaminated blood were infected with hep C. Some 1,200 people were co-infected with HIV and hep C, and perhaps only 250 of them are left alive. The suffering experienced by those who were co-infected is different from that of those who were mono-infected. There is now the possibility of treatment for hepatitis C, which we all welcome. Such treatment has considerably changed the outlook for many people, but it is not available for the co-infected.

This discrete group cannot grow any larger; it is diminishing all the time. Those who are co-infected have experienced things in their lives that have not affected others,
such as being told their length of life right at the beginning. I know of those who were told when they were very young that they might have only five or six years left. They thought that the education they were going through was of no consequence—what was the point?—and nor was looking after any sum of money they were given, because they might as well spend it if they were not going to live. Their outlook is now different, because medical treatments have allowed them to stay alive, but their condition is still extremely serious and varies almost from day to day.

For that diminishing number, a lump sum, which the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and others have mentioned, might be a possibility. They do not want to be dependent on the system; they want recognition of what they have lost, including their opportunities, and a lump sum might be the answer for them. I would be very grateful if there is now some consideration for the co-infected, because much of the debate has tended to be about the majority. I do not think that that is necessarily wrong, because what is provided for the majority is very important, but the co-infected matter.

We have been here too often. I doubt, sadly, that my hon. Friend the Minister will be the last Minister to talk about this issue, but we will not go away and the House will not leave this. This is a collective shame, because Government after Government have not grasped that this just needs a final settlement. We can find the money for other things. This issue cries out for that sort of settlement and we will not stop.

12.27 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this debate on behalf of children who lost their father, a mother who lost her son, and a spouse who lost her husband, as well as the many people who still suffer an injustice.

I want to focus on transparency in the public sphere. As the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) said, it has become obvious that there is evidence that there was knowledge long before there was action, as we saw, for example, from Lord Owen’s testimony to the Archer inquiry. It was stated that when he went to the Department of Health as a Minister and saw boxes of notes on the subject, that raised questions in his mind. He decided he needed a team to deal with the matter, but when he returned a week later, all the paperwork had been shredded. I therefore wonder whether, through this debate—perhaps the Minister will reply to us in writing—we could give permission to others who might know more to come forward. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that it might not be right to hold a full-scale, lengthy inquiry, but there must be some way of holding to account the individuals who knew more.

That covers the justice point; the other linked point is the question of trust in health providers. Madam Deputy Speaker, as I am sure that you are aware from listening to this debate, there was wide knowledge at the time, even among health professionals. I therefore wonder whether health professionals who were working in the national health service at the time might be able to shed some light on how it could be that individuals knew about the contamination, yet decided to continue with the use of contaminated products, both for reasons of cost and because it was said that there was no alternative. Years later, we are in a position of trying to find the truth. Now is the time to look at these two questions of trust and justice.

I add my voice to those who have said that bringing in Atos and other private providers could redound to the sense of a lack of trust about resolving this matter. Could we not look at this as just an NHS-led process, which would underline honesty and a sense of communicating well with those who have suffered so many years of trauma due to this terrible situation?

I put on record my recognition of the excellent work of the all-party group and of members of the haemophilia community, who have helped MPs to research this matter so diligently and have called for a proper investigation for so many years. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for bringing forward the debate.

12.30 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing this debate and on all the fine work she has done on the all-party group in keeping this issue in the public eye and in the ministerial eye. I associate myself with many of the points and comments she made. She set out clearly what needs to happen now to resolve the problem, so I shall not repeat what she said.

I would like to highlight the cases of a couple of my constituents who have suffered from the terrible effects of this scandal. I spoke again this week to one of my constituents, Helen Wilcox, who contracted hepatitis C following a blood transfusion at the age of 17, 40 years ago. She told me that she had received some terribly bad news—that her illness had progressed to cirrhosis of the liver. She is currently undergoing tests and biopsies to find out how long she has left to live. I ask Members to imagine the sort of strain her family has had to live with all these years, knowing that her condition would probably get worse, yet hoping that it would not.

Mrs Wilcox has had four strokes and suffers from rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis. She takes 35 tablets a day and can barely get out of bed. Understandably, she says she has no life. She does not go out and she cannot make plans. She barely has the energy to bring up her children, and she had to give up her job 10 years ago. I am sure that the Minister will agree that she and her family deserve the certainty and clarity of a decent settlement in keeping with the pain and suffering she has endured.

Mrs Wilcox is not on her own. Many other Members will have similar stories from their constituencies. Another victim in my own constituency is Richard Warwick, who was multiply infected with HIV and hepatitis C as well as hep B by the NHS. His life has been ruined through no fault of his own. Of the 30 pupils in his class in the special school he attended, only four remain alive today. In fact, of the 1,200 victims who are co-infected, only 280 are still alive. Richard has campaigned long and hard for a fair deal for victims such as himself. One of the most heart-breaking and emotional meetings I have ever had as a Member of Parliament was when I spoke to Mr and Mrs Warwick, who told me about the impacts that they had on their lives and their terribly difficult decision not to have a family because of the health implications that would potentially fare for their children.
I welcome the point made by the Haemophilia Society that the new payment scheme is an improvement on proposals in the original January consultation. I think it makes complete sense to have one single scheme rather than multiple schemes, and I am pleased that more money has been identified to pay the victims. On behalf of my constituents and others like them, however, I ask the Minister to ensure that no one is worse off under the new system, including those who are in receipt of discretionary payments. I ask, too, for greater clarity about payments made to the families of victims after they have passed away.

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is giving an emotional speech, and it is hard to listen to these cases. I am not going to go into the details of the constituent I speak for, but I will speak up for the idea of the lump sum payment for the co-infected, because they have even more strains than others. As my hon. Friend says, there are fewer and fewer of them and it is up to us to try to make their lives as good as we possibly can.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend makes a good point, echoing the comment of the chair of the all-party group that there should be an option to take an ongoing payment or a lump sum.

Of course, the victims have lived with their illnesses for decades and now they want to ensure that their families are compensated for the losses they endured because of that. Mr Warwick also had to give up his job many years ago. When his employers discovered that he was infected with HIV, he was asked to leave. That meant his wife became the main breadwinner, although she could only work part-time as the rest of her time was devoted to his care. Given that she may be near to or at retirement age, it may be difficult for her to find a full-time job. Mr Warwick tells me that more than anything he wants to be able to put his mind at rest by knowing that Mrs Warwick will continue to receive monthly payments throughout her lifetime.

I urge the Minister to think about the terrible impact this injustice has had on Helen Wilcox, Richard Warwick and their families—and many others like them—and to offer them greater clarity and a fair settlement, so that they can have peace of mind this Christmas.

12.36 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I commence in the same vein as others by paying tribute to the leadership and work of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on this issue. I see other Members across the Chamber today who have also played a part, including the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), who has been in meetings with the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley). This is not a party political issue. The core of it is simply about doing the right thing, and it shows all-party groups and Parliament at their best. Members have come together on the basis of the difficult personal stories of our constituents, such as the one we have just heard from the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake).

I have two constituents who have provided me with an inspirational lead in tackling the problem. My constituent Debra has HIV. She received it from a partner who had received contaminated blood products. In fact, he did not tell her at the time, and it took her several years to work out that all her health problems derived from that infection. He obviously became her ex-partner, and that person later died of his illness. Debra has never been able to hold down a job because of the continuing, persistent nature of the illness. In common with the constituents described by the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton, Debra was asked to leave her job, and her career has been badly threatened.

My constituent Neil has hepatitis C, which he contracted as a haemophilia patient as a child. Again, he is unable to hold down a job, which means he cannot hold on to decent housing. Another aspect of the problem is that Neil’s body retains water, and he has to go regularly to hospital to have his body drained of excess fluid. He can work, but he suffers from fatigue and his whole life has been dominated by these problems.

The only mistake these constituents of mine and of other Members have committed is to be unlucky. That is the only thing they have done. They were unlucky when they received these contaminated blood products or, in the case of Debra, were infected by a partner, without being told the circumstances. They are the victims of what could be considered, as we have said, a crime. We cannot get away from the fact that we still need to do more for people whose basic problem is that they were unlucky at a difficult time in their lives.

The current system is chaotic. We are simplifying it, although I fear that when we simplify systems of this kind, they may also become less valuable. As other Members have said, when it has been simplified and the various schemes have been brought together, no recipient should be any worse off. I approve of such an amalgamation, but I cannot help feeling that so far there has been almost a policy of divide and rule—perhaps unwitting, perhaps deliberate—with different types of scheme for different types of sufferer. There are also different schemes, and different levels of schemes, in the different countries of the United Kingdom. The situation is absurd: someone living in England might qualify for a Scottish scheme because it relates to the country that the recipient was in when he or she was infected.

We need some consistency and fairness. People who, rightly, feel angry and let down are being forced to compare their circumstances with those of other victims rather than looking to the real culprits: the private companies, described so eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North, which put profit before patients’ safety all those years ago and have never been brought to account. For that reason, I support the calls for a proper inquiry. I tabled some questions to the Department of Health recently, and it transpires that those corporations have never paid any compensation and no compensation has ever been sought from them. Someone said earlier that it might be difficult to pin down exactly who was responsible and when, but there should at least be an effort to track down those who are responsible and force them to pay for their misdemeanours.

I asked Debra and Neil for their comments. There is no doubt that Debra will lose money under the current proposals. The former Prime Minister, David Cameron, said in the House:

“Today I am proud to provide them with the support that they deserve.”—[Official Report, 13 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 291.]
Debra found those words rather distasteful. Her response was angry, and she had every right to be angry. She gleaned from what the Prime Minister had said that she, as an HIV-infected partner, deserves to be worse off. She knows that her support will be reduced, but she wants to know what will happen to the money that Macfarlane Trust beneficiaries are losing. Will the amounts be the same? Victims of this scandal who are losing money are being asked to turn in on themselves rather than directing their fire at the real culprits. The Minister can deal with that by ensuring that no one loses out.

Debra believes that the schemes will take financial support from HIV and co-infected victims: those whose condition has no cure, who are forced to take toxic medication that helps to keep them alive, who struggle with mental illnesses as a result of living with stigma and discrimination, and who every day face the reality that, despite medication, people are still dying from HIV and AIDS. Debra has the impression that moving the schemes around is robbing Peter to pay Paul.

Neil supports the idea of a Hillsborough-style inquiry, but says it is important to ensure that the level of support payments is maintained. He says:

"£15,500 is far too low and does not take into account how much expense being ill and travelling to and from hospitals across the country is!"

He also says that the payments should be linked to inflation, because otherwise they will grow ever smaller.

**Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): The hon. Gentleman mentioned a Hillsborough-style inquiry. Like the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), I should like the Government to consider that. I took up the case of Ms Sullivan-Weeks’s stepfather, who received unheated Scottish blood products in England after they had been withdrawn in Scotland because there was a time lag in England. We do not know how many people were affected in that way, but he ended up dying. That prompts a particular sense of injustice. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is another reason why a Hillsborough-style inquiry is necessary?

**Christian Matheson**: Absolutely. I want to get to the truth. The victims and the surviving members of their families deserve the truth, and the culprits must be held to account as well. As has already been pointed out, it seems that there was knowledge of what was going on at the time.

The right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) rightly said that this matter is not going to go away. The longer it goes on, and the greater the sense of injustice felt by the victims and their families, the stronger will be the calls for a final resolution. I am glad that the Minister is present, because the Government have an opportunity to do the right thing: to lift the black cloud of uncertainty, and to end what was eloquently described by the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire as a “drip, drip” approach. We need a final answer to this question, which will provide the certainty that has been missing for so long.

12.45 pm

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) and to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson). Without them, we would not have come as far as we have. With them, we have come a long way, although there is still more to do. I do not want to repeat what they have said, but what I will say is that the House of Commons Library has produced a very useful debate pack which I recommend to Members. The reference is CDP-2016-0227.

I also commend the Tainted Blood website, whose timeline and chronology remind us that the first known case of a haemophiliac being infected with hepatitis C was discovered in 1961. We know that the development of blood products was designed to help haemophiliacs, but it actually harmed them.

I know a bit about this subject indirectly. On the day of the State Opening of Parliament in 1975, my wife received eight pints of blood, and went on to join us in the House of Commons. That was before Factor VIII had been spread around. The first member of my family knowingly to take an AIDS or HIV test was my mother. She had had a pancreatic operation and received a lot of blood, and later, when she heard what was going on, she said that she was going to get herself tested.

When I was a Northern Ireland Minister in 1989-90, I got in touch with the then director of the Haemophilia Society, because a friend of mine had been infected with HIV and AIDS after his haemophilia had been treated. I spent a long time doing the best I properly could, in my role as a Minister in a different Department, to give advice on how to try to bring the issues into the open. I pay tribute to my constituents and friends who are living with hepatitis C, HIV or AIDS and who have given me an insight into their circumstances.

I want to make a couple of points which will be obvious to those who think about them. First, is it not possible for something to be written in the medical notes of all the people who have been infected to prevent every hospital, clinician or care giver they encounter from going through questions such as “What is your drinking habit?”, “Why have you got this liver problem?”, and X and Y and Z? It seems to me that one of the first things to which people should be entitled is an understanding that their circumstances do not require them to tell strangers, several times a year, what has caused them to be in need of care and help.

Secondly, while I welcome the advances in dealing with hepatitis C, some specialist treatment requires people who live some distance from London to come to specialist hospitals here, and to arrive reasonably early. Travel and accommodation costs—including those of the person who is accompanying them, to whom they are married or who is caring for them—will need to be met. We need to find some way of ensuring that when members of this group in particular require specialist treatment, they are not put to abnormal difficulties in finding accommodation or paying for their needs. I think we can be more sympathetic than that.

Some of these people are very young, or were very young when they were infected. They are not people of my age, approaching their retirement years—not that I am hoping to retire soon. They may have felt lonely because they did not feel they could have an active social life. Some probably had no particular interest in pursuing higher education, given the degree to which they could work, and, as well as physical health issues, they probably needed other therapy. People should go out of their way to put arms around them—act not just
like a two-armed human being, but like an octopus and get right around them and try to meet all their needs in a way that they find acceptable.

I wish colleagues in the Department of Health well. These are not easy issues to tackle. I know perfectly well that the Treasury has a job to do in trying to oversee every little change in departmental spending, but I hope the Prime Minister will do what her predecessor did, and, after a few months of letting the debate settle down, meet my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and representatives of the Haemophilia Society and ask, “Are we getting it right? Is there more that we should do?” The Prime Minister is able to bring together the Department of Health, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Treasury and ask, “What more can we properly do to get rid of most of the problems?”

I have a question for my hon. Friend the Minister that I hope she will be able to answer today or in writing. Are the Government still giving help to the Haemophilia Society? The load on that society has been increased by this work. Its briefings and involvement have been important to Government and those affected, and to those of us trying to represent both. I hope that if the society is being put to extra costs, the Government will see if they can provide the funds they used to provide—I think they provided £100,000 for five years.

12.51 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): We come into politics not for title or high office, but because we care and want to make a difference to people’s lives. If I ever get round to writing a list of my political heroes, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) has secured her place on it for all she has done for the many people affected by this—not just those who have been infected, but their families and loved ones, and people grieving the loss of someone who they thought would have longer than they had. A big difference is being made for them, but we still have a long way to go to secure real justice.

I am here to represent my constituent Alex Smith. He is infected with hepatitis C. That is bad in itself, but to add insult to that his wife died from the same infection, which was contracted from a blood transfusion while giving birth. He has suffered the loss of his wife, he has raised children by himself, he has been ill, and he has not been able to work. I resent the fact that the approach to this feels inhumane. It feels as though the starting point is how much money the Government are willing to pay rather than looking at things from the point of view of a human being.

I really struggle with the idea that the best on offer is to enable the victims of blood contamination to live just above the poverty line. The hopes, dreams, ambitions and potential of so many people have been ruined not just by the contamination, but by the treatment they have received from the hospitals when trying to find out information and get hold of their medical records through poor diagnosis and treatment, and in trying to get justice and fair funding so that they can live a decent life.

It is more than just the infection that has now taken hold of people; it is the whole issue and the way it has been handled. It has dominated the lives of tens of thousands of people. Their lives have been put on hold while they have tried to get answers and justice. They have tried to just about keep their heads above water, but sometimes the bailiffs knock on the door or the red letter comes because they are unable to pay the utility or council tax bill or the rent.

I feel that the Government have a duty. They should not be held accountable for what went on in the ’70s and ’80s—we cannot expect that of them, although we obviously owe an apology on behalf of the nation—but we can judge them by their response today. I feel that their response lacks humanity and lacks recognition of the pain and suffering so many have gone through. They seem unwilling to provide answers and justice to the people affected.

I absolutely support the call for an independent inquiry. There are many questions that still need to be answered, not just for the victims and their families, but so that we can make sure the same mistakes do not happen again. I read the Manchester Evening News yesterday which told of an excellent but heart-breaking investigation that was carried out into how patients were treated by the Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust. There were stories about children who died as a result of ill treatment. What was most hurtful was not just the poor treatment, but the fact that the hospital did not face up to the mistakes it had made and tried to block information from coming out. When the journalist tried to get that information it was withheld and efforts were frustrated. The information needed to be released in the public interest.

That is the experience of many people who are affected by blood contamination. When they requested information they ought to have been entitled to—medical records, details of who knew what and when—they were frustrated by the very organisations and institutions responsible for the infection in the first place. That is a gross injustice to those trying to make sense of what happened to them and to move on in their life. So many of them still cannot see a future, and the Government have taken far too long to come forward with a comprehensive plan to address the questions and give the answers that are very much needed.

I urge the Government, for no party political gain whatever—this is beyond party politics; this is about human beings—to come forward with a properly funded and logical scheme that does not just keep people out of poverty, but reflects the fact that they have the right to a decent and fulfilling life. The answer should really unpel the lid and get the information people desperately want to know about who knew what and when and how this happened. We need to learn lessons so that this does not happen again.

We are debating this specific issue today, but there are many people who are affected by poor public service and who are frustrated when they try to get answers. If there is one thing this place can do, it is apologise if an apology is needed, but more than that, we can be the champions for justice and help people get the answers they deserve.

12.56 pm

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): Since being elected to this House, every Friday at surgery I have talked to one or two constituents on this subject. In the few moments that I have, I want to share with the House what it has taught me about the impact of this
[Nadhim Zahawi]

extraordinary tragedy. I have lived with them through all the frustrations and all the false hope that we will finally reach a settlement.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for the incredible work she has done in leading all of us on a cross-party basis to get the message across in respect of all those people—all those human beings, and all that human suffering. I also congratulate the Minister on her role and pay tribute to her predecessor, who worked hard, working with many of us, to try to get to a full and final settlement. I hope the Prime Minister and the Treasury are listening carefully to this debate, and that it is not beyond us to work together now to get what we have been promising our constituents—those people who, through no crime of their own, have been infected with HIV or hep C—that they will get a settlement and, as the previous Prime Minister said, nobody will be worse off.

This is a question about fairness, as the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) rightly emphasised. I do not think it is fair that my constituents should feel that people infected in Scotland get a better deal than they do in Stratford-on-Avon.

The difficulty for Mr M—as I will refer to him, because it is right that he maintains his privacy—is that for a very long time there has been something called the discretionary payment, which in reality is not discretionary in any way. It is something that he absolutely relies upon to make sure that at the end of the week and the month he can balance the books; he can live just well enough to be able to feel that he has regained his dignity and his freedom. The difficulty for the Minister is that there is this sum of money, but I urge the Government to look again at this matter, because it could lead to a legal challenge if people feel that they are being unfairly treated vis-à-vis Scottish settlements or other parts of our country. Some of our constituents are considering that course of action.

I want to move on to the case of Ms W, whose anonymity I am protecting because she deserves that protection. Her issue has involved the Macfarlane Trust and she is not alone in feeling that the trust is not fit for purpose. I have attempted to deal with the trust on her behalf; every step of the way it has blocked my attempts to get her case across. My message to those on the Front Bench is that it would be an outrage if the trust were to continue to deal with my constituents in any way, because it is simply not fit for purpose.

I will end my speech by mentioning Mr D, who is infected with hepatitis C, to remind colleagues of the urgency of this matter. We must not find ourselves back here again in a year’s time still looking for a settlement. Just this morning I received a call from Mr D’s wife, who works in our NHS, to tell me that he had been admitted to hospital following a severe deterioration in his liver due to the advanced hepatitis C. He might not be around by the time we come to a settlement, so I urge the Minister to remind her Government that this is about fairness and about speed of settlement.

1.1 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for her strong campaigning zeal in relation to this subject. The contaminated blood and blood products scandal has touched the lives of many people over the past 40 years. Sadly, many people have died, leaving loved ones who had spent their lives caring for them. The scandal has not only affected those who are infected but changed the lives of their families as well. We have had many debates in the House and Westminster Hall calling for a full and final settlement for those affected, and what we see today is an improvement on what was offered to them in January, but we still have a distance to go if we are to give those people and their families the means to have a decent standard of living.

Questions remain unanswered as to why those infected blood products, which infected others, were imported from the United States—and perhaps other places—into Northern Ireland and Britain. I understand that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), is not the Minister responsible for this matter, but I hope that she can answer my questions today. I hope that she will pursue Lord Prior to ensure that we get answers. As the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) said, there is a collective shame surrounding this issue. It is an issue without political boundaries or barriers, because it has impacted on families throughout the UK.

I return to a point that I raised in an earlier intervention, to highlight the issue that we face in Northern Ireland. I have written to the Northern Ireland Health Minister, Michelle O’Neill, because there has not yet been an announcement on the scheme for Northern Ireland. She replied to me in early August, after the Prime Minister’s statement here in the Commons. She stated:

“I am currently considering options for the future of financial support for patients and families in the north of Ireland before making a decision.”

That is a similar answer to those that I received from her predecessors. There is no sense of urgency on their part, and no recognition or acknowledgment of the fact that this is a serious matter, which has impacted on people’s lives. I have written again to the Minister in Northern Ireland to urge her to address this matter as soon as possible, and I would appreciate it if the Under-Secretary here could raise it in any forthcoming discussions with her Northern Ireland counterpart.

An important point is that the affected people in Northern Ireland can stay in the current scheme as long as the English scheme remains unreformed, but once the new English administrator is in place—I hope it will not be Atos or Capita—the existing discretionary charities will close. That will leave my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan), as well as other affected people in Northern Ireland, in great peril. We do not want that to happen. The Haemophilia Society has also raised this matter in its document.

I remind the Minister that the Irish Government took the courageous decision some years ago to accept liability for this tragedy, which has compromised the health and the immune systems of so many people, and to deliver a compensation scheme.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): The House has been misinformed on this point a number of times in previous debates, and it is important to point out that the
compensation scheme in the Irish Republic was established even before liability was acknowledged. The tribunal system and the compensation scheme were set up, and the acknowledgment of liability simply added the quantum. The fact of compensation had already been established, and that is what is still missing in the UK.

Ms Ritchie: I thank my hon. Friend for his helpful intervention. He characterises the position in the Republic of Ireland, which illustrates clearly the acknowledgment that the needs of people came first, before all the other extraneous matters.

I welcome the fact that progress has been made, but there are still matters that the Government must address if they want to be responsible for the long overdue settlement that these people are entitled to and require. It is not clear what will be in place following 2020-21. People need time to plan and they should not have to worry that the scheme might deteriorate or be pulled out from under their feet. I am also concerned by the lack of clarity on support for dependants, bereaved partners and bereaved parents, both current and future.

I have spoken many times in the Chamber about constituents of mine who have been affected by contaminated blood, and they have given me permission to name them. One constituent I have known for most of my life, Brian Carberry, has to go to weekly hospital appointments. He also has associated health problems. Over a year ago, he was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Thankfully, he is currently in remission.

Two other constituents are twins, Martin and Seamus Sloan, who live in Kilkeel. They are both haemophiliacs and both infected. Their lives have been turned upside down. They have difficulty keeping hold of interpersonal relationships, and their immune systems have been completely compromised. That means that they are exposed to many other types of illness, and they are therefore unable to work and to provide for their families.

The strain and challenges that the families of infected people face cannot be overlooked. It is a direct result of this tragic situation. There can never really be a remedy for those whose lives have been affected, but the Government can recognise their suffering and alleviate the financial strain that they experience as a result. The Government must also try to resolve what the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire described as the legacy of collective shame that goes back across many Governments, and to bring relief to the people affected. Sadly, some of those people have passed on.

Regular payments must be in place and discretionary grants must be available to all those infected and their families. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North, who has been such a stout campaigner on the behalf of these individuals, I would also like some form of inquiry, but I do not want an inquiry to hold up whatever form of compensation will eventually become available. We need to find out the reasons and the causes and hold to account the people who did this to our constituents and the wider population. It must never happen again. The Government have made progress, but they must ensure a full, fair settlement that is allied to an inquiry, because that is what these people deserve, so vitally need and have long been owed. It is long overdue for those lives lost, compromised or damaged by bad health as a result of infected and contaminated blood products.

1.10 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), who has consistently spoken with passion about this issue. I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing the debate and for chairing the all-party group on haemophilia and contaminated blood.

I rise in this debate as a Scottish Member representing a Scottish constituency for two reasons. First, I want to speak on behalf of constituents such as Cathy Young, a stage 1 widow and member of the Scottish Infected Blood Forum. Like me, that group wants not only to express solidarity with those in other parts of the UK who find themselves in a different scheme, but to make the reasonable point that Scottish Members may find that they have constituents who are victims of infected blood and are covered by two different schemes, because the infection took place not in Scotland, but elsewhere in the UK. That is an important point. Members from other parts of the UK will find that they have constituents who are part of the Scottish scheme and benefit more as a result. Cathy wrote to me last night to say:

“I think for me personally, being a widow, obviously those still living with the horror of this disaster must be financially looked after, and not with payments that people feel that once again they’re just being fobbed off, but I would like both widows, and the deceased person’s estate, like children or parents of children who have passed away, to be recognised, and not with the insulting payment being offered. Our community deserve and demand the respect that has been denied us, and the justice that is long overdue. I send my total support to all those infected and affected by this disaster.”

Secondly, I want to raise issues relating to the proposed Scottish scheme that require this place to complete some work so that those infected in Scotland can receive their compensation. The Haemophilia Society points out that

“The Scottish scheme is comparatively more generous. The Scottish discretionary support scheme will also be better-administered, with patient involvement in governance; a goal to minimise means-testing and assessments; and a commitment to continue existing ongoing payments and ensure no beneficiary is worse off under the new support arrangements.”

According to analysis, the Department of Health could adopt many aspects of the Scottish scheme and still fall within the allocated budget. The all-party group calls on the Government to adopt those measures, particularly in relation to bereaved partners, and to reverse their plans for appointing a profit-making private administrator for the discretionary scheme. Any additional funds required to support those affected could be found, as the motion states, from the 2013 sale of the Government’s stake in Plasma Resources UK.

There are other differences between the schemes. Annual payments for those with HIV and advanced hepatitis C will be increased in Scotland from £15,000 to £27,000 to reflect average earnings. Those with both HIV and hepatitis C will receive their annual payments increased from £30,000 to £37,000 to reflect their additional health needs. When a recipient dies, their spouse or civil partner will continue to receive 75% of their annual payment. Those infected with chronic hepatitis C will receive a £50,000 lump sum, which is an increase on the previous £20,000, meaning that there will be an additional £30,000 for those who have already received the lower payment.
A new support and assistance grants scheme will be established in Scotland to administer and provide more flexible grants to cover additional needs. Scottish Government funding for the scheme will be increased from £300,000 a year to £1 million a year. As recommended, the Scottish Government will aim to deliver the new scheme through a single body so that those affected no longer need to apply to more than one body for funding.

However, the timing of the Scottish-wide payment system will depend on both Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the Department of Health. Will the Minister outline what discussions the Department has had with HMRC about passing the relevant tax orders so that payments can be made to those entitled to compensation? They should be able to receive it with the minimum of fuss and should not be liable to tax. That has to happen whichever mechanism is used to make the new payments. To use the existing scheme to make the new payments, all four nations of the UK must agree, but only Scotland is signed up at the moment.

There are some important decisions to be taken before the Scottish scheme is established. They include changes to the threshold for receiving ongoing support, a re-examination of the ability of those with incomplete medical records to apply, an appeals procedure for those who think they should be in the Scottish scheme—that might apply to people resident in Scotland who were infected elsewhere, but want to apply to the Scottish scheme—a procedure for converting ongoing payments into a lump-sum settlement, and consideration of how the new discretionary scheme will operate in practice. The affected community will broadly welcome the replacement of the five trusts with a single scheme administrator, but the news that the new administrator of the proposed English scheme is likely to be a profit-making private company, which was not mentioned in the consultation documents, will be met with considerable concern. The tender process for a new scheme administrator started in September 2016. It was expected that the new administrator would take over in May 2017 following a transition period, but it appears that the deadline is now being pushed forward.

It is of grave concern to many hon. Members that Atos and Capita have attended Department of Health meetings to discuss bidding for the contract. It will be of utmost importance that the new supplier understands the complex needs of scheme beneficiaries and deals with all correspondence sympathetically. We all have concerns that if, as is likely, the successful bidder is a private company, it is not clear how the discretionary aspects of the scheme will be delivered. While the Department will own and publish a set of principles for discretionary support, as well as holding the budget, it will be up to the scheme administrator to consider applications for grants and other support. The Scottish scheme has the alternative option of a scheme administrator with more beneficiary involvement, and the original all-party group report recommended a similar thing. The Scottish discretionary support scheme will be better funded, as its funding is set to more than treble, while the English scheme will see a more modest 25% increase in 2018-19.

Before I conclude, I want to discuss some concerns relating to matters raised by the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and health records. People who were infected during this disaster do not have the words “HIV” or “hepatitis C” on their death certificates, which is understandable due to the stigma attached to those conditions at the time. Will the Government or the scheme administrator consider that issue? There are people who were infected whose death certificates say something different, but their medical records will show that infection.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. He might be about to put another question to the Minister, but in case he does not, I will. How will the Government try to get to the spouses of people who might have died 25 years ago? Those spouses might not know about this offer, because not everyone is involved in the networks.

Chris Stephens: That is very important. It is also up to us, as Members, to raise that issue with our constituents through newsletters and all the rest of it. The hon. Gentleman is right that there are people who lost their partners years ago and do not know about the scheme. I thank him for his intervention and I hope the Minister will consider that point.

There are clear points to address because we must ensure that the compensation is not subject to tax, as that would be ludicrous. We must also deal with the issue of the death certificates. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak. I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this first-class debate.

1.20 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this important debate. Let me start by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for scheduling today’s debate and the hon. Members responsible for tabling the motion. I especially thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for leading the debate and for her work on the all-party group. She summarised the situation clearly and forcefully, and I am particularly grateful to her for outlining the risk of private operators administering the scheme. That concern has been raised by several hon. Members on both sides of the House.

Another recurring theme in the debate has been justice and the question of how much was known about the contamination at the time—that question has been asked, so it deserves an answer. Without any doubt, this subject is one of the most terrible chapters in the history of our NHS. It is truly horrific and has had an impact upon tens of thousands of people and their families. In some cases, their experience has been ongoing for more than 40 years. Many people have already died or been left suffering long-term disability and hardship as a result of infections. Relatives have had to sacrifice their careers to provide care and support. In some cases, partners and loved ones have become infected. Indeed, I received an email from a surviving victim of contaminated blood whose partner subsequently became infected and died. Patients, families and carers have had to deal with such difficulties with immense and enduring courage, and I wonder how many have found the strength—physically, emotionally and, indeed, financially.

That brings me on to the proposed changes to the current ex-gratia payments. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) illustrated, the proposed new scheme in Scotland will lead to an increase
in annual payments for those with HIV and advanced hepatitis C from the current £15,000 to £27,000 per year. That amount is set at a level that reflects average earnings. That point is important as this is not about poverty; it is about a decent standard of living. The payments for those co-infected with HIV and hepatitis C will increase from £30,000 to £37,000 per year, and that amount reflects their additional health needs. When a recipient dies, their partner will continue to receive 75% of the previous annual entitlement. That, too, is important, given how many have had to give up their own careers to look after loved ones. Those infected with chronic hepatitis C will receive a £50,000 lump sum payment, which gives an additional £30,000 to those who have already received the lower payment.

The Scottish discretionary support scheme is set to see its funding more than treble. It will have an independent appeals mechanism, and there is a general guarantee that no individual will be worse off than at present. To simplify the situation so that those affected will no longer have to apply to more than one body for funding, the Scottish Government aim to deliver this scheme through a single body. Full governance arrangements are still to be detailed for this new organisation, but it is likely to be administered by National Services Scotland. It is also worth remembering that the Scottish Government are committed to reviewing the distinction between stage 1 and stage 2 hepatitis C.

There are clear differences between what is proposed for Scotland and the system elsewhere, with many viewing the Scottish scheme as comparatively more generous. That said, it is not without its detractors, particularly those with lesser health impacts who will not receive the more generous payments proposed. It is therefore important that we continue to listen to the views of beneficiaries as we design and implement the new Scottish scheme, so evidence-based reviews of the payment criteria will be carried out. In Scotland, we want to improve the scheme for everyone, but we must give greater priority to those in most severe need.

We have already heard of many tragic individual cases from throughout the UK, but I will spare hon. Members further heart-wrenching examples of cases of which I have received details. Instead I shall focus on some of the questions that have been raised with me by victims and their support groups; I hope that the Minister can assist with some answers. The first relates to the compensation schemes and the fact that there are currently five different organisations funded by UK Health Departments, including the three devolved health authorities. That means that using the existing schemes to make the new Scottish payments requires the agreement of all four nations of the UK. There must also be agreement from the boards of the UK-wide schemes. Currently, only Scotland is signed up. There will be a Scotland-wide payment system, but the timing will depend on the UK Government. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the Department of Health. I therefore ask that the UK Government do not stand in the way of the Scottish payments.

That brings me to my second ask, which echoes one made by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West (Diana Johnson). My hon. Friend must pass tax orders so that none of the payments are liable for tax—that must happen whichever mechanism is used to make the new payments. Thirdly, what more can be done about cross-border infections? The current schemes are based on where the individual was infected, rather than their residency, which means that the English schemes apply to some Scottish residents and the new Scottish scheme will apply to others resident in England. That issue compounds the next point I wish to make: hepatitis C sufferers are acutely aware of the cold, and during the winter their heating bills go through the roof. If they cannot afford to heat their home, they are at greater risk of death through complications due to illness such as flu or colds. There is therefore a clear need for the winter fuel allowance, so perhaps Ministers can advise us on their rationale for wanting to remove it.

It has been suggested to me by the Scottish Infected Blood Forum that the liver damage test is outdated and we should look at the impact the condition has on the whole body. The problem may be amplified among those who have made positive lifestyle choices such as abstaining from alcohol, as their liver may appear to be less affected. Finally, people want some certainty about future funding, so what support will continue after the current spending review period?

I always try to be positive and to look forward to the future, but given the age of many victims and their medical complications, people are dying every week—there are fewer of them every year. Thousands have already died and for them this is all too little, too late. It is difficult to be positive in the circumstances, but I am grateful to have had the opportunity to take part in today’s excellent and generally consensual debate.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in such an important debate. I want, first and foremost, to thoroughly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), who for many years now has championed and pushed on this vital matter. Her work cannot and must not go unnoticed or unrecognised. I am sure people across the country, and indeed across the House, will want to join in thanking her.

The experiences of those men and women affected by this awful scandal should never be out of our minds as we continue to do all that we can to support them. Doing all we can for them is paramount, knowing full well that whatever we do will not be enough to give them back their life or a life without suffering or pain. HIV and hepatitis are terrible conditions. Someone living with HIV or hepatitis will face fears of developing other conditions and have to face the stigma that comes with these conditions. This debate is welcome, as it is the first time the House has had the chance to debate the new scheme since it was announced and to continue to hold the Government to account to do more. It is important that we now have the chance to discuss that in a considered and comprehensive manner.

In my contribution, I want to touch upon three areas: first, the current funding system in England; secondly, the involvement of private companies to administer support to beneficiaries; and, thirdly, the need for an independent Hillsborough-style panel to recognise the failures of the system that these people have had to live with.

It was announced earlier in the year that a new financial arrangements system would be introduced, and a public consultation was conducted to get views
and opinions on how that would take shape. Although there has been a welcome, if somewhat modest, increase in the annual payment to people with HIV, hepatitis C at stage 2 and those who are co-infected, as well as the first guaranteed ongoing payments for people with stage 1 hepatitis C, it is concerning that these payments fall short of what has been drawn up in Scotland.

Also, the current English system makes no mention of support for people who have been cleared of hepatitis C prior to the chronic stage but who, despite fighting off the disease, may still exhibit symptoms ranging from fatigue to mental health issues and even diabetes. These people have never been entitled to any support, and continue to get none. The scheme does not include support for those infected with other viruses, such as hepatitis B, D or E, and for those people it has meant continuous monitoring of their liver function. It is estimated that that group is extremely small and, according to the Haemophilia Society, would be a minimal cost to the Department of Health.

We find that the new scheme does little or nothing for bereaved partners, parents or children of those who have sadly died from diseases contracted through the contaminated blood scandal. The new system should have gone a long way to supporting those various groups within the affected community. I hope that the Minister can give us some reassurance that those concerns have been noted, and that she will go away and look into what more can be done to help the people I have just mentioned.

There are also concerns regarding the discretionary payments, which, thankfully, were saved, despite it being announced in the consultation earlier this year that they could be scrapped. That should be welcomed, but there is a clear concern that the discretionary support will not go far enough to improve the support on offer for those with HIV or those who are co-infected. The Government need to consider that impact and what more they plan to do. It is worrying that the Government have yet to make clear the minimum and maximum discretionary support that people will be able to receive.

I understand that the Reference Group on Infected Blood is currently considering that policy and that we will hear more from it in the new year, but would it not be worth while for the Minister to give us some indication now, so that those who will depend on this money in the years to come can have some reassurance, especially as we enter the festive period? There are many questions to be answered. That is why I hope that in the time allowed the Minister will give us in the House and those who will be watching the debate the reassurances that they need.

The new scheme will replace the current system so that the five trusts across the country that administer the payments are amalgamated into one, and I know that that has been welcomed. However, there is one very concerning point that was so eloquently put by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North when she opened the debate and which needs to be addressed by the Minister. I refer to the potential involvement of a private sector company, such as Atos or Capita, which both bid in the tender process. The Minister no doubt expects me to make the typical party political point, but I am not going to do that.

That potential involvement was never included in any talks with the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and blood contamination, no consultation was held with the affected community, and there was no mention of it in the Department’s response to the survey, yet we see it happening now. The concern here is that the many thousands of people affected by the mistake—which, it must be remembered, was often made by US private companies—feel aggrieved at the potential involvement of a profit-making private company. That resentment is justified, especially as it was the mistake of a private company that put them in their current situation. There should be no profit making when it comes to compensating for the failures of the private sector. That was highlighted well by my hon. Friend in her speech and was also touched on by the former Health Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt).

The issue was highlighted too by the APPG’s survey of nearly 1,000 people affected by the scandal, who clearly had concerns about the involvement of a profit-making private company. It is important that those affected have their say in the administration of the payments and support. I would therefore be interested to hear the Minister’s thoughts on their involvement, as we have seen in Scotland, where there has been an alternative scheme operator which includes beneficiary involvement. Perhaps the Minister can tell us why private involvement is now being considered, but was never consulted upon.

My final point is about co-ordinating an independent panel, such as in the case of Hillsborough. The Prime Minister promised in September that she would keep an open mind about an independent panel, but she has, sadly, quashed the idea. The rationale given is that we have had two public inquiries into this matter already, by Lord Archer and Lord Penrose. That may be the case, but it is important that we consider the approach to helping people to get the justice they deserve, especially as it is clear that neither of the inquiries met the needs of the affected community. The two inquiries were narrow in their focus and were not about apportioning blame. The affected community is not calling for that. What it is calling for, which is strongly supported by the Opposition, is a truth and reconciliation process and public disclosure of the failures, which those affected rightly deserve.

Mark Durkan: On the need for some vehicle of inquiry into the background, in an intervention I pointed out that, in the Irish Republic, the right to compensation was established in 1995. There was an Act in 1997, but it was following a tribunal of inquiry that the state admitted liability, so there was further legislation in 2002. The liability of the Irish state rested on the fact that the tribunal found that the state knew that there was a risk and carried it because the UK and others were prepared to carry the same risk.

Mrs Hodgson: I am grateful for that important intervention, which emphasises why we need an inquiry into issues such as the one that the hon. Gentleman has raised.

I am sure the Minister can understand the concerns across the House and out in the community among the people affected and their families. Before she replies, I ask her not to adopt the same language as that used by the Prime Minister, who attributed the lack of support
for an independent panel to the delay in the introduction of a support system. An independent panel with clearly defined terms of reference would not impede the development and implementation of the new system. I hope the Minister will keep that in mind when she responds, and recognise how important it is for those affected to get the reconciliation for which they have fought so long.

The Government must be committed for reforming the system and listening—must be commended, rather, for reforming the system and listening. I know they are committed to that. However, this is such an important issue that we must get it right, and once more I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North for her steadfast campaigning on this issue over many years. I am sure the community will also recognise that fact. Those people who have had their lives marked so significantly by the failures of the past should rightly be compensated and respected. Those who have died because of that serious mistake, those who are still living with the repercussions of the mistake, and those who have thankfully fought it off but still live with the impact of it all deserve respect and dignity, and I hope that in her reply the Minister will give them just that.

1.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and all the members of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood on helping to secure this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for providing time for it. It has been a highly informed, very personal and moving debate, but it has also been non-partisan. I thank all Members from across the House for the constructive way in which they have approached the debate.

I would like to begin by formally adding my personal apology to all those who have been affected by these tragic circumstances and the impact that this has had on so many families. I thank all colleagues’ constituents for their bravery in allowing their personal circumstances to be shared in the House today. It brings this debate to exactly where it should be, reminding us all what we are trying to achieve through the process. The importance of that cannot be overstated. I wish I could refer to all the constituents who were mentioned today. I listed them, but that would take most of the debating time that we have today, so I say thank you to all those who allowed their stories to be told. That is exactly why the Government are introducing the reforms we have been debating today to existing support schemes, alongside a commitment within this spending review period of up to £125 million until 2020-21 for those affected, which will more than double the annual spend over the next five years.

At the beginning, however, we should be up front in recognising that nothing can make up for the suffering and loss these families have experienced, and no financial support can change what has happened to them. However, I hope all of those here today will recognise that the support provided is significantly more than any previous Administration have provided, and recognise how seriously the Government take this issue. I would like to join colleagues in paying tribute to the previous Prime Minister and to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), for all their work on the issue. I reiterate their statement that the aim of this support scheme is that no one will be worse off.

It is, as many colleagues have said, time for our reforms to bring an end to the tortured road that far too many of those affected have been down. It is time for a more comprehensive and accessible scheme that gives those affected their dignity back. However, as I hope is clear from the debate, not all the details are yet resolved. I hope to answer as many questions as I can today, but I am certain that the noble Lord Prior will be listening closely to the debate, and he will be in contact with all those here today to make sure we can resolve details that I cannot get to in the time available.

Let me turn to where we are. The reforms guarantee that all those who are chronically affected will, for the first time, receive a regular annual payment in recognition of what has happened to them. That includes all the 2,400 individuals with hepatitis C stage 1, who previously received no ongoing payment, but who will now expect to receive £3,500 a year.

Increases to existing annual payments have also been announced. These are not designed in themselves to guarantee a reasonable standard of living. The package needs to be considered in the context of the whole range of support that is available for the patient group, including support being exempt for the purposes of tax, and benefits being claimed by beneficiaries of the schemes, as the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and all Members today? Is that correct or not?

I would like to address the concerns that have been raised about the tendering for the scheme. The shadow Minister is, I am afraid, not quite correct that Capita and Atos have already bid to administer the scheme. The invitation to tender has not yet been issued, so no initial bids have been received so far. We intend to issue the invitation to tender shortly, and I am absolutely sure that, as the tender is being designed, the concerns that have been raised in the debate will be heard, and that the concerns about trust and the history of this situation will be well understood by all those involved in the design.

I would also like to address the concerns that have been raised about the funding for the scheme. The shadow Minister is, I am afraid, not quite correct that Capita and Atos have already bid to administer the scheme. The invitation to tender has not yet been issued, so no initial bids have been received so far. We intend to issue the invitation to tender shortly, and I am absolutely sure that, as the tender is being designed, the concerns that have been raised in the debate will be heard, and that the concerns about trust and the history of this situation will be well understood by all those involved in the design.

Diana Johnson: I am grateful to the Minister for clarifying the position around the tender, but could she confirm that the only organisations or businesses that have been invited in for conversations with the Department of Health were the two that have been mentioned by a number of hon. Members today? Is that correct or not?

Nicola Blackwood: I have had no meetings on this issue, because it is obviously not within my departmental brief. I am happy to try to find out about that issue, if the hon. Lady would like.

Christian Matheson rose—
Nicola Blackwood: I would like to move on to some other issues because we are quite tight for time. I would like to talk about the budget that has been allocated, because it has been mentioned on a number of occasions. The pressures on the health budget will come as no surprise to anyone here today—we had an animated debate about that just this week. I would like to assure everybody in the House that, even in the context of those pressures, we fought hard to protect the money for this scheme through tough budget negotiations so that we could fulfil commitments that were made and ensure that the concerns of those affected are addressed as far as possible.

In that context, I would like to talk in a little more detail about some of the concerns that have been raised today by colleagues. Colleagues have rightly raised the issue of support for the bereaved and those relying on discretionary payments. That is why we have introduced the one-off payment of £10,000 to bereaved partners or spouses of primary beneficiaries, where infection contributed to the primary beneficiary’s death, and in recognition of their relationship at the time of death.

Jim McMahon: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Nicola Blackwood: I will in one second. I just want to respond to a point made by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North about the certification of death. We understand that death certification may not state a direct contribution, so the policy that is to be published will recognise other ways to show a causal link between infection and death. We would like to make sure that issues around that are not a barrier to support under the scheme.

Jim McMahon: I thank the Minister for giving way on that point, which she has partly answered in her contribution. However, could we just get some clarity on cases where the death certificate is marked “unascertained” and on whether there will be more flexibility around that, providing that the hepatitis can be proven?

Nicola Blackwood: The issue of death certificates is one that we are very alive to. It is one that the Department is trying to address, and I hope that we will be consulting closely with the relevant groups to make sure we deal with it in as sympathetic a manner as possible.

Ms Ritchie: Could the Minister comment on the points I made about the inactivity of the Northern Ireland Executive? Would it be possible for further phone calls to be made to the Minister for Health in Northern Ireland to accelerate the process and to enable payments and a scheme to be made available?

Nicola Blackwood: If the hon. Lady will have a little patience, I have an entire section on the devolved nations coming up. Before then, however, I would like to move on and speak a little about the other sections of the scheme. As well as the one-off payment to bereaved partners and spouses, the Government’s response to the consultation makes it clear that partners and spouses will be able to continue to access discretionary schemes on a means-tested basis. However, that is not the end of the story. My officials will continue to work with a reference group of experts on the details of the policy for this new payment for the bereaved and on elements of the wider discretionary payment. As soon as the policy is confirmed, the Department will publish it and give guidance on who is eligible and how to access the payment as easily as possible.

I recognise that, as has been clear from this debate, some do not feel that the new payments that have been announced are sufficient. However, they are based on the consultation response, and a judgment was made to provide support to the widest group of people possible to recognise the pain and suffering of those who have been affected by this tragedy. There are never really any right answers when designing a support scheme in recognition of such awful circumstances. Difficult judgments have to be made in relation to prioritising support. We consulted on the proposals and used the responses gathered to announce reforms that, for the first time, provide annual payments to all infected individuals rather than waiting for more people to get sicker before they receive support.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North raised issues about other viruses. We have not expanded the scheme to include other viruses, including vCJD. In that case in particular, that is because there is already
a vCJD compensation scheme that offers no-fault compensation. It was set up by the Government for vCJD patients and their families in recognition of their wholly exceptional situation. The scheme provides for payments to be made, in respect of 250 cases, from a trust fund of £67.5 million. Over £41 million has been paid out by the trust to date. There are currently no proposals to extend the infected blood system of ex gratia payments to include other viruses or infections that were contracted through routes other than NHS-supplied infected blood. This is based on the advice of the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs. For example, hepatitis B was not involved in the schemes when they were set up because the blood donor hepatitis B screening test had been introduced in the 1970s. There are other reasons for not including hepatitis E that I am happy to write to the hon. Lady in more detail should she wish me to do so.

We now arrive at the devolved nations section that I mentioned to the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie). Many colleagues have referred to the Scottish Government’s reforms. We are working closely with officials from Northern Ireland in keeping them up to date on our progress with implementation. These beneficiaries, as the hon. Lady said, will be eligible under the Northern Irish scheme to continue to receive support at their current levels. I am happy to ensure that my noble Friend Lord Prior is made aware of her concerns about the potential impact on Northern Irish victims.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) rightly raised the importance of co-ordination between the devolved nations on the support schemes. Given the significance of the points that he raised, and some complexities about the co-ordination of business, it is important that I ask my noble Friend Lord Prior to contact him directly on those points so that these matters can be co-ordinated effectively. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman on one point: the £500 winter fuel payment is now automatically included in the payment that people in England are getting as part of the support scheme. That means that they do not have to apply for it, as was the case previously. I hope that he will accept that is a degree of progress.

Many colleagues point to the Scottish scheme as a blueprint for what they would like to see introduced in England, but there are some differences, as the hon. Gentleman noted. In England, there are about 2,400 individuals with hepatitis C stage 1 who were not receiving any annual payment. We have introduced a new annual payment for all those individuals so that they can get support now rather than waiting for their health to deteriorate before they are eligible for it. The Scottish Government have made their own judgments. They have chosen to provide a lump sum payment, and there are currently no proposals for annual payments to the hepatitis C stage 1 group.

We have put in place other measures to avoid the sense that, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) suggested, this support could be grudging, or that, as the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North mentioned, people could feel as though they were being treated as beggars. We have specifically put in measures to avoid this. For example, as we announced in response to the public consultation, people should not feel as though they have to jump through hoops to prove that they are worthy of support. We have no intention of introducing individual health assessments to registrants of schemes as a means of making people feel as though they have to prove their eligibility. Another key element is a special categories mechanism, with appeal, for those with hepatitis C stage 1 who consider that the impact of their infection, or the treatment for it, is similar or greater than for those at stage 2, such that they could qualify for stage 2 annual payments. This is a particularly beneficial aspect of the scheme.

Members have raised the issue of those who could clear hepatitis C infection. They will remain entitled to compensation under the scheme. The shadow Minister is right that those who clear the virus during the acute phase are not included in the scheme, but that is because the body fights off the infection before the severe health impacts occur. That has been the judgment of the expert advisory group, which we have been pleased to listen to.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister deal with the question of tax rules? Has she had any discussions with HMRC on that issue?

Nicola Blackwood: I thought I had already answered that. These schemes are exempt from tax and we are continuing to ensure that the ongoing schemes will be subject to the same tax rules.

Several colleagues raised the issue of a public inquiry. The Prime Minister has been very clear that we do not believe that a public inquiry would provide further information. The things that a public inquiry could achieve, according to media reports, are establishment of the facts, learning from events, preventing a recurrence, catharsis, improving understanding of what happened, and rebuilding confidence and accountability. It is difficult to see what more information could be made available through a public inquiry given that action was taken as soon as possible to introduce testing and safety measures for blood and blood products as these became available, with the introduction of health and heated products, and that the Government have published all documents associated with this event from the period 1970 to 1985, in line with the Freedom of Information Act 2000. However, I am sure that campaigners will continue to make their case.

We have heard a lot about when this year’s payments will be made. I share that concern. When I was appointed as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State with responsibility for public health and innovation, I made resolving this issue one of my highest priorities. I am not prepared to suffer any further delays. It is not fair that affected patients should suffer the continuing uncertainty that has been raised by colleagues. I have told the Department that it must announce the scheme immediately. I am pleased to announce that letters to all hepatitis C stage 1 sufferers were sent out on 11 November informing them of their new annual payment and asking them to claim this through the existing schemes. The schemes have said that they will be able to make these payments by 22 December. Letters to those at stage 2 and those with HIV have been sent this week, and their additional payments will be made shortly before Christmas. The schemes are also planning to send all letters to bereaved partners and spouses before Christmas with the aim of paying their new lump sums before the end.
of the financial year, and certainly during March 2017. Details of the payment schedules are now available on the schemes’ website. In addition, as already announced, all new and increased payments will be backdated from April 2016 or the date of joining the schemes, if later.

I believe it is right that the Government’s focus is on considering how best to create and implement a system with the increased budget that is affordable, that redesigns the inconsistencies that we have heard about, and supports those most affected by these tragic events now and into the future. I will continue to listen to the concerns of those affected. I hope that I have responded to those concerns as effectively as I possibly can.

1.59 pm

Diana Johnson: I will try to be brief. I thank, and am grateful to, hon. Members from across the Chamber for their excellent contributions. I spoke for quite a long time at the beginning, but I missed out some very important points, including the fact that the new scheme will be in place only until the end of the spending review in 2021, and that is of concern to many people. I was also remiss not to welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) to her new role. She is a good friend and this is the first time that I have been in a debate with her as the shadow Minister for public health.

I know that the issue under discussion is not part of the Minister’s policy area, but I was pleased that she offered some reassurance on particular areas, including that any budget underspend by the trusts and charities in the new scheme will stay in the Department of Health budget and not go to the Treasury. I hope that it will be used to help beneficiaries. Her comments about death certificates were also welcome.

I am still very worried, however, about the tendering process that the Government seem to be set on pursuing to decide the scheme’s new administrator. It would be absolutely wrong if the they chose a private sector provider to do that.

I welcome the stage 1 hepatitis C payments.

Sir Peter Bottomley: Does the hon. Lady agree that, whoever administers the scheme, if there are anomalies or cases that come outside the rules, they should be free to tell the Government that they should change them?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): May I interrupt? The winding-up speech is meant to be very brief. I do not mind, but there is a big debate to follow with a lot of speakers, and we are eating into that time.

Diana Johnson: I will be very quick. The ongoing payment of £3,500 for people with stage 1 hepatitis C is not a large amount of money for those affected. Under the Scottish model, a £30,000 lump sum payment is made if people have already received the £20,000 lump sum payment. Over the spending period, therefore, I am not sure that the Government can really say that the help that they are providing to people affected with stage 1 hepatitis C is greater than that provided to those in Scotland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the Government’s recent announcement on the reform of the support schemes for people affected by contaminated blood and blood products; recognises that the contaminated blood scandal was one of the biggest treatment disasters in the history of the NHS; believes that those people affected should have a reasonable standard of living and not just be removed from poverty; is concerned that bereaved partners of people who died with HIV/AIDS and those reliant on regular top-up payments will be worse off; is concerned that the new payments for people infected with Hepatitis C are not commensurate with the pain and suffering caused; notes that people who were infected with other viruses, those who did not reach the chronic stage of Hepatitis C and bereaved parents are not mentioned in this announcement; and calls on the Government to use the funds from the sale of Plasma Resources UK to bring forward revised proposals that are properly funded and which provide appropriate support to all affected people.
Reducing Health Inequality

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): There are 11 Back-Bench contributors to this debate. Will Members bear that in mind, in order to give everybody a good chance of having equal time?

2.2 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I beg to move, That this House calls on the Government to introduce and support effective policy measures to reduce health inequality.

In her first speech at Downing Street, the Prime Minister referred to the “burning injustice” of the difference in life expectancy between the richest and poorest in our society, and to her determination to tackle it. The purpose of this debate is to try to assist the Government in making that a reality, but I also urge her to look at the gap in healthy life expectancy. Based on Office for National Statistics data from 2012-13, the healthy, disability-free life expectancy of a woman born in Tower Hamlets is 52.7 years of age, while that for a woman born in Richmond upon Thames is 72.1 years of age. That is a gap of about 20 years. The social gradient for disability-free life expectancy is even greater than that for mortality. I ask the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), to consider the issue not only as one of social justice, but as one that adds hugely to NHS costs and to economic costs more widely. There is a compelling economic and social justice case for tackling it.

What should the Minister do? In a nutshell, she should follow the evidence and start immediately, beginning with the very youngest in society—in fact, she should start with them even before they are born—and take a whole life course approach, following all the wider determinants of health. She should also take a cross-Government approach, with leadership at the highest level of the Cabinet. She needs to take the long view—many of the benefits will become evident in 20 or 30 years’ time—while not ignoring the fact that there will also be quick wins. She needs to look at everything that needs to be done to tackle the situation.

I hope that this will be a consensual debate. I congratulate the Labour Government on the work that they did to tackle health inequalities, which is starting to pay dividends. I also pay tribute to Sir Michael Marmot for his groundbreaking work; the blueprint that he set out in 2010 holds true today and it should be the basis of everything that we do. It is about preventing ill-health as well, and that is what I want to address, because I know that many Members across the House will speak with great expertise about the wider determinants of health. Tackling the issues starts long before people come into contact with health services, but that is still an enormously important part of tackling health inequalities. As Chair of the Health Committee, I will focus on those aspects.

On preventing early deaths, we need to look at lifestyle issues, including smoking and obesity, and at preventing suicide, which is the greatest single cause of death in men under the age of 49. Public health plays a critical role. The “Five Year Forward View” called for a radical upgrade in prevention in public health. Cuts to public health budgets are disappointing and will severely impact on the Government’s ability to tackle health inequalities. The Association of Directors of Public Health surveyed its members in February and found that the cuts to the public health budget were affecting issues such as weight management, drugs, smoking cessation and alcohol, which are key determinants that we need to tackle. In my own area, part of which covers Torbay, cuts of about £345,000 to council public health budgets will result in the decommissioning of healthy lifestyle services. Those budgets affect education and active intervention, and support a network of fantastic volunteers. I regret that those cuts to public health are going ahead, and call on the Government to stop them.

I want to tackle a few key areas. First, smoking is still the biggest cause of preventable death in the United Kingdom. Every year, 100,000 people die prematurely as a result of smoking. In her closing remarks, I hope that the Minister will update the House on the tobacco control plan.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): About 25 years ago I took an interest in how many death certificates mentioned smoking, and the answer was four. The figure may be larger now, but we should encourage medical practitioners to say that the person had been an active smoker, even if it was not the primary cause of death, so that at least people can become more aware of the issue.

While I am talking about this, I will mention two other things, which my hon. Friend may be going to cover. One is nutrition at the time of conception, and the second is that we should learn the lessons of how we cut the drink-driving deaths, which was not by public programmes, but by people doing the things that actually made a difference—that cut down the incidence and cut down the consequences and cut down the deaths.

Dr Wollaston: Those are extremely important points. The Government can introduce policies and make sure that there are levers and incentives in the system to make that happen. The drink-drive limit is a very important example.

We are not likely to make a difference to the gap in disability-free life expectancy without tackling smoking, which is a key driver for health inequality and accounts for more than half of the difference in premature deaths between the highest and the lowest socioeconomic groups. Without tackling it, we will not make inroads.

I would like briefly to touch on obesity and on the Government’s obesity strategy, which the Health Committee has looked at. To put the matter in context, the most recent child measurement programme data show us that 26% of the most disadvantaged children leave year 6 not just overweight but obese, as do 11.7% of the least deprived children. Overall, of all children leaving year 6, one in three is now obese or overweight. The situation is storing up catastrophic lifetime problems for them, and we cannot continue to ignore that.
In our report, the Committee called for “brave and bold action”. Although I really welcome many aspects of the childhood obesity plan—such as the sugary drinks levy, which is already having an impact in terms of reformulation—it has been widely acknowledged that there were glaring deficiencies and missed opportunities in the plan.

I would like to have seen far greater emphasis on tackling marketing and promotion. Some 40% of food and drink bought to consume at home is bought under deep discounting and promotion, and that is one of the potential quick wins that I referred to. We often focus in this debate on what people should not do, and this is an opportunity to look at what they should do. Shifting the balance in promotions to healthy food and drink would have been a huge opportunity for a quick win, because one of the key drivers of this aspect of health inequality is the affordability of good, nutritious food. This would have been an opportunity to tackle marketing and promotion, and I urge the Minister to bring that back into the strategy. I also urge the Government to extend the sugary drinks levy to other drinks, including those in which sugar is added to milky products, because there is no reason why it should be necessary to add sugar to such drinks.

I also welcome the mention in the plan of the daily mile, which has been an extraordinary project. I have met Elaine Wyllie, who is one of the most inspirational headteachers one could meet, and she talked about the strategy and about how leadership from directors of public health makes a real difference. I hope that the Minister will update the House on how that will be taken forward. We should think not just about obesity, but about physical activity and health promotion, and about the benefits that they could bring to all our schoolchildren.

The Health Committee stressed in our report the importance of making health a material consideration in planning matters when money is so restricted. I do not think that to do so would be a brake on growth; it would be a brake on unhealthy growth, and it would give local authorities the levers of power when they are making licensing decisions and planning decisions for their communities. That is something that Government could do at no cost, but with enormous benefit.

The Health Committee is actively considering how we reduce the toll of deaths from suicide. The Samaritans have identified that men living in the most deprived areas are 10 times more likely to end their life by suicide than are those in the most affluent areas. Many factors contribute to this—economic recessions, debt and unemployment—but when we try to tackle health inequality, we will not make the inroads that we need to make unless we look at the inequality in suicide, particularly as it affects men. Three quarters of those who die by suicide are men. I hope that the Minister will look carefully at the emerging evidence from our inquiry as the Government actively consider the refresh to the strategy, and that they will do so at every point when they look at how to tackle health inequality.

I would like the Minister to look at the impact of drugs and alcohol on health inequality. The fact that there are 700,000 children in the United Kingdom living with an alcohol-dependent parent is a staggering cause of health inequality, which has huge implications for those children’s life chances and for the individuals involved. Again, alcohol has a deprivation gradient; the two are closely linked.

There is evidence about what works, and we have had encouraging news from Scotland. The Scottish courts, I am pleased to say, have ruled that minimum pricing is legal, although I am disappointed that the Scotch Whisky Association has yet again taken the matter to a further stage of appeal. As soon as those hurdles are cleared, I think it would be a great shame if England undermined the potentially groundbreaking work being done in Scotland by failing to follow suit and introduce minimum pricing at the earliest possible opportunity; if we failed to do so, people would be able to buy alcohol across the border.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving credit to the Scottish Government for what they have done on minimum unit pricing. I reiterate what she has said: it is disappointing that the matter has been taken to appeal yet again. Does she agree that there is a lot to look at from Scotland in terms of the smoking ban, which England then took up?

Dr Wollaston: I congratulate the Scottish Government. It does seem to be the case that where Scotland leads, England will eventually follow. Scotland is particularly good at following the evidence, and I call on us to do likewise. I am particularly concerned that the benefits that will come about when Scotland introduces minimum pricing will be undermined if we do not follow suit here, so I call on the Government to do so as soon as possible.

In summary—I know that many other Members wish to speak—there is a huge amount that we can do, and not all of it has a cost. I urge the Minister, in summing up, to look at all the possibilities. I urge her to stick with the Marmot agenda and to take a cross-Government approach, but to make sure that there is leadership at the highest level. The Prime Minister’s words in Downing Street were hugely encouraging. The Health Committee calls on the Prime Minister to appoint somebody at Cabinet level to take overarching responsibility for health inequalities and to put those fine words into action.

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2.16 pm

Alan Johnson (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I rise to express my enthusiastic support for the work of the Health Committee under the superb leadership of the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). I also pay tribute to the Prime Minister for her description of health inequalities as a “burning injustice” and for placing the issue at the top of her agenda, which was virtually the first thing she did as Prime Minister of this country.

This is an unusual debate. Usually in this Chamber, Back Benchers press the Government to take something on as a priority, but this is more of a top-down issue. The need to tackle health inequalities has been forcefully expressed by the Prime Minister, and through this debate we are trying to translate those words into effective action. For those of us who have grappled with the nuts and bolts of trying to tackle the obscenity—that is what it is in the 21st century—of health inequality, the Prime Minister’s words were, as the hon. Lady said, enormously encouraging, because they demonstrated the leadership that the issue requires if the awful statistics are to be properly addressed.
I want to set the matter in its historical context to demonstrate the difference in approach that spans the 37 years between the appointments of Britain’s first woman Prime Minister and its second. Although health and life expectancy improved dramatically for everyone following the creation of the NHS in 1948, there was a strong suspicion by the 1970s that persistent health inequalities existed and that they were defined largely by social class. There was, however, an absence of easily understood statistical evidence on which to base a clear assertion. In 1977, the then Health Secretary, David Ennals, commissioned the president of the Royal College of Physicians, Sir Douglas Black, to chair a working group that would report to Government on the extent of health inequalities in the UK and how best to address them. The report proved conclusively that death rates for many diseases were higher among those in the lower social classes. Stripped bare, it was the first official acknowledgment that the circumstances into which a person was born would largely determine when they died. That remains the thrust of the argument expressed by the Health Committee’s report, except that it has quite rightly added the new dimension, which was highlighted by the Marmot indicators of health inequalities in November 2015, of the difference made by the number of years spent in good health. There is an extraordinary gap between the most and the least disadvantaged of almost 17 years.

By the time the Black report was published, a new Government had been elected. They displayed their enthusiasm for tackling health inequalities by reluctantly publishing fewer than 300 copies of the report on an August bank holiday Monday in the depths of the summer recess. In his foreword to the report, the new Health Secretary could not even raise the enthusiasm to damn the report with faint praise; he simply damned it and virtually ignored it, and that remained the case for 18 years.

This is important because people assume that health has improved for everyone since the 1940s—it has, by and large—but during those 18 years, many of the problems that Black highlighted actually got worse. For instance, in the early 1970s, the mortality rate among young men working age in unskilled groups was almost twice as high as that among those in professional groups; by the early 1990s, it was three times as high. The most awful statistic—this began to emerge in the 1980s—was that the long-term unemployed were 35 times more likely to commit suicide than people in work. It would be inconceivable today for a Health Secretary to be as dismissive of an issue that is so critical to the life chances of so many.

We are also more aware today than we were then that healthcare is only part of the problem. Indeed—the Minister has a difficult job—it is a minor part: the proportion has been calculated at between 15% and 25%. The epidemiologist Professor Sir Michael Marmot, the world’s leading expert on this subject, has established the social determinants of health. The Acheson report of the late 1990s explained:

“Poverty, low wages and occupational stress, unemployment, poor housing, environmental pollution, poor education, limited access to transport and shops”—

and the internet—

“crime and disorder, a lack of recreational facilities...all have an impact on people’s health.”

Beveridge’s five giants—disease, want, ignorance, squalor and idleness—were a more pithy and poetic way of describing the problem. Beveridge’s brother-in-law, the historian and Christian socialist R. H. Tawney, set the template that we should follow. He said the issue was “not...to cherish the romantic illusion that men are equal in character and intelligence. It is to hold that...eliminating such inequalities as have their source, not in individual differences, but in its own organization”.

The Marmot report, which I commissioned as Health Secretary in 2008 to inform policy from 2010 onwards—unfortunately, the electorate decided that we would not be in office to carry this out—recommended six policy areas on which we should focus: the best start in life; maximising capabilities and control; fair employment and good work; a healthy standard of living; healthy and sustainable places and communities; and a strengthened role for and provision of ill-health prevention. Marmot advised that those six areas should be focused on with a scale and intensity proportionate to the level of disadvantage, which he called “proportionate universalism”. The coalition Government accepted all Sir Michael’s recommendations. However, they responded with a policy—“Healthy Lives, Healthy People”—in which the focus was on individual lifestyle and behavioural change. That, as Sir Michael has pointed out, is only one facet of the problem, just as the NHS is only one part of the solution. Moreover, the only piece of cross-Government co-ordinating machinery, the Cabinet Sub-Committee on health, was scrapped in 2012.

The Health Committee’s report on public health and today’s debate, together with the Prime Minister’s pledge, give us a fresh opportunity to capitalise on the brilliant work done by Sir Michael Marmot and his Institute of Health Equity at University College London, and on the political consensus that I am pleased to say now exists on this issue, by forging a fresh and dynamic response across the Government to tackling health inequalities. One of the Committee’s recommendations, as has been mentioned, is that a Cabinet Office Minister should be given specific responsibility for leading on this issue across the Government. I have a more radical suggestion: the Prime Minister herself should take personal responsibility for this issue. The Prime Minister, with the First Lord of the Treasury and Minister for the Civil Service, and previous Prime Ministers have taken on other ministerial positions—Wellington was also Foreign Secretary, Home Secretary and Colonial Secretary, and Churchill was Prime Minister and Defence Secretary. It would set a wonderful example if the Prime Minister followed up her words by saying, “I’m going to lead on this. I’m going to chair the cross-Government Committee that tackles health inequalities.” That level of leadership is needed, because only then will there be meaningful cross-departmental work to tackle these inequalities.

I echo the Health Committee’s view that devolving public health to local authorities was the right thing to do. Not everything in the Health and Social Care Act 2012 was approved by Opposition Members or many other people, but that change was the right thing to do. The cuts in authorities’ budgets—£200 million of in-year cuts—must be restored and I suggest that the ring fence is extended at least to the end of this Parliament. With local government having so many problems, I fear that breaking the ring fence for public health will mean that the money goes elsewhere and is not focused on these issues.
2.29 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the very thoughtful speech of the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson).

Today’s subject, reducing health inequalities, is very far reaching. I will focus on obesity, as I chair the all-party parliamentary group on obesity, and also sit on the Health Committee and was involved in producing the report that my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) has alluded to.

I make no apology for talking about obesity again in the Chamber. Alongside terrorism and antimicrobial resistance, it poses a major threat to our nation. More than one in five children are overweight or obese before they start primary school; that figure rises to more than one in three as they start secondary school. Our children—our future generations—are at risk of developing serious health conditions such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Recent data have shown the continuing and widening inequality gap in the overweight, obese and excess weight categories for reception and year 6 children. Some 60% of the most deprived boys aged five to 11 are predicted to be overweight or obese by 2020, compared with a predicted 16% of boys in the most affluent group—60% versus 16%. Overall, 36% of the most deprived children are predicted to be overweight or obese by 2020 compared with just 19% of the most affluent.

Those vast inequalities must be tackled, and, as the Health Committee inquiry into childhood obesity stated, we need to take “brave and bold” action. Every study around at the moment shows that higher obesity rates are linked to deprivation. Critically, the national child measurement programme showed that the gap between areas less affected and those where childhood obesity is more prevalent is growing. That cannot and should not be ignored. We need to see it as a wake-up call, highlighting the fact that many of our young people could face a future riddled with the complications of obesity—as I have said, those include diabetes, heart disease and cancer—as well as the immense strain we risk putting on our public services and the potential emotional impact on our population. Medics are reporting cases of type 2 diabetes in children. That is shocking and frightening, as until recently it was thought of as a disease only of the older population. It is a reminder, yet again, that action is needed to prevent a public health calamity.

I will focus now on the overall impact of obesity in adults. It is important we provide parents with every tool possible to make sure they can be great role models when it comes to what we eat and our lifestyles.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware that last week Tesco announced significant changes to the amount of sugar in its drinks. It did so of its own back. What are her views about how such pressure from the supermarkets could influence outcomes for our children?

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend makes a good point.

As I have said, only a minority of health inequality issues involve the Department of Health, but I want to highlight one that quite certainly does. The biggest cause of the hospitalisation of children between the ages of five and 14 is dental caries: 33,124 children went into hospital to be anaesthetised and have their teeth extracted in the past year. Incidentally, that is 11,000 more than for the second biggest cause of the hospitalisation of children, which is abdominal and pelvic pain. Believe it or not, it was the 12th highest cause of hospitalisation of tiny children below the age of four.

This is a health equality issue. Almost all the children who went into hospital were from deprived communities, including 700 from the city I represent. There is a safe and proven way dramatically to reduce tooth decay in children, and it also has a beneficial effect on adults. It involves ensuring the fluoridation of water up to the optimum level of 1 part per million. The cost of fluoridation is small. For every £1 spent there is a return to the taxpayer of £12 after five years and of £22 after 10 years. The evidence—from the west midlands and the north-east, and from countries across the world—has now existed for many years. A five-year-old child in Hull has 87.4% more tooth extractions than one living in fluoridated Walsall. The whole medical profession, the dental profession, the British Medical Association and the Department of Health have recognised that for many years.

In Hull, we intend to fluoridate our water as part of a concerted policy to tackle this element of health inequality. We need the Department of Health to show moral leadership by encouraging local authorities in deprived areas to pursue fluoridation, and supporting them when they do. The Health Secretary retains ultimate responsibility for public health, including ill-health prevention. This is one issue on which he can begin the process of reducing hospital admissions by encouraging preventive action and, in terms of health inequalities, giving poor kids prosperous kids’ teeth.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Has he or anyone else solved the problem of how to protect water supply companies and businesses so that they do not find themselves facing unjustified claims or difficulties?

Alan Johnson: I had actually finished my speech, but I will answer the hon. Gentleman’s intervention as my conclusion. I have talked to Yorkshire Water, and my understanding is that putting the focus on local authorities changes the whole dynamic of how the various conspiracy theorists can attack on this issue.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Walsall) (Con): I am sure that my hon. Friend was aware that last week Tesco announced significant changes to the amount of sugar in its drinks. It did so off its own back. What are her views about how such pressure from the supermarkets could influence outcomes for our children?

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend makes a good point.
Obesity is the single biggest preventable cause of cancer after smoking. The Government acknowledge the importance of early cancer diagnosis; and dedicated NHS staff at all levels are committed to delivering that. So surely every preventive measure that can be put in place, must be. As previously noted, as well as cancer, obesity leads to a greater risk of type 2 diabetes and heart disease. Those conditions are all life-changing and life-limiting.

I am sure people now understand that there is a link between obesity and diabetes, but, sadly, I fear that many think they can just take a pill to keep diabetes under control. Sadly, for far too many diabetes sufferers, that is not the case. The consequences are vast, with many diabetes patients needing lower limb amputation and suffering kidney disease, heart disease and sight loss—as I said, it is life-limiting and life-changing. Action needs to be taken now to turn around what I believe has become an obesity epidemic.

Everything I have talked about should prompt a reconsideration and review of the Department of Health’s childhood obesity plan. Although the Government were leading the world in producing the plan for action, when it was published, many, myself included, said that it was quite a let-down. I stand by that view. There simply was not enough detail in that 13-page document. It was aspirational, rather than a focused plan of action; it ignored the recommendations of Public Health England, which were endorsed by the Health Committee; and it did not set firm timescales for turning the tide on childhood obesity.

The plan we have is insufficient for the scale of the task we have to tackle. That does not mean starting all over again, however; it means that we need to do more. We need clear actions and timescales. I acknowledge that there is a fine balance between a nanny state, business co-operation, and parental and personal responsibility, but I am sure it is not impossible to find that common ground. Yes, it is the responsibility of parents to ensure their children eat healthily, are physically active and learn good habits that will last a lifetime, but time and again that has proven insufficient by itself. Parents need more help and the current childhood obesity plan cannot and will not give them what they need.

It would also be a mistake to think the answer lies in burdensome regulation of business, namely the food and drink sector. Demonsing that sector is both unhelpful and unfair. As we have discussed, some producers, manufacturers and retailers have already taken great strides in reformulating products and encouraging healthier consumer behaviour. We must commend them and welcome those actions. Evidence suggests that the least affluent households in the UK have higher absolute exposure to junk food advertising than the most affluent households.

Interventions such as reducing the promotion of junk food, or the soft drinks industry levy, are likely to have a disproportionate benefit to the most deprived communities.

Just as the current plan does not help parents, however, it likewise does nothing for business, which would be better served by clear goals for reformulation, advertising and labelling, and timesframes in which those must be achieved. Both publicly and privately, many businesses in the sector note that they would be better served by clearer, more far-reaching Government recommendations that at least gave them a measure of certainty for the future.

We may well be horrified by the national child measurement programme figures and other data we read on an almost daily basis now. Just this week, Cancer Research UK revealed that teenagers drink almost a bathtub full of sugary drinks on average a year—I hope that a visual representation will shock some teenagers into changing their habits rather than suffering the consequences.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making an excellent and thoughtful speech—she will be pleased to hear that there has been nothing in it that I have disagreed with so far. Was she therefore as disappointed as I was at the removal from the childhood obesity plan—we can only guess at why—of targets on halving childhood obesity, as well as measures on advertising and marketing that would have helped with the issues she has been discussing?

Maggie Throup: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I will come on to that point when I make some requests of the Minister towards the end of my speech.

We know that childhood obesity levels will not drop tomorrow, but we need to see some signs in the next few years that they are declining. The foundations of an effective strategy are readily available in the form of the Public Health England recommendations and the Health Committee’s report.

In conclusion, when the Minister responds, I would like to hear a firm commitment to the soft drinks levy; clear goals for product reformulation and timesframes within which those should be achieved; action on junk food advertising during family viewing; and action on supermarket and point-of-sale promotions—for example, we do not want to go to buy a newspaper and be offered a large bar of chocolate. I would also like to hear what accountability will be put in place to ensure that schools provide the exercise outlined in the plan. Such measures would ensure that we had a strategy, rather than just a vision, and enable us to start tackling the obesity challenge in our society today.

2.40 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), the Chair of the Health Committee, for bidding with colleagues for this crucial debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting the time. There is probably no other person in this place who is better placed than her to talk about health inequalities, and her speech demonstrated that clearly. It was both challenging and thorough. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), and it was good to learn a bit more about obesity.

Many will say that health inequality stems from the overarching inequalities in education and opportunity across the country and even within communities, and that is true. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson) outlined the historical context of that. However, I would say that health inequality starts even before birth—before a child is born into affluence or poverty; long before
they have the opportunity to start at a good nursery or are left to make do with what is left; and years before they start making their own life choices.

Yes, health inequality begins in the womb and the child’s development can be very much restricted or enhanced by the diet of the mother, her tendency to drink alcohol or smoke in pregnancy, and dozens of other factors relating to antenatal care and access to general practitioners. Where people live has a major impact on all those things, but the effect can be mitigated by the actions of the NHS, local authorities and, of course, the Government. They can all, given the resources, make the kind of interventions that are needed to support people where that support is needed. The issue is one of resources, which are needed for everything from mounting campaigns to discourage smoking in pregnancy to providing the best hospital facilities in the areas of greatest need.

I will talk about my area, the borough of Stockton-on-Tees, and the north-east of England to illustrate the reality of health inequalities and the poverty that plays its own part in people’s life chances and life expectancy, and to show just why Government policy is putting the brakes on the progress we made in the years up to 2010. I will start with some facts. There is a life expectancy gap of 17 years between men in the most deprived ward in Stockton and a man in the least deprived ward, and the gap is over 12 years for women. That gap has increased by two years over a five year period, and unless we take immediate measures, I fear it will continue to grow.

Child development is an important contributor to health equity, as the successes and opportunities that children receive contribute to their quality of life later on. The English average for children achieving a good level of development at five years old is 60%, but in Stockton the figure is just 50%. A child who has a low quality of health due to parental lifestyle is more likely to be out of school more often due to illness, especially when it comes to dental health, with 72% of children in the most deprived areas having decayed, missing or filled teeth. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle offered much more information on that problem and solutions to it.

In my constituency, the biggest causes of early death are cardiovascular disease, cancer and smoking-related diseases. The number of hospital stays due to alcohol-related harm is 808 worse than the average for England. That represents 1,500 stays per year. The rate of self-harm hospital stays is 225 worse than the average for England and the rate of smoking-related deaths is 320 worse.

Sadly, the position in the north-east region is similar and there are some startling statistics, many of them related to alcohol. Some 57% of people living in the north-east, or about 1.2 million individuals aged 18 or over, have suffered at least once due to the drinking of others in the last 12 months. Some 62% of people know at least one heavy drinker. Males, younger age groups and those who drink the most were more likely to know a greater number of heavy drinkers. A third of north-easterners drink above the Government’s recommended limits on a daily or almost daily basis, and one in five binge drinks on a weekly basis. More than 60% of us worry about violence caused by drinking and 90% of us are concerned about people being drunk and rowdy in public. There is a strong relationship between alcohol and crime. Almost half of all crime is alcohol related and that is having a significant impact on individuals and communities.

While smoking rates in the north-east have declined over the past two decades, Fresh, a great charity, reports that 18.7% of adults still smoke and nearly 9,000 children in the region start smoking every year, according to Cancer Research.

The north-east has the highest rate of economic inactivity in England. Between July 2014 and June 2015, 25.3% of the working-age population in the region was economically inactive, with over a quarter of that inactivity due to ill health. The regional unemployment rate remains the highest in the UK at 7.9%, while life expectancy is lower than the English average. Men and women in the north-east typically live over a year less than the national average.

My constituency and much of the north-east reflect the picture across poorer parts of the country, and the evidence from charities and experts on these issues show them to be highly significant. A British Lung Foundation briefing on health inequalities found that people living in the poorest areas will die, on average, seven years earlier than those in the richest areas. There is a strong correlation, which is backed up by much evidence, that shows that a person’s affluence and opportunities affect their health. Cancer Research UK has carried out research that shows that inequality is linked to 15,000 extra cases of cancer in England and that children from the most deprived groups are twice as likely to be obese than the least deprived groups.

So there is quite a dire picture across the north-east region, but that is not for want of action by health groups, local authorities and charities. They have had some remarkable successes over the years, despite the poor hand dealt them, but they need the support of the Government to make even better progress. To reduce health inequalities, we need to provide more resources to support those who seek help; to invest in our health services to detect illnesses earlier; to ensure that healthcare has a greater role in schools; to stop those 9,000 children a year taking up smoking; and to ensure that the NHS has the means to look after and treat everybody who needs it.

Back to Stockton, how do we ensure that those who live there are not at a significant disadvantage from birth compared with those in more affluent areas? We must start from the beginning. By investing in early years education, we can make sure that all children have the best start in life and reach their key development milestones to the best of their ability. As I suggested earlier, we can start before they are even born.

The borough council has taken a number of measures to address the health inequality within the borough. The delivery of the health and wellbeing strategy is increasingly being targeted at those who most need support. For example, the Stockton seasonal health and wellbeing strategy co-ordinates a targeted approach to make sure that those who need the most support are getting it. Some 18,000 people have received winter warmth assessments to make sure their homes are prepared for the winter months, and Stockton Borough Council is working with Public Health England to implement a child dental health programme in schools, including
even in nursery—isn’t that sad!—and for reception children. In our poorest wards, the council runs a community-led initiative focusing on three key outcomes for children up to three years old: cognitive development; speech and language development; and nutrition. These schemes are ensuring that children have more opportunities to break a cycle of health inequality in some areas of my constituency, and some areas in the wider country, and promoting a healthier and safer upbringing.

As I keep repeating, however, all these schemes need resources, but those are sadly diminishing as each year goes by. I could bleat on about the poor deal the north-east got from the coalition and is now getting from the Tory Government—the movement of health resources from the north to the south and the huge cuts to local authority spending, which have impacted on their ability to maintain the services they need in order to close the equality gap—but I will not. I will, however, remind the Government that while new hospital projects in Liberal Democrat and Tory constituencies planned by the last Labour Government went ahead in 2010, the one to serve my own and neighbouring constituencies was axed.

Our health professionals and trusts do a remarkable job in our area in the most difficult of circumstances, and I hope that one day soon they will have the 21st-century hospital and facilities they need to serve our community and help close that inequality gap. Perhaps the provision of that hospital should form part of the sustainability and transformation plan for our region. Instead we face the potential downgrading of our hospital and the potential loss of our accident and emergency department.

The challenge posed by health inequalities, not just in my area, is bigger than any individual parent, and bigger than any local authority or health trust. We must have a unified strategy to ensure that health inequality is a thing of the past and that my constituents, as well as those of many other Members, have the best start in life and a good quality of life. We need earlier intervention in schools, more support for those suffering from mental health problems, and greater action to break the cycle of health inequality in some areas of my constituency, and some areas in the wider country, and promoting a healthier and safer upbringing.

I am well aware that we heard one of the gloomiest outlooks for our country from the Chancellor for decades when he delivered his autumn statement yesterday. He went on to predict the huge fear that in the tough years ahead, partly as a result of the Government’s failure properly to fund public health, the NHS and social care, we will see health inequalities grow, not reduce, and that the huge gap in life expectancies will not be closed for many decades to come.

We should have a country not where the future opportunities and health of children are determined by their socioeconomic status or the availability of resources to tackle the issues of smoking, alcohol, drugs and inactivity, but where children yet to grow up or be born have the freedom to choose whichever path they want to take without negative health implications holding them back.

2.51 pm

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I follow previous speakers in this debate with a certain trepidation. I hope that I can live up to their mark. I congratulate the shadow spokesperson, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), with whom I have worked closely on issues around basketball. I should also draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) on securing this debate. As a fellow Devon MP, she might know something about the issues I want to talk about—it would be helpful to have a conversation with her afterwards.

In my constituency, there is an 11-year life expectancy difference between the north-east of my patch, where the professionals live, and the south-west, in Devonport, which is best known for its dockyard. Last week I chaired a supper in Plymouth with health practitioners and academics on the subject of iron-deficiency anaemia in Devon. I will not pretend to be a medical expert—as hon. Members can probably tell, that is something that rather bypassed me—but it is a condition where the body has a low red blood cell count, resulting in less oxygen getting to organs and tissues. It can have serious consequences and often leads to more admissions to hospital or a deterioration in health.

The condition is a result of poverty—especially, but not exclusively, among the over-75s. I was horrified to learn that Plymouth is top of the national list of iron deficiency. The rates of iron-deficiency anaemia are four times the national average. In the Northern, Eastern and Western Devon area, which includes Plymouth, there were 1,530 in-patients with IDA in 2014, a 19% increase on 2013, following a steady rise over the previous few years. I understand that in 2014 this amounted to an avoidable cost to the local health economy of just over £1 million.

I want to focus on NHS England’s desire to close three GP surgeries in my constituency by next March. I fear that this action will serve to put greater pressure on the principal acute hospital at Derriford, in the constituency of my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). I am told that the reason why NHS England is considering the closures is the size of the GP practices. I understand there is a Nuffield report that says that that should not be the only thing taken into account. The Cumberland GP practice has 1,800 patients, Hyde Park has 2,800 and St Barnabas 1,700. They are considered by NHS England to be unsustainable and too small, despite the fact that they are growing practices. I have mentioned some of these issues before, but I have no problem repeating them. I was told that closing the practices is not down to saving money, but is about delivering better value for money. However, before I speak about those issues, let me put my constituency in some context.

Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport runs from the A38 down to sea, and from the River Plym to the River Tamar. It is home to one of the largest universities in the country, with more than 27,000 students, thousands of whom live in the city centre. It is a naval and Royal Marines Commando garrison city, as the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), for whom I was previously a Parliamentary Secretary, knows only too well. Before the November recess, the Ministry of Defence sadly confirmed that it would be releasing Stonehouse Royal Marine barracks and announced that the Citadel, which is where 29 Commando is based, would be released back to the Crown Estate.
[Oliver Colvile]

Fortunately for Plymouth, the MOD also announced that the Royal Marines and their families would be transferred from Chivenor, in the north of Devon; Arbroath, up in Scotland; and Taunton, just up the M5. While the city’s population is growing, this announcement will almost certainly put even greater pressure on our schools, our hospitals at Derriford and Mount Gould, and our GP practices.

Although Plymouth has a global reputation for marine science and engineering research, it is a low-wage, low-skills economy. It is an inner city—something pretty unique for a Conservative to represent, if I might say so. Indeed, I do not have a single piece of countryside in my constituency, unless we include the Ponderosa pony sanctuary, which is a rather muddy field. In the run-up to the 2010 general election, when I won the seat on the third attempt, the Conservative party pledged to do something about healthcare in deprived inner cities. We have started to make good our word, and in 2014 my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter)—one of the Minister’s predecessors—came to Devonport to open the Cumberland GP practice, which is now very much under threat. Other facilities on the Cumberland campus include a minor injuries unit, the Devonport health centre and a pharmacy.

The Cumberland GP practice was set up by Plymouth Community Healthcare—now Livewell Southwest—and the Peninsula medical school. There was, and is, a desperate need to provide a tailor-made alternative service to the existing GP practice—then the Marlborough Street practice, now the Devonport health centre—for this deprived Devonport community and a need to look after drug users and the city’s homeless in hostels such as the neighbouring Salvation Army hostel. The practice also offers practical placements to students at the Plymouth medical school. Until earlier this year, it was funded by Livewell Southwest, a social enterprise, which found it too expensive to maintain.

Despite Devonport’s real deprivation, NHS England did not want to get involved in providing a contract to the Cumberland GP practice, which has consequently been operating without a formal contract and is managed by Access Health Care. I understand that in the past the neighbouring Devonport health practice has not been interested in offering facilities to homeless people and drug users—it may change its mind, though. Indeed, I understand that some of the Cumberland practice’s patients were not keen to transfer back to the Devonport centre, which is where they came from in the first place.

NHS England’s reason for putting the Cumberland GP practice under threat is because it considers it to be too small and to be operating in unsuitable, cramped premises. Unless we are careful, we could put more pressure on Derriford’s acute emergency unit, which is already under enormous pressure.

I became aware of NHS England’s proposals for these three GP practices in August, during the summer recess, when NHS England no doubt expected me and other MPs to be away on parliamentary trips or taking a holiday—hard luck! I was there! I immediately put together a series of meetings with the city councillor, director of public health, the leader of the council, the cabinet member for adult social care, people from NHS England, the dean of the medical school and Dr Richard Ayres, who runs the Cumberland GP practice. At that meeting, I suggested that the Cumberland GP practice should share the Devonport health centre’s brand-new building, which has space and operates as a federation, sharing the receptionists and backroom staff. This was supported by everybody present. Indeed, the city council’s health and wellbeing board also supported it, following an inquiry that recommended measures to allow the Cumberland GP practice to continue.

However, I understand that Devonport health care might not be willing to do that, so it appears that the Devonport community might be deprived of a second GP practice and patients will have no choice over which doctor they go to. The Northern, Eastern and Western Devon CCG is looking at ways to try to keep the Cumberland GP practice open, but it needs space in the short term while it considers alternative locations. I have also received representations from patients at both the Hyde Park and St Barnabas surgeries.

At Hyde Park, although Dr Stephen Warren is keen to continue as a GP, following a heart attack, he has transferred the ownership of his practice to Access Health Care because he no longer wishes to deal with the backroom tasks of administration, which is part of running a practice. He argues that his and his partner’s growing 2,800-patient practice—the Cumberland is growing as well—has attracted outstanding reviews, and that he would not be able to inform his patients where he was going if he relocated to another practice. He also thinks that some patients like to have a relationship with an individual doctor whom they can see speedily rather than having to wait weeks. It is rather like having one’s own personal bank manager, which I feel is quite important.

The St Barnabas surgery, which is also run by Access Health Care, was set up in a new development next to a residential care home for the elderly where patients do not have to walk very far to get to it. In all three cases, NHS England, for supposedly technical reasons, gave patients only 24 hours’ notice of its initial engagement. I must say, frankly, that I found the public consultation process utterly appalling. I wrote to NHS England asking it to give more time to engage with local communities, and I am grateful that it bothered to listen.

Recently, at my weekly constituency surgery, I was asked to write to NHS England to ask whether it had engaged with other GP surgeries and with Derriford hospital, and whether it had consulted them, because some GPs will have to accommodate more patients. That is a very big issue.

There are wider issues in all of this, too. At the moment, the commissioners in Northern, Eastern and Western Devon spend a higher amount of money in eastern Devon than in the more deprived western locality. The Government’s success regime is keen to correct that, so that resources are focused on deprived communities such as Devonport.

Rebecca Pow: I wish to make an observation. Given the detail that my hon. Friend has gone into and how he seems to be representing his community in these deprived areas, I wish to observe how very fortunate they are to have this Conservative MP in that inner-city area.

Oliver Colvile: It is generous of my hon. Friend to say that, and I shall try to intervene on similar lines later! [Interruption] I also observe that there have been no mentions of hedgehogs in this debate.
Finally, as the Minister may know, I am the Government’s pharmacy champion, and the Government are reviewing the role of pharmacy to take pressure off GPs and major acute hospitals such as the Derriford. Much has been made of the 6% cut, but there has been very little publicity of the £19 million that will be made available through the Government’s pharmacy access fund. My hon. Friend might like to use her winding-up speech to give us a little more information about all this, and to explain how the Department of Health will provide the resources for pharmacies to take pressure off GPs by delivering flu jabs, opticians, mental health services, anti-smoking measures and a nationwide minor ailment facility. If she cannot do that now, perhaps she would like to write to me about it.

Plymouth’s health service is under real pressure. Like the rest of the country, the town does not have enough GPs. Parts of my constituency are very deprived and we need to do something about the 11-year life expectancy difference. The Government must ensure that resources follow health needs. We also need to make much more use of pharmacies. As my hon. Friend the Minister knows, I am the Government’s pharmacy champion, so may I ask how we will ensure that pharmacies have funding, and how they will be able to operate?

3.5 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important and, in my opinion, overdue debate. I thank the Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), for initiating it, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for it.

I want to focus on an area of health inequality that receives disproportionately less funding than most others and, sadly, far less attention from Ministers than it due. I am, of course, talking about dental and oral health inequality. Most people, when asked to describe what health inequality looks like in this country, would cite difficulties in seeing a GP, long waiting lists for treatment for common ailments, and the rationing of licensed drugs for those suffering from treatable diseases. I could, of course, go on. Most, however, would not immediately cite dental and oral health, although inequality in that area is just as widespread throughout the country as the many other important inequalities that Members have rightly highlighted today.

Let me underline my point by sharing with the House some unsettling figures that have caused me, as a Bradford Member, more than a few sleepless nights. Official figures reveal that five-year-old children in Bradford are four and a half times more likely to suffer from tooth decay than their peers in the Health Secretary’s constituency of South West Surrey. The number of children admitted to hospital for tooth extractions—they usually require a general anaesthetic—has risen by a quarter over the past four years. Shockingly, during the past year 667 children in Bradford alone have spent time in hospital for that entirely avoidable reason.

Maggie Throup: As someone who was born in Bradford, I can proudly say that, even at my age, I have only one filling. As with obesity, dental problems are often due to a lack of parental responsibility as well as environmental factors.

Judith Cummins: That is an interesting point. I shall deal with some of those issues later in my speech.

According to the latest figures, 32% of children in Bradford—nearly a third—have not seen a dentist for more than two years. Ideally, as Members will know, children should be given a check-up every six months.

Dental and oral health has been and continues to be the Cinderella of health service provision. It is seen as being “nice to have”—to be tackled once the good ship NHS has returned to calmer waters—and due for its much-needed extra funding only when the financial black holes elsewhere in the NHS have been plugged. Such inequality in dental and oral health is plain wrong. It is an unspoken injustice in today’s society, and the task of tackling it cannot and should not be kicked down the road like the proverbial can year after year.

Tooth decay is an almost entirely preventable disease. It is a scandal, without exaggeration, that tooth decay is the No. 1 reason for hospital admissions of children between the ages of five and nine. It is a scandal not only because it causes our children needless pain and suffering, but because, in this time of austerity, it wastes countless millions in NHS resources. However, its impact goes much deeper than that.

In an increasingly globalised and competitive world in which our children are expected to succeed at school, improve their skills and excel in internationally benchmarked exams, they all need to be healthy and energised to face the school day. Too often, however, pain arising from poor oral and dental health hinders their school readiness, impairs their nutrition and growth, and cripples their ability to thrive, develop and socialise with each other. A recent survey sadly confirmed that more than a quarter of our young people feel too embarrassed to smile or laugh due to the condition of their teeth. For our teenagers, the injustice is no less when they need to succeed and make their way in a competitive job market.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): In my constituency, I can tell the extent of someone’s poverty by the state of their teeth, so not only is there the issue of decay, but this is about not having the money to be able to get the necessary treatment—perhaps cosmetic treatment—which can then lead to embarrassment and a loss of confidence.

Judith Cummins: I thank my hon. Friend for making that valid and important point.

Disproportionate levels of poor oral and dental health, predominantly in deprived, low-income areas such as those in Bradford, hamper these young people from forging their careers. Survey after survey confirms that young people who suffer from poor dental and oral health face poorer job prospects. Dental and oral health plays, rightly or wrongly, an important part in selling ourselves in today’s competitive job market.

I have set out the depressing scale of the challenge, but what can we do—or, perhaps more accurately, what can and should this Government be doing—to tackle this scandalous health inequality? As I highlighted to the former Prime Minister Mr Cameron, when I challenged him about this inequality in my constituency and city, there are some simple steps that can be taken. The first of them is due to be implemented in the foreseeable future: a tax on sugary drinks. Although the Government’s
[Judith Cummins]

final proposal was very much weaker than it should have been, it was nevertheless very much a welcome step in the right direction.

The Royal College of Surgeons faculty of dental surgery, a professional body that sees dental inequalities first hand in its day-to-day work, suggests a number of low-cost, easily deliverable measures that could readily be adopted by Government: tightening restrictions on advertising high-sugar products on television, for example by restricting advertisements before the 9 pm watershed; limiting price promotions in supermarkets for high-sugar foods and drinks, and excluding these products from point-of-sale locations such as checkouts and counters; and, most sensibly, limiting the availability of high-sugar foods and drinks in our school system.

Perhaps the most important measure that the Government could implement, as highlighted by the British Dental Association, would be to expedite changes to the current dental contract. Critical changes are long overdue, the first of which would be to incentivise preventive work through the contract. The second, and most important, would be to incentivise the dental profession to establish new practices in deprived areas. Such areas desperately need practices as people there typically face the least availability.

In my constituency, despite need being so high, there is a shameful shortfalls of NHS dentist appointments. Very few NHS dentist have open lists, meaning that most people in search of dental treatment simply give up, and those who are determined end up finding a dentist outside the city boundaries. Surely that is not right. I understand that the Government hope to begin rolling out a reformed dental contract from 2018-19 onwards, but that simply is not soon enough.

I finish by asking a simple question: is it just and equitable that five-year-old children in Bradford, my home city, are four and a half times more likely to suffer from tooth decay than their peers in the South West constituency of the Health Secretary? I hope that the House agrees that the answer is no.

3.13 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), who gave such a shocking account of oral and dental health. I am also delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). I commend her for raising this important issue and for so ably highlighting the impacts and causes of health inequality.

I want to focus on an area my hon. Friend did not mention, and to bring it to the Minister’s attention: natural and green solutions to help to reduce and prevent the disparity and inequality in health outcomes. I am not suggesting that the things I am going to mention are the only solutions, but I really believe that our natural environment has an important and often underestimated role to play in our health and wellbeing. Health inequality can cost up to £70 billion a year, with those below the wealthiest levels in society suffering the greatest degrees of inequality. Many of my colleagues have expanded on that point today. I have a particularly deprived area in my constituency called Halcon, which is among the 4% most deprived parts of the country. Many of the factors being described today apply to that part of Taunton Deane.

Interestingly, people living in deprived areas are 10 times less likely to live in the greenest areas. That seems more than a coincidence. There must be a link. In fact, I can tell the Minister that research shows that disadvantaged people who have greater access to green spaces are likely to have better health outcomes. A good-quality natural and built environment can have a significant positive impact on mental and physical health. Not only that, but some of the solutions that I am going to mention can be cost-effective. I know that the idea of cost savings will always make a Minister’s eyes light up. Many people are beginning to realise the important link between health and wellbeing and the natural environment, and I am heartened that many service providers are already thinking about that and putting people in place to deal with it. For example, the Somerset Wildlife Trust, of which I am very proud to be a vice-president, has appointed Jolyon Chesworth as its first health and wellbeing manager. That is heartening, and I shall watch with interest to see how that role develops and what the trust will do to highlight this issue.

The natural world can have a really positive impact on mental health. I am a firm believer in the therapeutic power of a brisk walk in the beautiful Somerset countryside. Maybe we can stretch that to include Devon.

Oliver Colville: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the great problems is that mental health care has been a Cinderella service in the NHS for far too long? Does she also agree that the Government are trying to do something about that?

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is right; it has been a Cinderella service.

The solutions that I am outlining are free. I am giving the House ideas for free therapy, because nature is free. It is a beautiful thing, and it really does have power. What could be more relaxing than a walk up to the Wellington monument on the Blackdown hills in my constituency? Hundreds of thousands of people go up there, including lots of people with disabilities, because it is easy to get to and it is all flat. Those walks to the monument are really beneficial. I know that it is not quite relevant to the debate, Mr Deputy Speaker, but the Government raised my spirits yesterday by announcing that they were giving £1 million to the Wellington monument’s restoration project from the LIBOR fund. That will have loads of spin-offs for the public, and health and wellbeing will be part of that. We are going to build a big community project to encourage more people to go up there.

When I was looking for somewhere to live in London—obviously, I have to stay up here during the week—one of my criteria for the flat was that I had to be able to see a tree from my window, and I can. I could not live without one.

Dr Wollaston: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the points that she is making. There are good data to back up what she is saying. Public Health England estimates that an inactive person is likely to spend 37% more time in hospital than someone who is active, and that inactive people are 5.5% more likely to visit their doctor. There is a good evidence base for what she is saying.
Rebecca Pow: That is absolutely true, and I shall give
the House a few more statistics as I go on. I am not
making this up. This is not wishy-washy; it is actually
coming into our psyche.

Oliver Colvile: May I encourage my hon. Friend. when she is in London, to take a boat from Chelsea Harbour down to Greenwich? She will see the magnificent layout of trees that occurs beautifully in the west, although there seem to be fewer of them in east London.

Rebecca Pow rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I do
not want us to get into a forestry debate. I admire this
love-in for the south-west, but I think we need to get
back to health.

Rebecca Pow: I did actually go out on a boat up the
Thames this morning with Greenpeace to look at the
issue of microplastics in water, and we also saw some
trees. Trees are important and serve a good purpose in
taking in air pollution, which has an effect on health;
we have a lot of asthma in our cities. If we plant more
trees, we will help to combat all that.

It has been demonstrated that mental health can be
aided through contact with nature. As a keen gardener,
I can vouch that getting one's hands in the soil, watching
things grow, planting seeds and watching the seasons
change definitely does lift the spirits and is a pick-me-up.

Maggie Throup: My hon. Friend makes a good point
that brisk walks are not the only thing that can help
health. Last Friday, I was helping some young children
at Chaucer Junior School to plant bulbs in the school's
grounds. We were getting exercise out in the fresh air in
an area that is quite built up and urban, which must be
a good thing for their future health.

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.
Many schools run gardening groups. There is so much
to take from gardening, and it can also help the unemployed
and other groups. Gardening is physical activity, but
watching things grow out of the soil is so beneficial. In
fact, Royal Horticultural Society research shows that
90% of UK adults say that just looking at a garden makes
them feel better. Doing something in a garden is
better, but one can also just look. There were data
recently about watching birds on a bird table or hedgehogs.
If someone has the chance to watch a hedgehog, that
could make them incredibly happy because they are so
rare now. I got terribly excited when I recently saw one
eating my cat's food.

Alison Thewliis: I do not want to rain on the hon.
Lady's garden as such, but does she agree that there can
be a negative impact on someone's mental health if
their surroundings are not good? Some 60% of people
in Glasgow live within 500 metres of vacant or derelict
land, which can negatively affect their mental health.

Rebecca Pow: That is such a good point. We need to
be doing something with derelict land as communities.
The Woodland Trust has some great data saying that, if
someone lives 500 metres from a wood, their health will
be better because not only can they go into it, but they
can look at it and enjoy it. The mental health charity
Mind produced a report called “Feel better outside, feel
better inside” that advocates the benefits of ecotherapy.
Ecotherapy improves mental and physical wellbeing and
boosts people's skills and confidence to get back to work
by taking part in gardening, farming, growing food,
exercise and conservation work. Some 69% of people
who took part in such projects definitely saw a significant
increase in their mental wellbeing and 62% thought that
their overall health was improved. The projects helped
254 people find full-time work, which saves the nation
money because they no longer need support.

In my constituency, a job agency called Prospects has
a contract to get the long-term unemployed back to
work. It does gardening with groups of people, but it
also does forest walks. I have been out with them in the
Neroche forest, which contains a lot of ancient woodland.
It definitely helps people not only to engage in nature,
but by giving them confidence because they are talking
to each other and getting out in a different atmosphere—not
an office. Many of those people then have the confidence
to apply for jobs and get back into work. There is a
clear case for having the prescription of access to green
space in the armoury of traditional medical treatments
to deal with a range of mental health issues.

We also have physical health to consider. The great
outdoors is a vastly underutilised tool, in the wider
sense. Many of my colleagues have been talking about
obesity and the outdoors can play an important part in
our fight against it. Obesity, particularly childhood obesity,
currently costs the Government £16 billion, and those
living in deprived areas are twice as likely to be obese.

With that in mind, I advocate that consideration be
given to green prescriptions. The Local Government
Association has recently called on the UK to implement
a similar model to that used in New Zealand, where
eight out of 10 GPs have been issuing green prescriptions
to patients, with 72% of them noticing a change in their
health. The LGA is encouraging GPs to write down
moderate physical activity goals for their patients, including
things such as walks in the park and all-family classes
that they can go to. A number of GPs are already using
these schemes on Dartmoor and Exmoor, and in one
pilot people are being encouraged to visit the national
parks, which are beautiful, on their doorstep and free to
enter. I am recommending all these things. Councillor
Izzi Seccombe, chairman of the LGA’s health and wellbeing
board, said that writing such a formal prescription
encourages many more people to get out and do the
activity. If the doctor says that people must take a pill,
they take it, so if the doctor says that they must go out
for a walk in the wood, people might do it.

A great many initiatives are already taking place,
such as NHS Forest, which aims to improve the health,
wellbeing and recovery times of patients and staff by
increasing access to NHS gardens—the locations on the
doorsteps of the hospitals. As part of the Health and
Social Care Act 2012, a statutory duty was placed on
local authorities to create health and wellbeing boards.
However, the Health Committee has reported that those
were not working very successfully and have few powers.
Perhaps the Minister might examine that, as they could
start to make a big difference in moving this agenda
forward.

There was a proposal in 2015 for a nature and wellbeing
Act, which was much discussed and debated. That
sought to put nature at the heart of all the decisions we
make about health, education, the economy, flood resilience and so on. Perhaps, Minister, we could re-examine some of the ideas in there, because some of them are very good. We know that there are links between access to green space and health. It seems a no-brainer to me—if we can improve access to green space and look into the idea of beginning to prescribe these green treatments, we could really make a difference to health and health inequalities.

That would be much easier if we had all the data and we could prove these benefits with those data. Help is at hand, because the Wildlife Trust has commissioned a piece of work; it has commissioned the school of biological sciences at the University of Essex to gather just such data. Once we have some solid facts, we can really move forward. I would like to think that the Minister will consider some of these ideas. When the Cabinet Minister forward. I would like to think that the Minister will consider some of these ideas. When the Cabinet Minister for tackling health inequality is put in place, as was recommended by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes—or perhaps the Prime Minister could lead on this, as recommended by the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson)—we might be able to add my green points to the agenda and really move forward to a healthier society.

3.28 pm

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who makes some interesting points. I also thought the intervention from my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), about the landscape in Glasgow was particularly pertinent.

Let me begin by commending the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), whose campaigning efforts in health matters, coupled with her ability to challenge her own Government, are second to none. I thank her for securing this debate and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the time for it to take place in the House today. It is clear from this debate that we are united as a constituent nations, regions, local constituencies and health inequalities, disempowerment and deindustrialisation, the last of which has impacted on people in many ways, such as through unhealthy behaviours, psychosocial stress and, of course, poverty. In May this year, the Glasgow Centre for Population Health, NHS Scotland, the University of the West of Scotland and University College London produced a report entitled “History, politics and vulnerability: explaining excess mortality in Scotland and Glasgow” which confirmed this.

The report, which was signed by over 30 academics and health professionals, found that Glasgow’s population was more vulnerable to factors that impacted on health across the UK, such as poverty, deprivation, deindustrialisation and economic decisions taken by the UK Government that have led to the population having poorer health outcomes. Such vulnerabilities arose from notoriously high levels of deprivation over a sustained period; urban planning decisions in the post-war period, such as the creation of monolithic, poor quality, sustained period; urban planning decisions in the post-war period, such as the creation of monolithic, poor quality, peripheral housing estates; the regional economic policies of the UK Government and its Scottish Office; and local government responses to UK Government policies in the 1980s.

Again, where there are socioeconomic inequalities, there are health inequalities. These inequalities are not a mistake and they are not an accident, they are not inevitable and they are not irreversible. Income inequalities were relatively narrow in the UK until the late 1970s, and health inequalities declined dramatically. However, income and wealth inequalities soared again during the 1980s and 1990s, and so have health inequalities. Again, this did not happen by accident, nor did it happen in countries across the world. It happened in countries which, like the UK, made conscious decisions to roll back the state to the minimum level possible; to slash public expenditure like it was going out of fashion; to reconstruct the tax and welfare system to be less redistributive; and to champion the wants of business and the financial sector at the expense of the needs of workers and their trade unions. This was an ideologically driven Conservative Government hell-bent on pursuing a neoliberal agenda at any cost, come what may.
To break somewhat from the conciliatory tone, there were worrying signs that that approach was being mirrored by the previous Government. However, we have a new Prime Minister, and she has offered encouraging words about her Government’s ambition to fight burning injustice, but what she does matters more than what she says. Hopefully, today’s debate is a starting point.

The interventions the Government could make, which are more likely to reduce inequalities in health, are those that utilise taxation, legislation, regulation and changes in the broader distribution of income and power in society. As Michael Marmot, chair of the Marmot review, said in 2010:

“Simply restoring economic growth, trying to return to the status quo, while cutting public spending, should not be an option. Economic growth without reducing relative inequality will not reduce health inequalities.”

The Government must acknowledge that health inequalities cannot be solved with health solutions alone; they are rooted in poverty and income inequality, as well as across all areas of Government policy. Solutions from the Department of Health or the NHS will not suffice, as ably outlined by the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson). Therefore, the Government should commit to a joined-up, evidence-based approach of cross-departmental working, with a Minister from the Cabinet Office given specific responsibility for embedding health as a priority in all Government policy.

Inequalities in health are a matter of life and death, health and sickness, wellbeing and misery. They represent misery on the greatest scale imaginable. If the Government are looking to fight injustice, this is it. The only question is: are they up to the job, and are they willing to do it?

3.36 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): On the doorstep of No. 10, our Prime Minister, taking up her leadership mantle, gave an inspirational social justice speech, aimed at ensuring that we reduce health inequalities, including by addressing the stark realities of the mental health challenges that so many families in our communities live with daily. I want to speak about that, about the importance of healthy early relationships in life—even beginning before birth—and about the mental health challenges that can be involved. I would like to conclude with a reference to the implications of alcohol harm, wearing my hat as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on alcohol harm.

Building healthy relationships—beginning before birth—and establishing them in our earliest years as building blocks in our family and community life are absolutely key for the prevention and reduction of mental health problems in childhood and throughout later life. That starts in the womb.

Let me commence by setting out some key facts from the early lives of our children here in the UK. Depression and anxiety affect from 10 to 15 of every 100 pregnant women. Over a third of domestic violence begins in pregnancy. One million children in the UK suffer from problems such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, emotional problems and vulnerability to chronic illness, which are increased by antenatal depression, anxiety and stress. The UK has the world’s worst record for breastfeeding. Some 50% of three-year-olds experience family breakdown. Some 15,700 under-tens live in families classed as homeless.

By addressing some of those social determinants of health inequality, beginning even before birth, we could help exponentially, in terms of not just the physical but the mental health of so many of our young people, and that help would last their whole life long. We need to support our youngest, so that we can increase their life chances and reduce the health inequalities that get in the way of their achieving their full potential.

Points on the compass of scientific advancement are increasingly showing us the direction of travel in terms of the social determinants of health, and they significantly point towards the experiences of bump, birth and beyond. The top policy recommendation in Marmot’s “Fair Society, Healthy Lives” report, which was referred to by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry), and which was published as long ago as February 2010, was to give every child the best start in life. The “1001 Critical Days” manifesto, which is the UK’s only children’s manifesto with the support of eight political parties, was launched three years ago in response to that report.

A child’s development is mainly influenced initially by their primary care giver—usually their mother—but often their father—and by others who are engaged with helping with their parenting. Parenting begins before birth. We have known for a long time that how we turn out depends on our genes and on our environment. Scientists now realise that the influence of the environment begins in the womb, and how the mother feels during her pregnancy can change that environment and have a lasting effect on the development of the child. So we all need to support and look after pregnant women, for their sake and that of future generations.

A stable and secure home learning environment is critical in the early months. Children, right from their infancy, need to be protected, nourished, and stimulated to think and explore and to communicate and interact with their parents and others. Babies are primed to be in relationships, and their earliest relationships really matter for our health and well being throughout life.

Alex Cunningham: I know we are trying to make this a non-partisan debate, but does the hon. Lady recognise that all the things she is talking about require resources? Some of our most needy communities have seen a loss of those resources in recent times, and we need to do something to redress that.

Fiona Bruce: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention.

We need to focus on the fact that learning about and enjoying healthy relationships is a key determinant of future health, both physical and mental. Between 1.3 million and 2.5 million years of lives are lost as a result of health inequality in England. Many children never reach their potential throughout their life partly because of a lack of healthy relationships in their early years. Relationship breakdown is a significant driver of poverty and health inequality. A comprehensive cross-departmental strategy to combat health inequality must include
measures to strengthen healthy relationships and combat relationship breakdown, which is at epidemic levels in our country.

I am chair of a mental health charity for children in my constituency called Visyon, which is overwhelmed by requests on behalf of children as young as four. When I asked its CEO how many of the problems of the children it helps are the result of poor early relationships in the home, he looked at me and said, “Virtually all of them.” This is an absolutely critical factor in a child’s early development and healthy life, particularly in relation to mental health. Interestingly, a wide-ranging survey by the Marriage Foundation published in May 2016, involving thousands of young people, found a noticeable difference between the self-esteem levels of children who were brought up in stable households and those who were not. Self-esteem acts as a predictor of a range of real-world consequences in later life.

When relationships break down, as they do in all socioeconomic groups, it disproportionately affects children in low-income families because they are less resilient in combating the impact. Half of all children in the 20% of communities that are least advantaged now no longer live in a home where they have healthy relationships—where, for example, both parents are still with them by the time they start school. I am not saying that a child cannot have a healthy relationship with one parent or another, but it is important that we grasp this nettle and appreciate that healthy relationships with a range of people—including, ideally, a mother and a father—are good predictors of early health. We should support that, and the Government and Health Ministers should be brave enough to tackle the issue. For too long, Ministers have shied away from looking at healthy relationships, yet we are happy to help and educate young people about how to build healthy bodies for physical health in life.

Relationship breakdown is a root cause of poverty. When relationship breakdown happens, households often suffer dramatic income reductions. There is also an impact with regard to infant mortality rates, hospital admissions and mothers in poor health.

I agree that we need more funding to strengthen relationships, to provide the early support that is needed in many different ways. We need to consider extending children’s centres so that they can become family hubs that provide support for the whole family. The recent report of the all-party parliamentary group on children’s centres, of which I am the chair, made that recommendation. We need to look at the availability of couple relationship advice, not just parenting advice. Sex and relationship education lessons in schools need a much stronger focus on relationship education. We need to provide a family services transformation fund, so that local authorities can share best practice. We need to do all of that to ensure that we give children the best start in life, and in particular to tackle the serious challenge of the mental health problems experienced by so many schoolchildren. So many headteachers say that it is a major issue with which they have to grapple.

In the final part of my speech, I want to refer to the different but not entirely linked issue of alcohol harm. I say that it is not entirely linked because people who experience or fall into addiction are often looking for a source of comfort in life that is missing from their relationships. I am not saying that it is not right to enjoy drinking, but it needs to be healthy drinking. Alcohol harm is a major issue in our society and I do not believe that the Government are doing enough to address it.

The Government must do more to tackle health inequality. For example, in January the chief medical officer published her recommendation that it is wisest for women not to drink during pregnancy. Pregnant women are advised to make that choice, yet there has been wholly inadequate publicity for that recommendation. I speak as the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. We have heard heartrending evidence of the impact of alcohol on children’s lives, including their physical and mental wellbeing. It is particularly important to note that, according to the evidence that we have heard, women’s bodies tolerate alcohol at different levels, which is why the best advice is to not drink at all during pregnancy. We challenge Health Ministers, particularly in the run-up to Christmas, to get that message out so that pregnant women hear it and can make that choice.

Alcohol harm impacts on the health not just of the individual, but of those around them. One in five children under the age of one live with a parent who drinks hazardously. Alcohol is implicated in 25% to 33% of child abuse cases, and it generates a substantial bill for UK taxpayers with regard to the impact on emergency services. The all-party parliamentary group on alcohol harm will publish a report on that on 6 December, and I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) has contributed to it. I hope hon. Members can share best practice. W e need to do all of that to ensure that we give children the best start in life, and in particular to tackle the serious challenge of the mental health problems experienced by so many schoolchildren. So many headteachers say that it is a major issue with which they have to grapple.

I want to finish with a point that now arises continually in my work on alcohol harm, namely the impact of cheap alcohol. Let me tell Members a fact that may surprise or even shock them; it shocked me when I first heard it. For the cost of a cinema ticket, it is possible to buy almost 7.5 litres of high-strength white cider, containing as much alcohol as 53 shots of vodka. Many homeless people, and many people who are in a vulnerable state in life, are drinking that product, which has been likened to a death sentence. In the hostels run by the homeless charity Thames Reach, 78% of deaths were attributed to high-strength alcohol. Not for the first time, I urge Ministers, for the sake of the health of the most vulnerable, to consider a minimum unit price for all alcoholic drinks. That is a targeted and effective intervention that would save lives and reduce health inequalities considerably. Potentially, according to the Institute of Alcohol Studies, eight out of 10 lives saved as a result would be from the lowest income groups.

We need better education to inform young people about the effects of alcohol harm, so that they can make better choices and so impact on their own health. We need improved alcohol treatment services because they are inadequate. More than half of drug addicts receive treatment, but only one sixteenth of alcohol dependants do. We need to invest more in recovery for
those who are suffering the effects of alcohol addiction and harm. We need better and more effective alcoholism diagnosis in our hospitals and better rehab programmes. We need to support education better to help people not to fall into such difficulties in the first place.

3.51 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who made a number of interesting points. She made a convincing argument for introducing compulsory personal, social, health and economic education in schools. That is something that the Government could well do to foster good, healthy relationships, and it would go a long way to reducing health inequalities.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) on securing the debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for recognising the importance of the subject. I was pleased to hear the hon. Lady refer to drug and alcohol treatment services, as did the hon. Member for Congleton. The future of substance misuse services is in jeopardy when some local authorities face huge cuts to public health budgets and have no statutory obligation to provide such services. We need to address that when we talk about health inequalities.

I would like to add to the list something that I do not believe anyone has mentioned: the responsibility of local authorities in England to commission sexual health services. Sexually transmitted infections are increasing because cost-efficiency, rather than clinical need, seems to be the overriding factor when commissioning such services. We need to ring-fence funding for sexual health services as a matter of urgency; otherwise we face the development of a serious risk to public health.

I want to concentrate on diabetes and diabetic care, and throughout my speech I will refer to the report by the all-party group for diabetes entitled “Leveling Up: Tackling Variation in Diabetes Care”, which was launched yesterday. I declare an interest as secretary to that group. I urge everyone with an interest in diabetes care, and in health in general, to read a copy of that excellent report.

We took evidence from people with diabetes, healthcare professionals and clinical commissioning groups. One theme that came out from people with diabetes was the inconsistent quality of care. I am pleased that the Government and NHS England have recognised the need for improvement in diabetes services. During the investigation, NHS England announced £40 million of funding for diabetes improvements—diabetes is one of the six clinical priorities in the improvement and assessment framework for clinical commissioning groups—and it is vital that this opportunity to transform diabetes services is taken.

Our report identified three key things that people with diabetes need and deserve: first, high-quality consultations with the right healthcare professionals; secondly, support to manage their condition; and thirdly, access to key technologies. On the first point, a big part of how people with diabetes perceive their care is determined by how healthcare professionals communicate with them. People told us that they sometimes felt that they were criticised in appointments for not meeting treatment targets and that they were being dictated to about how to manage a condition that they had to live with.}

Our report found that people who have an input into their own care have better treatment outcomes. Consideration of their own lifestyles alongside their diabetes management, as well as an interpretation of National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines, allowed for tailored treatment plans. In this case, it seems that collaboration brings far better results than confrontation. People also talked to us about the difficulty of getting access to specialists, with some reporting that services were simply overwhelmed. Others said that they had to seek local services proactively to get a referral. The services that patients really valued were diabetes specialist nurses, dietetics and podiatry. Additionally, people affected by diabetes also valued their pharmacists and saw how their role might be significantly expanded to provide more information and support. That might well be worth reflecting on, given the Government’s recent cuts to community pharmacy services.

On the second point, about the support given to those with diabetes to help them to manage their condition, there is a huge variation in the information and education that is provided. Those who attended structured education courses generally reported that they found them valuable and that those courses helped them to manage their condition better. However, there is huge variation in the offer and uptake of these courses. In my constituency of Heywood and Middleton, only about 20% of people with diabetes are offered these courses, and the uptake is even lower. Clearly, that health inequality needs addressing. People in work often reported the problem of getting time off work to attend a five-day intensive course, while those with children also reported that accessing childcare was a problem. There is a job of work to be done to persuade employers that they will also reap the benefits of having a happier, healthier and more productive employee if they are reasonable about allowing time off.

The third point, on access to key technologies, serves to emphasise that technology now plays a key role in diabetes care, particularly for type 1 diabetes. Again, however, patients face a postcode lottery in getting the technology they need. That was cited as a major concern by the parents of children with diabetes. Worryingly, many type 2 diabetics reported that they had to self-fund their own blood glucose meters and test strips, which are essential for the self-management of their condition. Some type 1 diabetics reported the same thing, which sounds harsh, as it is a legal requirement for diabetics on insulin to test themselves before driving, and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency now advises people who take medication that causes hypoglycaemia to test themselves before driving. Similar postcode lotteries were reported regarding access to insulin pumps, and continuous and flash glucose monitoring, all of which can help diabetics to control their condition better and improve health outcomes. Sadly, inequalities in health outcomes persist because only the better-off are able to access devices that make living with diabetes easier.

The motion calls for support for policies to reduce health inequalities, and our report identified four areas the Government should look at: care and support planning; diabetes management, as well as an interpretation of National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines; a strong, local diabetes system. Variation and inequality in diabetes care show us that good care can be achieved, but our task and the task of the Government is to make
that happen everywhere so that best practice is shared, we end the postcode lottery in diabetes care and we tackle the diabetes crisis.

4 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who made important and serious points. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) on securing this incredibly important debate. I thank her and other Members who have participated for their work in this place to highlight this issue, and for the excellent debate that we have had.

This issue is about unequal lives and life chances. Naturally, like all Members, I take every opportunity to represent my constituency, whether that is Telford’s industry, its history of innovation and enterprise, its vibrant new town, its green spaces or its high-tech businesses and jobs, all of which I have spoken about with great pride and at some length. However, sometimes, as the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) so eloquently did, we must raise the issues that deeply affect the quality of life of our constituents. Those issues need to be addressed, but they are too often overlooked and glossed over, which can make those who experience these difficulties feel left behind and ignored.

Telford is a former mining area on the east Shropshire coalfield. It became a new town in the 1960s. With business, jobs and new growth it is starting to thrive in many ways, yet it retains significant areas of deprivation, with a total of 13 super output areas ranked in the 10% most deprived areas nationally. Hand in hand with areas of deprivation and disadvantage come marked health inequalities, which exist relative to both the national average and that for the west midlands, as well as—pertinently—relative to the surrounding, more affluent rural area of Shropshire.

To take obesity, which Simon Stevens has dubbed “the new smoking” as a killer disease, 72% of adults in Telford are overweight or obese, which is an increase on last year’s figure and one of the highest rates in the country. That compares with a rate of 65% in neighbouring, more affluent rural Shropshire. Some 32% of adults in Telford are obese compared with 24.4% nationally; in Shropshire, the figure is 23.1%. I congratulate and admire organisations in Telford that are doing such good work to tackle that. However, the figure is continuing to increase, and we cannot ignore it—we must talk about it and take it more seriously.

I want to take this opportunity to flag up the statutory obligations of local CCGs, NHS England and the Secretary of State to address health inequalities, in particular because Telford and Shropshire continue to undergo a controversial reorganisation of future healthcare provision. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 introduced legal duties on the Secretary of State, NHS England and CCGs to reduce health inequalities and move towards greater investment in healthcare where levels of deprivation are higher. NHS guidance for commissioners says that “health inequalities must be properly and seriously taken into account when making decisions”.

It is right that decisions are made locally by local health commissioners, but we need to ensure that commissioners pay due regard to health inequalities and that they evidence the fact that they have done so. That is not about box ticking or paying lip service to an ideal.

Telford and Shropshire are in the third year of a review into the reconfiguration of the area’s healthcare provision, which includes a women and children’s centre and an A&E. While I welcome the proposed additional investment in health provision for the wider area of Telford and Shropshire, I want to be a voice for my constituents, so I want to ensure that health inequality is prioritised both in the decision-making process and when new investment is brought to the area.

As the review of Telford and Shropshire’s healthcare draws to a close after a protracted and expensive process, it has been confirmed that the preferred option is to close Telford’s newly opened women and children’s centre at Princess Royal hospital and to rebuild it in the more affluent area served by Royal Shrewsbury hospital. In addition, it is suggested that there should be extra investment in emergency care at Royal Shrewsbury hospital. My constituents are rightly concerned about that proposal. Not only is the much-needed investment to be redirected elsewhere, but Telford may lose other key services. Telford has the greatest need, the fastest growing population, as a rapidly expanding new town, and, above all, the greatest inequality of health outcomes. Too often in Telford we hear that rural sparsity is prioritised for additional investment, rather than deprivation, health inequalities and need. That is wrong.

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to raise this issue. I ask the Minister to give us assurances that addressing health inequalities in Telford, and in other areas of deprivation and need where there is a stark contrast with more affluent neighbouring areas, will be prioritised. As my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) said, resources really must follow need.

4.7 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I join colleagues across the House in congratulating the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) and her Committee on their work in this area and on securing this debate. She brings a calm and clear knowledge to every health debate. We really do need a long-term vision in this area and I know that she, like me, wants to see that, whatever party is in government.

I speak today both as an MP for a constituency with large gaps in health, wellbeing and life expectancy, which are very much determined by place of birth, early years experience and poverty, and as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, which in this year alone...
has published 10 reports on the national health service, some of which shine a light on this debate. Our reports show the huge pressures on the national health budget and the huge increases in demand on that budget. To take diabetes as an example, 4.8% of the population is currently diabetic, but that is set to rise to 8.8% in the next few years.

It is my role and the role of my Committee to look at funding. Specifically, our role is to look at the economy, effectiveness and efficiency with which the Government spend taxpayers’ money, so I will talk first about how we spend the money that is allocated to our health service and how that is key to tackling health inequalities. I will then turn to how we look at the impact of decisions, both in the health service and in other parts of Government, on health inequalities—what we in the Committee call “cost shunting”.

NHS budget spending is in the region of £110 billion a year. The Government are keen to remind us that they have injected £10 billion into the NHS over the six-year period to about 2016. At the same time, we see an ageing population, a large and increasing demand, including for specialised services, and a health service squeezed at each step of the journey. My Committee has heard evidence on general practice, specialised services such as diabetes and neurology, acute trusts and social care, all of which has shown the impact on the budget. That has all been caught up in what, sadly, has been a rather childish debate over headline figures and often very subtle changes in language from the Government about who is to blame. Ministers have moved from the mantra, “We’ve injected an extra £10 billion”, to saying, “The NHS has been given what it asked for”, as though they were scolding a naughty child, and, “We will manage this within the NHS”, as the Chancellor said yesterday when I asked him why he had not considered the NHS budget in the autumn statement.

In today’s Daily Mail there is an exhortation—this is quoting sources close to or in Government—that the NHS simply needs to manage its resources better and cannot endlessly be given more money. I am Chair of the Public Accounts Committee. This is taxpayers’ money. I do not think we should endlessly pour money into any Department without demanding quite a lot of it, and I am clear that there are always efficiencies to be found in a system so large and with such a large overall budget. Every pound saved is a pound to spend on something else. That is the key point. Every pound saved in the Department of Health budget can be spent on other things and ought to be spent on public health in particular. I will come on to that.

As I have highlighted, there are many pressures on the NHS budget. With all these discussions and figures being bandied around, we need to take a closer look. In 2015-16, the Department’s budget was projected to have a £2.45 billion deficit. The measures used in the last financial year to balance the budget were extraordinary and one-offs and led to an unprecedented three-and-a-half-page explanatory note from the Comptroller and Auditor General alerting all of us, particularly the Department, to his concerns that those were not replicable, long term or sustainable. He reiterated that point in a Committee hearing only a few weeks ago.

I will not spend too long on the budget figures—the debate needs to move on—but I will touch briefly on the overall figures this year for acute trusts alone. From April to September, trusts overspent by £648 million and the deficit for the first six months forecast to the year end is £669 million. This trend was increased largely because of the decision in 2011 to allow for 4% efficiency savings across the NHS by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer. Everybody in the system knew that that was not realistic on a long-term basis. People knew that there would be a problem with the budget two or more years out from the crisis in the budget settlement in the last financial year, yet there is no openness in discussing how we spend money in the NHS, what we spend it on and what we focus on.

That brings me to public health. Too often, public health budgets are dealt with day-to-day crises and money is taken out of NHS education. The plans for service transformation are not necessarily a bad thing, but the danger is, if they are done in the wrong climate and with the wrong tone, that they are seen as an excuse for cuts. They can be so much better for patients, especially if focused on preventive work and the more efficient spending of taxpayers’ money, but too often they will be driven by financial pressures. A lot of pressure was put on finance directors of acute trusts in particular at the end of the last financial year. Many were encouraged, for example, to move capital funding into the resources side of their budget in order to balance the books—a short-term measure that can lead to underinvestment in facilities that, if invested in, can actually save money and improve the patient experience.

This short-term, year-on-year, or even spending review period planning will not tackle health inequalities effectively. We need a longer-term approach. We need to prevent more ill health and treat fewer patients. As others have highlighted, the age of death is increasing—we have an ageing population—but the age of disability remains broadly similar. Public Health England released a report towards the end of 2015 highlighting some of these figures. The cost of treating illness and disease arising from health inequalities has been estimated at around £5.5 billion a year, and there then is the issue of cost shunting, which is a big concern.

If we do not tackle these things, it will not just be individual patients or their families who suffer, or the taxpayer funding these services; there is a wider impact on society. Productivity losses are estimated at between £31 billion and £33 billion per annum. Lost taxes and higher welfare payments cost in the region of £28 billion to £32 billion per annum.

To go back to what the hon. Member for Totnes said about smoking, if we tackle tobacco issues in my neighbouring borough of Newham alone, that would save about £61 million per annum. That would make a big contribution to the local health budget in east London. If we replicated that across just east London, just think what we could contribute to the NHS budget.

About 1.3% of workdays a week are lost to sickness in London alone, which is lower than in many parts of the country. All these things contribute to our productivity gap and have a big effect, so if we do not do what the Chancellor said yesterday and ensure that our workers produce in four days what they now produce in five, we need workers who are well and can work until the increased retirement age that is demanded. It is quite shocking that the hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) and other colleagues from Glasgow represent a city where people will die before the age at which they die.
qualify for their state pension. There are certainly many people in my constituency who face that, although they are not the average. That is a sign of the failure of preventive work to tackle health inequalities at the right point.

When it comes to joining up Government, we need to look not just at the silos in various parts of the health budget, but at ensuring a healthier wider society. Let us take, on the one hand, the land disposals that the Government are undertaking to provide public land to build new homes. My Committee has looked at that at a great deal, although I will not divert the House today too much. In my area we have St Leonard's hospital, the site of a former workhouse in Hackney. When the most recent reorganisation of the NHS took place in 2011, the site was moved to the central PropCo, the property company that the NHS holds centrally to manage its estate. We therefore no longer have local control of what to do on that site. Given the state of homelessness locally, if we could provide families with more good-quality homes on that site that were not overcrowded, we would do more for public health and health inequalities than a lot of the fiddling around we do over whether a service should be based here or there and all the treatment work we are doing.

Departments are now taking account of other “strategic objectives”, as they put it, in land disposals, but that is still ill-defined. My Committee will continue to push on this matter because from the perspective of my constituency, where we have extraordinarily high house prices, if we can release land and provide homes for key workers, that would contribute to the outcomes of those Departments. I am determined that the Government are clearer in their outcomes, because in constituencies such as Taunton Deane—or perhaps not, as the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) highlighted—the need might be for green space or other facilities that would improve or promote health. However, if we do not have a wider view of what we are doing with our public assets, there is a danger that we will just sell to the highest bidder and lose the chance for several generations, because once land is gone, it is gone.

Finally on this issue, it is important to touch on the increasing challenge of homelessness, particularly in London and in my constituency. London households in temporary accommodation now account for around three in four of all such households in England. That is not a surprise, given increasing house prices and rents, and the impact of the benefit cap, which means that people cannot now rent a three or four-bedroom home on housing benefit anywhere in London or the south-east of England. I have people coming to see me now who even five years ago, and certainly 10 years ago, would not have come to me about their housing. They were managing okay, they were living in the private sector, they were paying their rent and they were working.

Now, one woman who came to see me had lost her job because she had been ill. She had hoped to go back to work. She had a good job with professional prospects, although not a well-paid job. She became ill and her rent went up, so she fell notionally into arrears while she was trying to find another home, as her rent was no longer covered because of the housing benefit cap. She tried to find somewhere in Hackney and the neighbouring six boroughs but could find nowhere, until eventually a landlord said he would take her in on benefits. However, because of the complexities in how housing benefit is allocated, she would not take her unless he had a guarantee a month before she moved in that she would be able to receive housing benefit. However, the system does not allow for that. As a result, a woman whose health was challenged anyway was suffering mental health issues through no fault of her own.

My constituent was of course very concerned, anxious and depressed about what was going to happen in her situation, and she is just one of many. This is the worst situation I have experienced in over 20 years as an elected member at local or national level. The stress of poor, uncertain and overcrowded housing has a huge impact on health. If someone is homeless, it increases by one and a half times the likelihood of their having a physical health problem, and it makes them 1.8% more likely to have a mental health problem, although it seems to me from my experience of speaking to people face to face that those figures are underestimates. Perhaps they mask the temporary housing problem, compared with the reality of what I am seeing. This has a huge impact, focused, yes, on the absolutely poorest, but also on people such as the woman I mentioned—people who have just hit a bit of a rocky patch in their life, where something has gone wrong and caused a spiral downwards towards homelessness.

There are so many hidden households in my constituency—families living on the sofa in the living room. It could sometimes be a family of an adult and two children in that situation while another family is living in the bedroom. For various reasons, they do not qualify for council housing, or they are on the waiting list—a bit of a misnomer when people wait a lifetime for a council property. Sometimes they cannot afford, on their income, to rent privately and they have no other options.

Temporary accommodation is now costing Hackney council about £35 million a year. I commend the Hackney Gazette, which has done a lot to highlight the conditions in temporary accommodation hostels in my borough and across London. We have the Homelessness Reduction Bill, which is passing through Parliament, but that is only part of the picture. Saying that councils must accept people who are homeless is fine, but unless we have the homes available to provide to those people at an affordable level, we will not solve this problem.

Rebecca Pow: I believe that the Government provided £10 million yesterday for homes, particularly in London, so things are being done and they are on the move. I just wanted to put that on the record.

Meg Hillier: The hon. Lady pre-empts my next point. I welcome the fact that the Government have begun to make some moves on housing, particularly taking away the “pay to stay” provisions. I am making sure that all my local housing associations are not going to buy into this on a voluntary basis—I hope they would not in London. The autumn statement freed up housing associations to use Government money for affordable housing as defined locally, rather than as set nationally. The idea that in my constituency affordable would be 80% of private rents is nonsense; it is well out of the range even of people who are well above the minimum wage. Most young people in Hackney share a home,
because they could never afford to rent somewhere privately and they certainly cannot get on the housing ladder. It is going to take a generation to solve this housing problem, so although I welcome what the Government have done, much more could have been in their six years of office.

I am pleased that we now have a Housing Minister who is a London MP and who understands London issues. We London Members often speak about housing here, and it is as though we are in a different world from others. However, we have this very big problem of homelessness, overcrowding and excessive use of temporary accommodation.

Let me finish with a story that should never be true in our world. It is a story of a woman who was living with her toddler and her husband in a hostel because she was waiting to get some council housing. Even three years ago, I used to say, “Hold on and hang on in there for six months, and we’ll find a home for you.” Nowadays, it is increasingly a year or 18 months. The woman went into hospital to give birth and had to come back, with her new-born baby, her toddler and her husband, to that one room in the hostel. The people living in that hostel are among the most vulnerable—not an ideal environment in which to bring children home. Many people with a lot of problems are crowded into one place, without the support they need. This is not, I am sure, what any Member wants to see. We must tackle the issue, because the health problems that that spins off for the next generation of children are immense. I add a plea from the health problems that that spins off for the next generation of children are immense. I add a plea from

Alex Cunningham: I do not disagree with the hon. Lady, but I think she must have misinterpreted my action. It was my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson) who mentioned the Black report, and I was indicating him. No offence was meant.

Alison Thewliss: My apologies. I had to nip out to the loo earlier, and I must have got my wires crossed. I thank both Members for raising those issues. It is important for us to think about the context of the debate and where we are going.

I have been reading the report to which the hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) referred. I pay credit to the in-depth work and dedication of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health. Its director, Dr Carol Tannahill, along with Bruce Whyte and David Walsh, lead much of that work. Along with their team of researchers, they have laid out the history of health inequality in Glasgow and in Scotland more widely. They have done a huge amount of research, and have come up with not only history, but some solutions.

In 2007, when I was first elected as a Glasgow councillor, the centre’s most recent report was “Let Glasgow Flourish”, but since then it has carried out a great deal of research on Glasgow’s “excess mortality”. It is interesting to note that that excess mortality applies across different causes of death, and across ages, genders and social strata, although it is most pronounced in members of the working-age population living in the poorest neighbourhoods, where the impact of alcohol, drugs and suicide, particularly among men, is stark. In comparison with Manchester and Liverpool, Glasgow experienced an extra 4,500 deaths between 2003 and 2007. In Scotland overall, there were an extra 5,000 deaths in each year between 2010 and 2012.

I shall not repeat what was said by the hon. Member for Glasgow East, but it is important to note that Governments knew that that was happening. The impact of their policies was known. Urban change, particularly in Glasgow, was taking place in a noticeably different way from the way in which it was happening in Liverpool and Manchester. It had a disproportionate effect on the working-age population living in the poorest neighbourhoods, where the impact of alcohol, drugs and suicide, particularly among men, is stark. In comparison with Manchester and Liverpool, Glasgow experienced an extra 4,500 deaths between 2003 and 2007. In Scotland overall, there were an extra 5,000 deaths in each year between 2010 and 2012.

I shall not repeat what was said by the hon. Member for Glasgow East, but it is important to note that Governments knew that that was happening. The impact of their policies was known. Urban change, particularly in Glasgow, was taking place in a noticeably different way from the way in which it was happening in Liverpool and Manchester. It had a disproportionate effect on the population, and we still see the lag of that today. One of the reports produced by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health quotes from a 1971 Scottish Office report called “The Glasgow Crisis”, which noted that “Glasgow is in a socially...economically dangerous position.”

However, nothing was done at the time. The urban regeneration in Glasgow took place in the shopping centres in the middle of the town, but did not touch the areas that needed it most.
Poverty and health inequality are incredibly difficult to turn around. They cannot be fixed by a sugar tax or any other individual health measure; a wide-ranging approach is required from all levels of government. Glasgow has worked incredibly hard, and has established a poverty leadership panel to examine some of the issues. The Scottish Government have invested heavily, and have set up a ministerial taskforce on health inequality. However, we must keep working harder and working together if we are to achieve a result.

Clyde Gateway is an urban regeneration company in my constituency. Members may wonder whether an urban regeneration company, which builds things and fixes the ground conditions, should be interested in health, but the company has been working for eight years in Glasgow and Rutherglen, and has learnt lessons from previous regeneration efforts. So far, it has managed to lower the claimant count for out-of-work benefits from 39% to 28% and the claimant count for jobseeker's allowance from 8.6% to 4.8%. That is pretty remarkable in itself, but the company cannot go any further until it starts to tackle the underlying health issues that are keeping people out of work. It is therefore working closely in partnership with local organisations and local people. It is crucial that local people are part of the process and are not having things done to them, as was the case before. They are now part of the solution and the community is a part of what is happening.

Clyde Gateway recently signalled its intention to seek a means of tackling health inequalities. It wants to work to improve diet and cancer screening, which are both factors in the area's ill health. There is a lot of worrying evidence that people in areas of deprivation are not taking up the screenings to which they are entitled. Those screenings include tests for cancer and free eye tests, which can also be an indicator of other conditions. I spoke to the Royal National Institute of Blind People yesterday about early intervention and the importance of people going for their eye tests. Clyde Gateway also wants to grow jobs in health and social care in the local community to make people working in the industry part of the community as well, rather than having staff coming in from other areas to "do" health to people.

I wholeheartedly agree with the notion that public health ought to be everybody's business. It is not just for public health officials to do on their own, because the roots of health inequalities are to be found in income inequalities. So in Scotland we are tackling some of the underlying causes. The living wage uptake in Scotland now far exceeds the uptake in other parts of the country. We are supporting families and helping to improve the physical and social environment and housing. We have invested heavily in housing, because much of the ill health was coming from housing that was damp and substandard. Housing was making people ill and was not being tackled.

We have increased free school meals and continued commitments such as free prescriptions, concessionary travel and free personal care. The hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) talked earlier about tooth-brushing and the rates of tooth decay. In the mid-1990s, when I was starting secondary school, just under 40% of children in primary I in Scotland—those just entering school—had no dental cavities. That figure is now just under 70%, which is pretty good and marks quite a shift, but we need to go a lot further. Initiatives such as Childsmile, through which all children in Scotland regularly get free toothbrushes and toothpaste, are helpful.

As the hon. Members for Totnes and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) mentioned, a lot of work is being done on minimum unit pricing to reduce alcohol consumption and deal with many of the issues that lead to people buying low-price cheap alcohol, which is killing them. We have reduced smoking rates, too, by bringing in the smoking ban first, and we are doing a lot of work to encourage active living and healthy eating, and investing to improve mental health services.

As chair of the all-party group on infant feeding and inequalities, I want to take this opportunity to speak about breastfeeding and the impact it can have on health inequalities. James P. Grant, executive director of UNICEF during the 1980s, said that "exclusive breastfeeding goes a long way towards cancelling out the health difference between being born into poverty or being born into affluence. It is almost as if breastfeeding takes the infant out of poverty for those few vital months in order to give the child a fairer start in life and compensate for the injustices of the world into which it was born."

That is quite a statement.

Sadly, there is a huge inequality in breastfeeding, particularly in the UK. Women in areas of greater deprivation are far less likely to breastfeed. They are then also often paying for expensive formula milk, which will put a strain on their family budget.

I was once told by a Labour councillor in Glasgow that in his experience there was an inverse perverse stigma: if a woman breastfed, it made her look as though she was too poor and could not afford the formula. The cost is a big issue, however, as I highlighted in my ten-minute rule Bill last week.

Families are being penalised for a societal problem: the UK just does not provide enough support, via midwives, health visitors, peer supporters and local networks, to ensure that mums are able to breastfeed for as long as they want to. Some of the economic agenda is having an impact on those important services, and coverage is fraying, as volunteer services find it harder to cope. It is seen as difficult, and there is so much blame and shame for mums, whatever they do and however they feed their children.

Many younger women have never seen anyone breastfeed. There is also interesting evidence from Sally Etheridge that the longer that black and minority ethnic women who have come to the UK from other countries stay here, the lower their breastfeeding rates become as they begin to assimilate into our bottle-feeding culture. I believe that there is a lot we can do to improve this situation and encourage the Government in that regard. I met the Minister earlier this week and am glad that she is listening and keen to address the breastfeeding rates across the country.

The series on breastfeeding from The Lancet and the UNICEF report on preventing disease and saving resources point out that the NHS could save significant amounts of money by investing in breastfeeding services. They reckon that there would be 3,285 fewer hospital admissions for gastrointestinal issues and 5,916 fewer admissions for respiratory tract infections, which could save £10 million across the country. That is no mean feat. There would also be connected reductions in obesity and sudden...
infant death syndrome, as well as a reduction in breast and ovarian cancer in the mum. Breastfeeding is a significant public health intervention, as the UNICEF call to action has illustrated.

I should like to summarise a few of the suggestions in the Glasgow Centre for Population Health report, as it is the purpose of our debate today not only to look at the problems. Health interventions on smoking, alcohol and so on have helped, but the report has found that the main means of resolving health inequality is not a health intervention but a wealth redistribution. A widening gap in income has been perpetuated by different Governments over many years. Fair and progressive taxation and fair wages would make a huge difference to the gap. Ensuring that all people have a sufficient income is critical, yet this Government continue to slash social security spending, which is making people not only poor but ill.

An NHS Health Scotland report published this month said that a quarter of lone parents in Scotland rated their health as either fair, bad or very bad. Those parents have to look after children. If their health is fair, bad or very bad, they will not be able to be effective parents. The impact of food banks on health is also clear. If people cannot afford to put food on the table, they have to resort to going to a food bank to get canned meals. They do not get fresh food and vegetables; they get something out of a can that they might not even be able to heat. That will have an impact not only on their physical health but on their mental health.

The GCPH report looks at the cost of living and at how we as a society can support people to live with dignity and live a life in which they have choices. Having choices in life should not be a luxury. If someone does not have any control over what happens to them in life, it will have a huge impact on them and their family for years to come. The report also recommends affordable, warm and appropriate housing. As the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) said, not having somewhere affordable and warm to live can have a huge impact on people. We need to learn from past mistakes and look more widely at the policies we pursue and the things that we in this House think are important, because they can have long-lasting effects, as we have seen in Glasgow.

Most significant to all of this is the adoption of the World Health Organisation’s principle of including health in all policies. This must run through absolutely everything that the Government do, because of the impact on health. Yesterday, the Chancellor failed to address health spending; indeed, he failed to address the question of health at all. He is failing the people of this country by spending; indeed, he failed to address the question of health. Yesterday, the Chancellor failed to address health.

I enjoyed the speeches by the hon. Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile)—a fellow member of the all-party parliamentary group on basketball—and for Erewash (Maggie Throup), who made an excellent speech on obesity and childhood obesity. I also enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). As she knows, I agree with most of what she says, especially about breastfeeding. We have had an excellent debate, with excellent contributions all round.

When it comes to addressing health inequalities, there are many conversations about the need for systemic change to reverse the trends. However, I want to look at tangible specifics that the Minister can get to work on in her remit as Minister for public health. I will do that by looking at the current state of health inequality and then the two key areas of smoking and childhood obesity and what more can be done to address those signifiers. I will then move on to the cuts to public health grants, which are exacerbating the situation.

The most recent intervention on health inequality came from the Prime Minister, who used her first speech on the steps of Downing Street to highlight that, “if you’re born poor, you will die on average 9 years earlier than others.”

We have heard clear examples of that from constituencies around the country. That welcome intervention set the tone of her Government’s serious work to address health inequalities.

It is hard not to agree when the facts speak for themselves. Two indicators from the most recent public health outcomes data show that London and the south-east have the highest life expectancy while the north-east and north-west have the lowest. The same pattern appears when looking at excess weight in adults, which we have also heard about today. Rotherham comes out the highest at 76.2% and Camden is the lowest at 46.5%. Those figures prove what we all know to be true: people living in more deprived parts of the country do not live as long as those in more affluent areas. Contributors to ill health such as smoking, excessive alcohol consumption—which we heard about from the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce)—and obesity are more prevalent in deprived areas.

There is a moral argument that it is important for the Government to address such issues, so that we can improve our nation’s health, but there is also an economic argument to be made. If we have an unhealthy population, we will not be as productive. In England, the cost of treating illnesses and diseases arising from health inequalities has been estimated at £5.5 billion a year. As for productivity, ill health among working-age people means a loss to industry of £31 billion to £33 billion each year. Those two arguments must spur the Government into action, but there are many issues to tackle and multiple ways for the Government to address them. Many such issues have been raised in the debate but, as I said, I will
[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

examine two key areas that the Minister must get right: smoking cessation and childhood obesity.

My first outing as shadow Public Health Minister was to debate the prevalence of tobacco products in our communities and the need for the Government to bring forward the new tobacco control plan.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood) indicated assent.

Mrs Hodgson: The Minister remembers it well. The Government need to set out key actions to work towards a smoke-free society. Smoking is strongly linked to deprivation and has major impacts on the health of those who do smoke, such as being more prone to lung cancer and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and facing higher mortality rates. If we look at that by region, which I have already established is a factor in health inequality, smoking levels are higher in the north-east at 19.9% compared with the lowest in the south-east at 16.6%. When looking at smoking by socioeconomic status, we find that the smoking rate in professional and managerial jobs is less than half that in routine and manual socioeconomic groups, at 12% and 28% respectively.

In the debate held just over a month ago, the Minister was pushed on when the new tobacco control plan would be published. Concerns have been raised by various charities, including ASH, Fresh NE and the British Lung Foundation, about how the delay could jeopardise the work already done. Sadly, the Minister evaded my specific question back then, so I will ask her the same thing again: when can we expect the new plan? Will it be this year or next year? The plan will not only go a long way to work towards a smoke-free society, but help to reduce health inequalities in our deprived areas. The Minister can surely understand that and the need to come forth with the plans.

The Minister knows that I also take a keen interest in childhood obesity. She has said repeatedly that the publication of the childhood obesity plan was the start of the conversation. Childhood obesity is the issue on everyone’s lips right now as it is the biggest public health crisis facing the country. I will not repeat the stats we all know about the number of children who start school obese and the number who leave obese—they are shocking. Many organisations and individuals, including Cancer Research UK, the Children’s Food Trust and Jamie Oliver, have made clear their dismay at the 13-page document that was snuck out in the summer and have said that it did not go far enough. Incidentally, it came out on the same day as the A-level results, so it looked like it was being hidden.

Obesity-related illnesses cost the NHS an estimated £5.1 billion a year, and obesity is the single biggest preventable cause of cancer after smoking. It is also connected to other long-term conditions such as arthritis and type 2 diabetes. When obesity is linked with socioeconomic status, we see real concern that the plan we have before us will not go far enough to reverse health inequality. National child measurement data show that obesity among children has risen, and based on current trends there could be around 670,000 additional cases of obesity by 2035, with 60% of boys aged five to 11 in deprived communities being either overweight or obese. There is a real need for the Government to come to terms with the fact that many believe the current plan is a squandered opportunity and a lot more must be done. That is why I hope the Minister will be constructive in her reply to this debate, giving us reassurances that move us on from this being “only the start”. At the end of her speech, the hon. Member for Erewash gave us a list of four or five items that we could start straightaway, which would certainly take us further on.

The Government have stalled or not gone far enough on the plans I have mentioned, but there is also deep concern that the perverse and damaging cuts to public health spending will widen the health inequality gap. The Minister knows the numbers that I have cited to her previously, but I will cite them again, even after my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle has done so. We are greatly concerned about the £200 million cut to local public health spending following last year’s Budget, which was followed by the average real-terms cut of 3.9% each year to 2020-21 in last year’s autumn statement. I want to add some further concerns that go beyond those raised by Labour.

Concerns were identified in a survey by the Association of Directors of Public Health, which found that 75% of its members were worried that cuts to public health funding would threaten work on tackling health inequalities. Those concerns are backed up by further evidence published by the ADPH, which found that local authorities are planning cuts across a wide range of public health services, because of central Government cuts. For example, smoking cessation services saw a 34% reduction in 2015-16, and that will become 61% in 2016-17, with 5% of services being decommissioned. That is seen across the board among local public health services and will be detrimental to reversing health inequalities. For the Government to fail to realise that cutting from this important budget will not help the overall vision on health inequality, set out by the Prime Minister earlier this year, is deeply worrying and shows a distinct lack of joined-up thinking around this issue.

In conclusion, health inequality is a serious issue that we cannot ignore or let the Government get wrong, as the health of our nation is so important, not only in a moral sense, but economically. I know the Minister will fully agree with the Prime Minister’s statement from earlier this year—there is no second-guessing that, as we all do—but we need radical proposals that get to the bottom of this persistent issue, which blights the lives of so many people living in our most deprived communities. We all want to see a healthier population, where nobody’s health is determined by factors outside their control, and we must do work together to get to the point where it is no longer the case that the postcode where somebody is born or lives determines how long they will live or how healthily they will live that life.

4.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): I congratulate the Chair of the Health Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), on her characteristically thoughtful opening of this debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to the debate, which has been not only highly informed, but very wide ranging. I will therefore start by apologising for the fact that I will not
be able to comment in detail about all the points raised, but I will reply in writing where I am not able to respond. Colleagues are right to say that the Prime Minister has made this issue a national priority, so it is not surprising that the Government share the commitment of the House to having an effective cross-Government policy that will reduce health inequalities.

We are recognised as world leaders in public health, and that has been achieved by avoiding the temptation to put health inequality in a silo. Marmot, as many have pointed out, is clear that an approach to treating health alone will not tackle what we here know are some of the most entrenched problems of our generation. We have avoided a health-only approach in the past, which is why the Chancellor’s autumn statement yesterday announced important and relevant measures such as raising the national minimum wage, raising the income tax threshold and providing, as the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, rightly observed, an additional £1.4 billion to deliver 40,000 extra affordable homes. That provision is in addition to the Homelessness Reduction Bill.

It is right that we also look to the work of industry and non-governmental actors. I am pleased to say that the food and drink industry has made progress in recent years. Its focus under voluntary arrangements has been on calorie reduction. Billions of calories and tonnes of sugar have been removed from products, and portion sizes have been reduced. Some major confectionary manufacturers are committing to cap single-serve confectionary at 250 calories, which is an important step forward. As my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) about his GP practices. When a GP practice closes, NHS England has a responsibility to make sure that patients still have access to services and are not misplaced. I am pleased to hear that he is making some progress on the matter, but if he finds that he reaches a roadblock, I will be happy to raise his concerns with the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), who has responsibility for community health.

Although, as a number of colleagues have said, councils have had to make savings and are acting in tough financial circumstances, they are still accessing £16 billion over the next five years from their public health grant. They have shown that good results can be achieved while efficiencies are found and the greatest effect is generated. There are a number of examples of outstanding practice to which we should pay tribute today. The HIV innovation fund, for example, which is funded by Public Health England in collaboration with local government, provides funding for services that meet local needs and offers the most at-risk populations free, reliable and convenient alternatives to traditional HIV testing. That is happening at a time when driving up HIV testing is a key public health priority.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes rightly noted, however, we must focus on key determinants such as obesity, smoking, suicide and alcohol. That is the core of the challenge that we face, which is why we are working closely with our partners in the NHS, PHE, local government and schools to deliver the childhood obesity plan. That subject has been raised by many speakers today and I assure the House that the delivery of the plan has started. We have consulted on the soft drinks industry levy and launched a broad sugar reduction programme. Those measures will have a positive impact, particularly on lower income groups, which are disproportionately affected. As many colleagues have mentioned, the measures will have secondary benefits, such as better dental health and diabetes prevention.

As was mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Erewash and for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), it is particularly important that we focus on effectively delivering a key plank of that obesity plan: the hour of physical activity every day. One of the ways in which we will make sure that is delivered effectively is by introducing a new healthy rating scheme in primary schools to recognise the way in which they deliver this and to provide encouragement. I believe that we have delivered the right approach to secure the future health of our children, but I am determined that we will implement it quickly and effectively, and I am very happy to enter into discussions about how we make sure that that implementation works.

I entirely agree with hon. Members on both sides of the House that mental health must not be forgotten when we are discussing health inequalities. We have made progress, but parity of esteem must be more than just a phrase; it must be backed by increased funding and effective reform. That is why we are investing an additional £1 billion every year by 2020 to help 1 million more people with mental illness to access high-quality care, including in emergency departments, as well as putting in place a record £1 billion of additional investment in children’s mental health. That money is funding every area in the country. We are working hard to make sure we drive these reforms to the frontline, including, as my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes said, by refreshing the suicide strategy with a particular focus on the alarming figures for suicides among young men and for self-harm.
There can be no complacency about the scale of the challenge, as the figures quoted today forcefully remind us. We know that inequalities can be stubborn to tackle. Variations in smoking rates, particularly in pregnancy, persist, and concerted efforts are required to tackle that. That is exactly why I am prioritising the tobacco control strategy so that we can use our combined efforts to target vulnerable groups, including pregnant women, mental health patients and children, and reduce those differences, not least by supporting local areas to use data effectively to understand how best to target their policies.

Alex Cunningham: Can the Minister offer us a timescale for the tobacco strategy?

Nicola Blackwood: I cannot, because I am not yet satisfied that it is as effective as I want it to be.

In addition, I am pleased with the action we have taken to introduce standardised packaging for cigarettes and other legislative measures. We have also launched the world’s first diabetes prevention programme, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), and we had a very good debate just yesterday about how we can improve diabetes care. We also have one of the most effective immunisation programmes in the world. That shows our commitment to take firm action where the evidence guides us, but as I have said, that action must be cross-government, at both a local and a national level.

Our job is to put prevention and population health considerations at the heart of everything we do, as the five year forward view makes clear. Devolution deals are giving local areas more control over many of the social determinants of health, such as economic growth, housing, health and work programmes, and transport. The focus on integrated public health services within devolution promises to remove many of the structural barriers to prevention that we have discussed today, and it makes public health everyone’s business, exactly as the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), said.

However, with devolution, to which the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson) referred, and as we move towards business rates retention, transparency will be ever more vital to ensuring that public health outcomes improve. That is happening, but we need to go further, and we need to do more to engage local people and their elected councillors in highlighting the unjustifiable inequalities that persist. Ensuring that transparency translates into accountability is a key priority for me, and I assure the House that I am actively involved in this matter.

Members on both sides of the House are right to launch this challenge today, and I take fully on board their suggestions of how we can collectively reduce health inequalities. However, I hope that I have made it clear that the only way we are going to make progress on this issue is to adopt a whole-Government, whole-society approach. We have to constantly remind ourselves that reducing these inequalities is for not just the NHS or Public Health England, but the whole of Government, as well as local areas, industries and, indeed, all Members of this House. Today I reaffirm my commitment to work together with the widest range of partners, inside and outside Government, to make progress on this agenda. I hope that every Member here will do the same, because we owe our constituents nothing less.

Dr Wollaston: I thank colleagues on both sides of the House for the extraordinary number of thoughtful contributions to this debate. As we have heard, this issue is everybody’s business, and what we now want is to see the Government translate the ambition and words into action.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House calls on the Government to introduce and support effective policy measures to reduce health inequality.
HS2 Phase 2: Consultation

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

4.59 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I want to make clear, on behalf of my constituents, my very strong objection to the proposals in section 4 of the document entitled, “HS2 Phase 2a: West Midlands to Crewe design refinement consultation”. I have already registered my objections to HS2 on many, many occasions. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) have also taken a very strong line on this whole subject for a very long time.

I want to set out my objections to these initial proposals. They amount to a railhead at Yarnfield, in between the proposed HS2 route and the M6, which is likely to become, we believe, a permanent maintenance facility to replace the infrastructure maintenance depot at Crewe. Stone Town Council has said in its objections that it is extremely disappointed with the level of consultation of Stone residents. That does not really fit in with the Minister’s saying in the previous debate, in which I took part with my right hon. and hon. Friends, that he was absolutely determined that consultation would be at the very highest level. I have to say that my constituents do not believe that that has been effective in this particular case, and I ask him to look into that.

I recently held a public meeting with my constituents in Yarnfield village hall, and the depth of frustration and anger at the proposals, which have caused extreme anxiety in the local area, was evident to all, as in a meeting with local residents that I had on the same day in Baldwins Gate, further to the north. I will hold a further public meeting on 3 December in Walton community centre.

The Yarnfield railhead sliver is totally new in the September 2016 consultation. The railhead was meant to have been in Crewe, and this is a shock to all my constituents in the towns of Stone and Eccleshall, and all the villages in and around the area, particularly Yarnfield. This is not a conceptual design, as the others have been; it is a detailed design that required much more time for consultation of the affected people. HS2’s standard consultation process was therefore hopelessly inadequate. Why did HS2 identify the Yarnfield area as appropriate instead of Crewe?

My constituents have raised an important issue in relation to the options appraisal in the community area report for my constituency. It contained eight options, but four were not taken forward. A brief commentary is provided with regard to only one of the four rejected options, which is Madeley. Of the remaining three, one is not related to Stone—option 5, for Crewe—and this is described in one section as the preferred environmental option. Of the three remaining Stone options, option 8—the Stone hybrid, now selected by HS2—seems to be a combination of options 2 and 3, but we have had only a very limited amount of time to consider all this. We believe that there has been misinformation about the number of jobs and a lack of evidence to demonstrate that there was availability in Crewe. This seems to have been overridden, and we do not understand why it has happened.

With regard to the railhead south of Crewe at the northern end of the phase 2a route, the consultation paper does not explain why Yarnfield must be chosen, nor why the so-called design development work would lead to the identification of Yarnfield as appropriate. The reason to move the location from Crewe to Yarnfield cannot be that Crewe is now to have 370 new homes, some of which have already been built. That would be baffling, because the site at Yarnfield is even more inappropriate given the positioning of local residential buildings.

The disruption that has already been caused by HS2 project preparation throughout my constituency, including Stone and Swynnerton, on top of the ongoing works at Norton Bridge that have been shattering the local area and having a great impact on nearby residents, has been excessive. Therefore, the attempt to minimise disruption in Crewe only to maximise it in Yarnfield does not seem, by any means, to be a good idea or a sensible option.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we need better communications with HS2? It has started to do the exploratory groundworks in my constituency, but it failed to get the correct permissions in Chalfont St Giles and since then a lorry has had an accident there. I think that we as MPs need a hotline to HS2 and to the Department, so that we can report some of the aggravation that is going down in our constituencies. If it is already happening in my hon. Friend’s constituency, all I can say is that I have a great deal of sympathy, because it is certainly happening in mine.

Sir William Cash: I am extremely grateful to, and concur with, my right hon. Friend. Accidents have occurred and I think that a hotline is an extremely good idea. I hope that the Minister is listening.

An analysis of the population of Yarnfield and the Stone area shows that over-65-year-olds make up a significant number of the local population. The proposed option will do nothing to enhance, let alone accommodate, an environment to support such an elderly population. Many residents in Yarnfield who are elderly and infirm will have to live with those proposals being imposed on them. Not only will they create dust, noise, light pollution and total disruption to all the residents of numerous surrounding villages and the Stone town, they will also ruin the lives of many who have chosen to retire to a rural environment and who have settled in the area in good faith. People in Stone town itself are also deeply concerned.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Although the development is not as close to my constituency as it is to his, there will be an impact on Great Bridgeford, Little Bridgeford and Ellenhall. In addition, if I am not wrong, there has been substantial new building of homes in Yarnfield itself and people will not have been aware that this was coming when they purchased those homes.

Sir William Cash: That is completely true. I concur with my hon. Friend. Indeed, people who came to the public meeting said that they moved to Yarnfield precisely...
because they thought that it was a peaceful area. They moved away from areas that had been disrupted by HS2 proposals, but now they find themselves saddled with them again.

The Campaign to Protect Rural England wrote about the proposals on Monday:

“The site is in the green belt, and CPRE has a long standing commitment to protect those special areas... In the case of HS2... We considered and accepted that the best location for the main construction compound was on railway land at Basford Sidings, south of Crewe. Temporary satellite compounds would be needed at points along the line during the construction period. The decision by HS2 Ltd to transfer the main railhead compound to Stone in place of the depot at Crewe then upgrade to a permanent one and include it in the Hybrid Bill”, which will come before Parliament,

“has caused us immense concern.”

The consultation proposals are entirely silent on many important details. Nowhere in them can we find the specified acreage of the railhead and compound. How can such consultation proposals and maps be provided to my constituents, causing great fear, anxiety and disruption in the area, without HS2 Ltd transparently showing the precise acreage of the proposed railhead and compound?

As I have said before, a great deal of noise, vibration, poor air quality, HGV traffic and visual intrusion will result from the proposed works. The consultation paper refers to the location having “good connections to the existing Norton Bridge to Stone Railway”, yet Norton Bridge is currently under a departmental consultation for closure, and it has certainly not been made at all clear what possible strategic link could be made to Stone railway.

On roads and highways, the proposed closure of Yarnfield Lane for three years is totally unacceptable to local residents, as it will compromise the health and welfare of the community and their ability to travel around the area. The proposal to use Eccleshall Road as an access and supply route to the construction site is untenable. It will block the whole area, which is already over-subscribed, and cause unbelievable chaos.

Stone Town Council is also concerned about the impact on the Walton area of Stone, where a strategic development location for 500 houses has been identified in the Stafford borough plan. The proposed railhead and sidings encroach on to that land. The maintenance facility must not be allowed to interfere with the local borough plan for Yarnfield and Stone. The design also proposes the use of the M6 as a supply route to the site, but that area of motorway is well known among local residents for becoming effectively a car park as soon as a traffic incident occurs. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford knows that that is absolutely true. The traffic will come back on to the local roads, the A34 and the A51, and that will make the situation even worse.

The proposal to use Pirehill Lane as a supply and service route to the construction site further out towards Whitgreave is ill-conceived and has no credibility. The proposal is absolutely unacceptable, and, furthermore, it has not been thought through. The consequences for local people are devastating. Although Stafford Borough Council and Staffordshire County Council say at the moment that they neither support nor object—that they are simply weighing up the situation—they have expressed concerns about the consultation, closing Yarnfield Lane, access to the M6, the connection to Norton Bridge station, the strategic allocation for housing for Stone and existing housing developments, all of which I have written to the Minister about.

Cold Norton, where there is a cluster of 40 dwellings within 500 metres of the M6, does not even seem to have been mentioned in the documents. If the B5026 and Yarnfield Lane, in particular, are closed during the works, my constituents in Cold Norton, Norton Bridge, Chebsey, Yarnfield, Swynnerton and Eccleshall will have their main travel route into Stone severed. Great Bridgford and many other areas that concern my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford will also be affected. There is also the question of the Yarnfield sports centre, which hosts extremely well-attended football games on weeknights. It will have incredible difficulty.

Jeremy Lefroy: Will my hon. Friend comment on the incredible disruption to the Yarnfield conference centre, which is becoming a major regional conference centre and hosting conferences from all over the country, which has had a lot of investment?

Sir William Cash: My hon. Friend has anticipated my next point.

Jeremy Lefroy: Oh, sorry.

Sir William Cash: Not at all. I was only going to say that, as Stone Town Council made clear, more than 80,000 visitors a year come to the regionally significant footballing facility at Wellbeing Park, Yarnfield. The closure of Yarnfield Lane will reduce the accessibility of the facility and force users to approach it through the village of Yarnfield rather than on the A34.

The Yarnfield Park training and conference centre is located in the village of Yarnfield and would be badly affected by the proposed closure of Yarnfield Lane, along with the disruption from the building work to create the railhead compound. Richard Smith of Compass Group has submitted to the consultation statements indicating that Yarnfield Park is one of the UK’s largest training and conference centres, with 338 bedrooms and more than 50 meeting and training spaces. The venue is operated by Compass Group, and it welcomes more than 50,000 residential guests per year. It has stated in a submission to me that the proposal to close Yarnfield Lane for an extended period would do extreme damage to its local business. The board of governors at Springfields First School have said that the closure of Yarnfield Lane would be intolerable. This has not been concluded, and I urge the Minister not to continue with these proposals, as they relate to my area, because of the arguments that I have made.

I turn to the effect of the proposals on Baldwins Gate, Bar Hill, Whitmore and Madeley. I wrote to the Secretary of State on 3 November about those areas. I urged him to refer back to the non-technical summary HS2 consultation document and the November 2016 report from Atkins, the famous rail engineering firm, on “Rail alternatives to HS2 Phase 2a”, and I urged him please to reconsider option 1 in the Atkins report, which has not yet been discounted. It is less expensive...
than the HS2 phase 2a project, while providing almost
the same benefits, and it would avoid the need to carry
out what is described as the “expensive” and “complex”
section of HS2 phase 2a north of Baldwins Gate.

That option would avoid almost entirely the very
expensive harm that the current project will impose on
the parishes of Whitmore and Madeley. In particular, it
would avoid the complex and expensive operation of
raising the A53 by as much, some believe, as 8 metres
in order for the track to be able to run under it, and
driving a twin-bore tunnel under the development known
as “The Heath” at the edge of Baldwins Gate. I urge
that the cost-benefit comparison between the two solutions,
current HS2 phase 2a versus high-cost option No. 1, be
revisited. Adopting the high costs of option 1 would
greatly simplify the construction project, offering virtually
the same benefits as the current HS2 phase 2a project
and, according to the Atkins estimate, would cost over
£1 billion less. Fundamentally, for my constituents, this
proposal would save the parishes of Whitmore and
Madeley from the devastation that they currently face.

It seems that HS2 Ltd was convinced that the heath
was flat and consisted of solid sandstone. It now accepts
that it is not flat, and it has been informed that the
ground is the remains of a sand and gravel quarry. In
other words, the heath is completely soft and unstable,
and HS2 cannot tunnel through it. HS2 is due to drill
boreholes to verify that, but it does not seem to have got
around to doing so. We think that that is for the very
good reason that the proposal will not stand up. There
will also be traffic chaos on the A53 for the duration of
the construction work, which is seven years, as it is
meant to be an access route to the area for construction
vehicles.

I strongly back my constituents in seeking support
for the Atkins report alternative of option 1. This is the
best option available for my constituents, primarily
because it proposes to connect HS2 phase 2a to the west
cost main line south of Baldwins Gate. The HS2 line
would then run to Crewe on the fast track of the west
cost main line. In that area of my constituency, this
option would avoid the permanent major adverse impact
of the Meece valley viaduct and embankment, the
Whitmore south cutting, the Whitmore wood cutting
and the Lea valley viaduct, which threaten to have a
serious impact on my constituents’ properties.

Option I would obviate the costly tunnelling at Whitmore
heath, Madeley and Bar Hill. It would save significant
amounts of money, and it would prevent the devastation
of ancient woods and lands and the damage that will
cause to my local area. In the absence of this proposed
change, my constituents have expressed a strong interest
in the creation of a tunnel from Whitmore to Madeley,
as the “next best option”. The proposal for a tunnel
from Whitmore to Madeley would avoid the destruction
by HS2 works of 33% of Whitmore wood, the viaduct
and embankments in the Lea valley and the disruptive
work on Manor Road.

I understand from emails I have received that HS2 is
considering a longer and lower tunnel option, combining
the tunnels of Whitmore heath and Bar Hill into one
long deeper tunnel. Many of my constituents, including
representatives of the Whitmore and Baldwins Gate
HS2 action group, believe that this is the best option.
Whitmore and Madeley should receive special treatment
and get the longer, lower tunnel. There is no other
tunnel on the whole of the HS2 route that has such a
large density of rural housing as the Whitmore tunnel.

On the question of Whitmore heath, the unfathomable
delays in carrying out the work of drilling boreholes
and taking samples to establish the nature of the ground
is a real problem in itself. HS2 Ltd says it is sandstone
and conglomerate rock, but the only sensible way to
find out is to drill boreholes. We insist that something is
done, because such work has not yet been done. Even its
former chief executive officer Simon Kirby, in a letter
written to me on 3 August, stated that boreholes are
needed. I need the Minister to intervene.

Finally, on woodland loss, the Woodland Trust wrote
to me on Monday—I will forward the letter to the Minister
—saying that the work at Whitmore wood under the
scheme
“will result in 6ha of loss from this ancient woodland.”

Swynnerton old park will be affected, as will Hey
Sprink. Barhill wood will be affected, with 0.5 hectares
of loss. Grafton’s wood will again be affected; it has
been greatly affected already by the west coast main
line. All these areas need to be protected. The Woodland
Trust supports us completely, as does the CPRE.

In conclusion, I simply say that, as far as I am
concerned, the Minister has alternatives in front of him.
The Bill has not yet been drafted, and it would be
possible for these changes to be made in the areas of
Yarnfield, Stone and all the other villages I have mentioned,
as well as in Great Bridgford and the other parts of the
constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford
that will be affected. We have had tremendous problems
with HS2, as the Minister knows. Will he please do
something about it, because we have not had the right
consultation? Other options are available, and he has
the opportunity to put this right. Will he please do so, and
will he also tell us what the arrangements are for Stoke-
on-Trent and about the question of having a stopover there?

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport
(Andrew Jones): I start by congratulating my hon. Friend
the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) on securing
this debate on the consultation process for phase 2 of
HS2, and specifically on his constituency of Stone. I
acknowledge his tireless work on behalf of his constituents,
alongside my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Chesham
and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) and my hon. Friend the
Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), in challenging
HS2 Ltd to really examine its practices to seek the best
possible outcome for the people of Staffordshire.

Having said that, I must also restate the strategic
importance of HS2 to our country’s infrastructure and
its longer term economic health. The number of seats
available out of Euston at peak hours will treble as a
result of HS2, relieving congestion while freeing up
space on the existing network. Journey times will be cut
not just along the newly built line but to destinations
throughout the north of England and Scotland. Although,
as has often been said, HS2 will become the largest
infrastructure project in Europe, its value is not as a
stand-alone project but as a fully integrated part of our
national rail infrastructure.

With that in mind, we have a duty to consider how
each region will benefit from the project, but we must
also consider those for whom the construction of the
railway will have a cost. For that reason, the ongoing consultation and engagement form such an integral part of HS2’s remit. That will continue to be the case throughout both phases of HS2, and I intend to give a brief overview of that process later. However, I wish first to turn to some of the issues raised by my hon. Friend regarding his own constituency.

Let us start with the proposed railhead near Stone. I fully understand that the proposals as they stand will have a significant impact on some of my hon. Friend’s constituents. That is clearly the case, and so I reinforce the Secretary of State’s commitment to treating those along the route with “fairness, compassion and respect”. In doing so, it is important not to lose sight of the need to deliver the best outcome for the country as a whole—we have a mixture of the individual and the public here.

I must remind my hon. Friend of why we are looking at a railhead at Stone. If the proposal were to go ahead, it would allow HS2 Ltd to significantly accelerate the construction schedule of phase 2a; because the site is situated in the middle of the phase 2a route, it would allow construction to start to the north and the south simultaneously, while negating the need for maintenance loops at Pipe Ridware, to the south of the site. That is why HS2 Ltd has put the idea forward. In addition to the programme-wide benefits, there would be benefits to the region in the form of approximately 150 new jobs.

If the railhead at Stone goes ahead, it will clearly have to be built with minimum disruption to local residents. The documents accompanying the recent consultation represented a worst-case scenario. It is important to say that no decision has been taken on road access to the site or on the closure of Yarnfield Lane, and HS2 Ltd must seek to keep the lane open; it will try to do so whenever it can. The strong message from colleagues tonight will clearly have been heard.

It cannot be overemphasised, however, that the consultation process underpins and is integral to all route decisions. As it is the main point of debate tonight, let me move directly to the consultation process. I am well aware of my hon. Friend’s concerns about the length of the consultation, as we have met and discussed it previously. However, we have been pleased by the high number of responses we have received to the three consultations, which suggest that residents have been able to engage with the issue and respond positively. I will update the House on the number of responses we have had. There were 442 responses to the working draft environmental impact assessment report, 98 responses to the equality impact assessment and 553 responses to the design refinement consultation, representing a total of 1,093 responses to the three consultations. I think the design refinement consultation has particularly exercised my hon. Friend, because it incorporates the proposed changes to the location of the railhead and depot.

As to the length of the consultation, I should say that the phase 2a consultations followed the same timescale as the phase 1 consultations. We are not seeking to treat one part of the country differently from any other. It is important to state that we have been entirely consistent on that. I have been through this with HS2 Ltd, and I am persuaded that during the course of the eight weeks it has been effective in getting out there and meeting people. I have looked at the press adverts that have gone out advertising the venues. There have been adverts highlighting the consultations in the Crewe Chronicle, the Staffordshire Newsletter, the west midlands’ Express & Star, The Sentinel, the Advertiser and the Lichfield Mercury. Those adverts have appeared on a number of occasions. There has also been a social media effort, which has reached several hundred thousand people. There has been positive engagement, as well as a series of public meetings, including in Yarnfield.

I understand entirely why this matter is of concern to colleagues and the people they represent. I am very supportive of the idea of a hotline. HS2 Ltd already offers colleagues individual technical briefings and I will make sure that those continue. It would be helpful to have a hotline for MPs and that idea is on the agenda for my next meeting with HS2 Ltd, so it is already in play. I am interested to hear that colleagues think it would be a good idea.

Mrs Gillan: I am very grateful for that positive response. I raised the idea with the interim construction commissioner several weeks ago, so obviously it has filtered into the system. A hotline would be of great assistance to my colleagues who are here, as well as to me and other colleagues in Buckinghamshire.

Andrew Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend for that comment. This is an important national project, but it has such implications for people on the line of route that we have to ensure that we treat everybody with openness, transparency and respect. Making sure that colleagues are informed, so that they can deal with their constituents and make the case for their areas effectively, is a key part of that.

I will certainly look into the consultation process. We have already made some changes for the consultation on phase 2b. I was able to do that before the announcements were made last week. I will always take feedback from colleagues and if we can improve things, we certainly will do. We have to treat people fairly and I am sure that the significant efforts that are being made now will pay dividends later.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stone asked about the timing of the Bill and whether people will have the opportunity to petition. We are looking to introduce the hybrid Bill for phase 2a next year and that will, indeed, offer residents the opportunity to petition, as was the case with phase 1.

As well as the measures I mentioned earlier, the publicity for the consultation took the form of leaflets distributed to households within 1 km of the proposed route, alongside information packs sent to public libraries and parish councils, with the request that the documents be made available at all community locations. Furthermore, briefings were provided for local authorities and parish councils.

There has often been feedback that the consultation events are not handled professionally. I have not been to the consultation events that have taken place for phase 2a, but I know that HS2 Ltd has always arranged training for staff to prepare them and clearly set out the conduct required for such events. I am confident that in the overwhelming number of cases, staff conduct themselves well, but any time any colleague has any concerns, I will be extremely available to hear them and will take them up with HS2 Ltd.
On the wider implications of the process we are discussing, I assure all colleagues that HS2 Ltd will continue to build on the good engagement work that has been done thus far as it goes forward with the phase 2 consultation.

Sir William Cash: I just want to be sure that my hon. Friend gets on to the Whitmore and Baldwins Gate question, because we are running out of time and I want to hear what he has to say on that.

Andrew Jones: We are, indeed, running out of time. I will go through all the points that have been raised with HS2 Ltd and ask it to contact my hon. Friend to give him an individual technical briefing on the subject. We have only seconds left, but the key thing is to treat this matter properly and not rush it. We will go through all the points he has mentioned.

I can quickly respond to the point about Stoke. We have asked HS2 Ltd to consider how we can have a service for Stoke, through to Macclesfield. That is a work in progress that has just been commissioned by the Secretary of State.

Debates such as these give us the opportunity to air and discuss the impact of HS2 on communities. They are vital in ensuring that we get the project right locally and nationally. This project will deliver for the whole country. I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to highlight all that is going on. I know he will continue to be a resolute advocate on behalf of his constituents, as will my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham. As the Minister for HS2, I will always be available to be contacted and will always take up the issues they raise on their behalf.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.
The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR Speaker in the Chair]

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.

Awards for Valour (Protection) Bill


Second Reading

9.34 am

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

To undermine our veterans is wrong, to claim to be a military hero when you are not is wrong, and to steal valour is wrong. That is why I am introducing the Bill. I thank the Ministry of Defence and the Government, as well as Her Majesty’s Opposition, for their prompt and full support for the Bill. In addition, I thank the Select Committee on Defence for its professional report, and colleagues for forgoing their constituency commitments today in order to be here to debate the Bill.

The point of the Bill is to protect genuine heroes. People should not be able to claim they are heroes when they are not. There is rightly a heightened respect for veterans and the service they have given this country. That, coupled with the increased accessibility of second-hand medals and insignia, has led, in my estimation, to an increase in the number of people stealing valour from genuine heroes. The so-called Walter Mittys parading themselves at Remembrance Day service parades and elsewhere sporting medals they have not earned not only is insulting but undermines those veterans who have legitimately earned them.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing the Bill to the House. As someone who served in the military many years ago as an officer, I would like to say how important it is to all servicemen and women to regard badges of rank and decorations as sacrosanct. He is doing a great service to all those in the armed forces by bringing forward the Bill.

Gareth Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his contribution. Since I introduced the Bill, I have been touched by the number of ex-servicemen and current servicemen who have contacted me to express exactly that sentiment, and who feel that they are being undermined and that the value of medals is being chipped away and eroded by those who are undeserving and yet claim otherwise.

People must have confidence, when they see the magnificent sight of veterans proudly wearing their medals at Remembrance Day parade services and elsewhere, that those medals were legitimately awarded to those who sport them. I will give the House one categorical assurance about the Bill. Nothing in it will cut across the wonderful custom of families, out of respect and honour to the recipients, wearing medals that their loved ones earned.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that there must be a clear definition of “family member” to ensure that there is no room for manoeuvre or any loopholes in the system for people to abuse?

Gareth Johnson: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. There are two ways of trying to preserve the right—I would call it that—of family members to sport medals. One is to be very definitive and to list everybody who qualifies as a family member, as the Children Act 1989 attempts to do, and the other is to keep it open and allow the courts some discretion.

The difficulty with trying to define exactly who is a family member is that we will always miss people out. Is the boyfriend of a niece a family member? It probably depends on the circumstances. The list goes on. I have deliberately taken the view, therefore, that there should be a wide definition of “family member” in order to allow the courts to decide whether it applies. No doubt, that point will be debated in Committee. It is something I am open-minded about. I do not want to be over-prescriptive. I just want to preserve this great custom and ensure that loved ones and family members can still sport, often on the right breast, the medals earned by others in their family of whom they are rightly proud.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The only position for medals that have not been earned is on the right breast. Anyone wearing a medal on the left breast has earned that medal.

Gareth Johnson: I am well aware of that custom. The Bill is not intended to deal with people who have wardrobe malfunctions when looking in the mirror. What I want it to do is to catch only those who deliberately intend to deceive others.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a clear point. Does he agree that, when our servicemen and women show great courage and bravery, they should be allowed to wear the medals awarded to them? Marines in my constituency have come to me because some of them are not currently allowed to wear their NATO Africa medal, as it does not meet the “risk and rigour” standards, yet those marines have faced attacks from rocket-propelled grenades and assaults from ships. I wonder whether that may be relevant.

Gareth Johnson: My hon. Friend touches on an interesting issue. I have discovered that the medal system is incredibly complex. My Bill would deal only with people who are intending to deceive others—people who are being fraudulent in what they are portraying...
about themselves. If people have legitimately earned those medals, they will not be caught by the Bill’s provisions.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): I support the Bill, but could my hon. Friend provide a comment or an assurance—that this may be an issue that will need to be dealt with in Committee if the Bill progresses—about those who have mental health difficulties and problems, who are not being malicious but just out of ill health find themselves often wearing a medal to which they are not entitled? We should deal with people in that category who have no maliciousness in their action in a particularly sensitive and understanding way.

**Gareth Johnson**:

My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Bill is not intended to criminalise people who have severe mental health problems. The law, and particularly the criminal law, is used to deal with this situation. I shall come on to the issue in more detail later in my speech, but the Bill is not an attempt to criminalise people who do not have the mental capacity to form the necessary intent to commit the offence. This is a specific intent offence, so someone who is unable to create that intent in their own mind will not be caught by the provisions. There is also an overarching provision that no criminal proceedings would follow unless it were in the public interest for that to happen. That applies in all elements of the criminal law, and it is often used with respect to cases involving people mentioned by my hon. Friend.

**Mrs Sherryl Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): My constituent, Surgeon-Captain Rick Jolly, was decorated by both sides in the Falklands war, but had to get the permission of Her Majesty to wear both medals. Does that not show that we should respect the medals that are given for valour? I completely agree with the Bill and I would encourage all Members to support it today.

**Gareth Johnson**: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention. She rightly makes the point that it is not. I think that illustrates that my intention is to preserve the custom that family members are able to wear medals for their own advantage, seeking the respect that comes from them to advance their own cause. I am thinking of a councillor in Thanet who wore medals that he had not earned in order to help his election campaign. I am sure that we will hear more about that later from my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay). I am thinking of Roger Day, who marched past hundreds of veterans and their families wearing numerous medals that he had not won. Yet no prosecution could be brought against him and many other people because, quite simply, as things stand, behaving like that is not against the law.

Estimating exactly how widespread the problem is can be very difficult. There are no arrests and so no records. The Naval Families Federation recently surveyed over 1,000 of its members and found that around a third of them had experienced these Walter Mitty-type characters. The Walter Mitty Hunters Club—I have no connection or association with the organisation—claims to receive something in the order of 20 to 30 complaints a week. I understand that it is investigating 70 cases that have been brought to its attention.

I am president of my local Royal British Legion group in Greenhithe in Kent, and there have been two instances there of people pretending to be decorated veterans when they had not even served in Her Majesty’s armed forces. This cannot go on. If we leave things unchecked, we will get to a situation where trust in the whole medal system and trust in valour evaporates. I have been contacted on numerous occasions by veterans who have recounted to me their experiences of witnessing impostors at remembrance services. They feel deeply hurt, offended and insulted by the actions of these individuals. The problem is genuine and, anecdotally, it seems to be increasing.
We therefore need the deterrent factor that the Bill would provide, and I think it right for the offence to carry a term of imprisonment as well as a fine. I have suggested a three-month period; that would mirror the legislation referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), which is no longer in force. Of course, any sentence would be up to the courts, but making the offence imprisonable would allow them to impose community-based penalties that would not be available if the offence were subject only to a fine. It is right, proportionate and appropriate for a term of imprisonment to be available to the courts at their discretion, for the worst cases, should that prove necessary. I should make it clear, however, that although the Bill provides for a three-month sentence, it would not be possible to impose a sentence of imprisonment in a youth court: a custodial sentence would not be available there, and I am content with that. It would be quite rare for people aged 17 and under to fall foul of the law, but I also think it right not to provide for their imprisonment, purely because of their age.

Unusually, I am endeavouring to introduce a law that has applied in the past, but does not apply today. Stolen valour has a history in this country. After the first world war, Winston Churchill introduced the offence as Secretary of War. He said at the time:

“We want to make certain that when we see a man wearing...a medal, that we see a man whom everybody in the country is proud of.”—[Official Report, 2 April 1919; Vol. 114, c. 1277.]

He was absolutely right. The same principle applies today, and it applies equally to the women who serve our country. The Armed Forces Act 2006 repealed the offence because it was a bit too messy and uncertain, but unfortunately it was not replaced at the time. That decision has been criticised by the Defence Committee. While it is possible to prosecute for fraud when monetary gain applies, or under the Uniforms Act 1894 if a full regimental uniform is worn, the law does not cover people who steal valour in the way that I have described, and public confidence can therefore be shaken.

**Bob Stewart:** I have met many people wearing SAS berets. An astonishing number of people walking around the streets appear to have been in the Special Air Service, but I reckon that one in 20 of them actually has.

**Gareth Johnson:** That is an important point, made by a distinguished and experienced veteran. I am told that pretending to have been a member of the Special Air Service is the most common example of people stealing valour from others in order to curry favour and win respect for themselves, and it is often done in a way that is deeply insulting. Veterans frequently have a good nose for people who are stealing valour from others, as I have observed in my local Royal British Legion club, where they sometimes notice that something is not right. That ability is often deployed to identify Walter Mitty characters of this kind, and if my Bill is passed, it could be used to prosecute them.

The stealing of valour has been recognised as a problem around the world. For instance, the Americans recently adopted their own Stolen Valor Act to protect recipients of the Purple Heart medal, who have developed as a result of people pretending that they had received it when they had not. In fact, very few countries do not have an equivalent of my Bill, and I am not aware that any that have such legislation have felt it necessary to repeal it. I think we can deduce that the law has worked well in other countries, so why should it not work here? Why can we not have our version of stolen valour legislation, which has worked well in America and elsewhere, and which I think we can be confident would work well in the United Kingdom?

We have a proud military history. Each of the regions that make up the United Kingdom has contributed significantly to our armed forces, and has excelled in wars over the years. It therefore seems wrong to me that we do not afford veterans the protection that they are given in so many other countries. Many people braver than I have put their neck on the line for this country. We owe the freedoms that we enjoy in this Chamber to those who have fallen and those who risked their life for us. Indeed, we are overlooked, at either end of the Chamber, by the shields of colleagues who gave their life for us in one of the world wars. We cannot allow that valour to be stolen. We cannot allow the public to lose trust in our veterans, and we cannot allow their memories to be undermined. I therefore ask the House to give the Bill a Second Reading.
determine the mental state of such people. That is normal and proper practice in other parts of the criminal code. I therefore do not think that mental health issues would be a problem if the Bill were passed.

The main reason why I am supporting my hon. Friend’s Bill is for its deterrent effect. We have no deterrents, following the Armed Forces Act 2006, which sadly dropped the old Army Act 1955 offence; prior to that, there was the offence in Winston Churchill’s Act after the first world war. Apart from having a deterrent effect, the Bill will create certainty for the public: we will be absolutely sure when we see veterans that we can pay an appropriate tribute to them and honour them, knowing that they are the real deal and have earned what they are displaying. So there are two benefits to my hon. Friend’s Bill.

There was discussion about the appropriate penalty. Three months’ imprisonment has been suggested, although there could be an opportunity for community payback—a certain number of hours worked in the community. There could be an opportunity for community payback.

Gareth Johnson: I mentioned Roger Day; he was the last person prosecuted under the 1955 Act, although the Act had expired a few days beforehand. The court gave him community service, as it was at the time, which shows that courts often feel that a community penalty is appropriate, but this has to be an imprisonable offence in order to make those penalties available to the court.

Craig Mackinlay: Absolutely; my hon. Friend gives a good account of his knowledge of the law in such cases.

What greater community payback could there be for people convicted under my hon. Friend’s proposed legislation than to do service to war widows, perhaps, or war graves, or the great memorials around our country by repairing and cleansing them? I want to mention the case of Kevan or Konnor Collins in my constituency. He was elected as a UK Independence party councillor by repairing and cleansing them? I want to mention the title now as it is a laudable aim.

Simon Hoare: Belatedly offered an apology for his lies and deceit.

Bob Stewart: He would also have had to have served in practically all three services to have got those medals.

Craig Mackinlay: My hon. Friend highlights the ridiculousness of the situation. Mr Collins was ousted by campaigners, and later resigned as a Thanet councillor. He was further found to be a bigamist. He was a Walter Mitty character of enormous proportions. I would not usually mention such cases and rely on the privilege of this House, but Sky News has covered this, as have The Sun and the Isle of Thanet Gazette, and he has even belatedly offered an apology for his lies and deceit.

How can we solve this? The United States has created, under its 2013 Act, an online database. That might be a sensible route for us to take, but love it or loathe it, the great internet already affords us a great deal of information about people who claim to be what they are not.

There is an international dimension to this. This country would not be doing something unusual through the Bill; we would be aligning ourselves with what happens among the rest of our friends in the EU, and also in Australia and the United States. For the deterrent effect, such an offence, which was taken away in 2006, is long overdue. I very much support the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford, and I hope that his Bill makes progress today.

10.4 am

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on bringing forward this Bill. I am afraid I cannot be as enthusiastic about it as him or my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay). It seems to me to be in line with the tradition of private Member’s Bills, which usually have two things in common. The first is a worthy sentiment; almost every private Member’s Bill that comes before the House on a Friday has behind it a worthy sentiment and I do not think anyone can doubt the worthiness of this sentiment. The other thing they usually have is an element, great or slight, of gesture politics, and the Bill falls into that category as well.

I want to be clear from the start that the idea behind the Bill is admirable; war veterans deserve our utmost respect, appreciation and support—I hope that goes without saying. I hope it also goes without saying, but I want to be crystal clear about this as well, that seeking to help them, given all they have done and sacrificed for us, should be an absolute priority. But unfortunately the Bill is not the necessary nor helpful, and I am concerned it will disproportionately affect people with mental health issues and even veterans themselves, which would be a very unfortunate unintended consequence of what is a laudable aim.

I will come on to the Defence Committee’s report on the Bill a bit later, but I want to mention the title now as it is highly relevant: “Exposing Walter Mitty: The Awards for Valour (Protection) Bill”. Unfortunately, exposing Walter Mitty is not all the Bill would do; it would criminalise Walter Mitty, and he could face three months in prison.

The situation astounds me. I stand here week after week—as you will have heard, Mr Speaker, far too many times for your own good—arguing that we should send more people to prison: people who have perhaps committed burglaries, robberies and other such crimes who get community sentence after community sentence and never get sent to prison. Everyone always tells me, “We send far too many people to prison. It’s absolutely terrible; we should send fewer to prison.” But here we are trying to send people to prison for some boastful exaggeration, and everybody in the House says, “Absolutely marvellous. Yes, of course, we should send all these people to prison, never mind the robbers, burglars and all the others never sent to prison. Let’s put all these people in prison; let’s make this an imprisonable offence.”

I am astounded by this change in Members’ attitudes.

Simon Hoare: But does that not underscore the seriousness and sensitivity of the issue our hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) is trying to address in the Bill, and explain why so many of us support it? We are dealing here with a special category
of people who, in many instances, have given their lives to protect and preserve all we hold decent in this country, and therefore to lump them in with victims of burglary and the like—important though they are—is to compare apples with oranges.

Philip Davies: I am surprised that my hon. Friend seems to think this is more serious than people committing a burglary or a robbery. We are going to have to agree on that point, and I do not think many people would agree with him. But if that is the case, we must then ask why the punishment is only three months in prison. If this is so serious and one of the most terrible crimes anyone could possibly commit, why are we not talking about 10 years in prison, or eight years, perhaps? Why only three months in prison for such a heinous crime? Hon. Members cannot have it both ways: they cannot say it is the most obnoxious crime ever and then say, “Actually, we only want three months in prison as a maximum punishment.” People will have to decide whether this is a serious offence or not.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Does my hon. Friend agree, however, that the Bill sends a message to our armed forces that we not only respect them, but value the work they do?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is right, but I would like to have £1 for every time on a Friday I hear somebody say, “We want to pass this Bill to send a message.” Well, actually we can stand here and send a message: we can all say how terrible it is if somebody wears a medal they are not entitled to, and we have then sent a message. We are not sending a message here; we are passing an Act of Parliament. We are talking about putting someone in prison. That is not sending a message; that is doing something far more drastic.

Gareth Johnson: Is my hon. Friend aware that domestic burglary carries a maximum sentence of 14 years and that robbery carries a maximum life sentence? This offence would, if the Bill went through, carry a sentence of three months. I believe that that is proportionate, and we would not wish to discourage this practice.

Philip Davies: I appreciate that that is my hon. Friend’s view, but I want to set out why it is not my view.

The current legal position is neatly summed up by the Ministry of Defence’s response to an e-petition in May last year, which stated:

“The Government does not believe that the UK requires an equivalent of the USA’s Stolen Valor Act...”

The Stolen Valor Act 2013 makes it a federal crime to fraudulently wear uniforms or medals, or by pretending of, or in connection with any fraud.

As far as current UK prosecutions are concerned, the details are a bit sketchy, to say the least. The Defence Committee reports in its written evidence that the “MOJ has provided data in relation to prosecutions under the Uniforms Act 1894. Data on a number of other offences was requested but was either not held or not held in a form that allowed the types of offence requested to be distinguished.”

To illustrate this point, I shall give the House the numbers of people proceeded against in magistrates courts and found guilty under the Uniforms Act 1894. There were none at all in 2011, 2013 or 2015, and one was found guilty in 2012 and one in 2014, so this is hardly a big issue. “Next to none” would probably be the best phrase to use.

I submitted freedom of information requests to West Yorkshire police and the Metropolitan police to see what information I could gather about the use of existing legislation by their forces. The reply from West Yorkshire police stated:

“A search was conducted for all arrests which were made between 1st August 2011 and 31st July 2016 inclusive and contained any of the keywords “medal”, “military” and “uniform” within the arrest circumstances description. As well as a search for arrests between 1st August 2011 and 31st July 2016 that were made for an offence under Sections 2 or 3 of the Uniforms Act 1894...a manual assessment was then carried out to find any records which related to the arrest of any individual wearing war or valour medals they were not entitled to wear. No such records were found.”

The Metropolitan Police Service responded:

“To locate the information relevant to your request, searches were conducted...The searches failed to locate any information relevant to your request, therefore, the information you have requested is not held by the MPS.”

So, if the existing legislation appears to be used infrequently, as we think, we need to consider carefully the extent of the problem that this Bill seeks to address.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I always like the breath of fresh air that he blows on to anything smacking of political correctness. As he has referred to the Defence Committee’s report, may I draw to his attention the testimony of Dr Hugh Milroy, the chief executive of Veterans Aid, one of the longest-lasting charities dealing with veterans affairs, which was set up just after the first world war? He says that incidents of false medal wearing are “a daily occurrence” and that “we have no sense of the enormity of it”. Wearing uniforms incorrectly is not a daily occurrence, and that is not what the Bill is about.

Philip Davies: I am coming on to the point that my right hon. Friend has just raised. I want to praise the Defence Committee, which did a brilliant job in looking at this matter. I shall give the Committee much praise throughout my speech and there are certain points in...
his report that I want to draw the House’s attention to, including the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford said this to the Committee’s inquiry:

“We have had a couple of instances of people who have, in a rather Walter Mitty style, pretended they have received honours when that is not the case. I don’t think it is untypical of a constituency to have a couple of people who have behaved in that way. My understanding from the media is that there are hundreds of people who have been behaving in the manner which the Bill seeks to address.”

The Royal British Legion stated in its written evidence to the Defence Committee that

“in the Legion's own experience, instances of so-called ‘Walter Mitty’ appear to be rare. Indeed, having spoken with colleagues in the Legion’s welfare department, whilst the Legion has previously been approached for crisis support by individuals purporting to have served in Her Majesty’s Armed Forces, but were found to have no valid Service number, only a handful of such instances can be recalled. Nationally, there are no reliable statistics to reveal the true scale of the problem, although the media will from time to time expose individuals who have been caught impersonating a member of the Armed Forces.”

The written evidence to the Select Committee from the Royal Air Force Families Federation stated, when asked whether the deceitful wearing of medals and decorations was widespread and a growing problem:

“We have no evidence either way but instinctively we would say it is not widespread...Whether or not it is a growing problem is hard to judge—any perceived increase may simply be down to wider exposure of incidents via social media. On the other hand, public awareness and the extensive media coverage of recent campaigns...may ‘encourage’ some individuals to claim to have been awarded medals to which they are not entitled.”

So it seems that this is not as big an issue as my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford would have us believe.

Simon Hoare: If I understand my hon. Friend correctly, he is taking us down a particularly dangerous path in saying that something should be made illegal only if there is a trigger quantum that makes such legislation necessary. The House could easily make something illegal for which there was evidence of only one occurrence. That would not make it any the less heinous, simply because there had been only one occurrence.

Philip Davies: The problem is that my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford said that this was a growing problem. I did not notice my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) intervening on him to say that it did not matter whether it was a growing problem or not. People are making the case that we need to pass this Bill because this is a growing problem, but there is no evidence for that. As I say, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset did not make his perfectly valid point to my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford when he was making his case for the Bill.

Looking at the position taken by past Governments, it is interesting also to consider the historical context of this matter. It was an offence under the Army Act 1955 for people to wear medals and decorations that they had not been awarded if they were used in such a way as to be “calculated to deceive”. That changed as a result of the Armed Forces Act 2006, which repealed the Army Act 1955 and the Air Force Act 1955, in which the offence had originally been specified. The Defence Committee inquiry asked the Ministry of Defence why section 197 of each of those Acts had been repealed and not replaced. It asked for the rationale behind that decision. The MOD’s response was:

“Section 197(1) created three separate offences. They included two offences of wearing any decoration, badge, wound stripe or emblem authorised for wear by the Sovereign, or anything closely resembling them ‘without authority’. It was not clear who could give the necessary permission. The need for authority in all cases suggested that none of these could be worn even in a theatrical performance, film, re-enactment or fancy dress without permission. Nor was it clear whether it applied only to current badges, stripes and emblems or also precluded the wearing of historic ones. Requiring specific authority for such events was considered to be excessive, and indeed was no longer insisted on. The third offence was of falsely representing entitlement to wear such badges and emblems. Section 197 would also have required considerable amendment.”

The MOD went on to say:

“These provisions in the 1955 Acts were not included in the Armed Forces Act 2006, not only because of the inconvenience of the need for ‘authority’ to wear them, but also because it was considered that the important element of the offences was to present people from making a financial or other gain dishonestly by wearing uniform, medals or by representing themselves to in the Armed Forces or entitled to a medal. It was decided that this was more clearly and comprehensively dealt with by the general offence of fraud under the Fraud Act 2006. That offence also carries a more appropriate sentence of up to 10 years’ imprisonment on trial before the Crown Court. It was also considered that an offence based on an intent to deceive which did not involve fraud (for example, where there was no attempt to make a financial or property gain, or cause someone loss) was likely in practice to cause difficult questions of proof.”

That is perfectly relevant to this debate.

As I understand it from my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet, the example we have been given in support of the Bill is that of the clearly disreputable person who made preposterous claims to become a councillor. That seems to be covered perfectly by the Fraud Act 2006, because he wanted to take a job, which came with some pay, through dishonest means. As that is already covered under the 2006 Act, the Bill would make absolutely no difference, apart from the fact that such a person could not be treated as severely by the courts if prosecuted under this legislation as they could be under the 2006 Act. Hon. Members who are using that case to make the argument for the Bill are saying that they would want that person to be treated less severely by the courts than they could be under the existing legislation. That seems a rather bizarre way of making the case for the Bill.

Previous speakers making the case for the Bill have said that we must fall in line with other countries. A few months ago, I asked the House of Commons Library to let me know what happened in countries around the world. It came up with some detailed and enlightening research on the subject, some of which is summarised in the excellent research paper that accompanies the Bill. I suspect, Mr Speaker, that you would not want me to read out what happens in every other country with regard to this matter; I suspect that you would want me to make slicker progress than that. Tempted though I am to highlight what happens in other countries, given that that was given as one of the great reasons why we need legislation in this country—

Mr Speaker: Order. I do hope that the hon. Gentleman will speak as freely as he ordinarily does.
**Philip Davies:** I am grateful for that guidance, Mr Speaker. The point I would make is that there are massive variations in what other countries do; it is not one-way traffic, as one might have thought from the speeches we heard earlier. For example, in Australia, the maximum penalty for fraudulently wearing a medal is up to six months in prison or a fine of 5,400 Australian dollars; in Austria, the maximum penalty is a €220 fine; and in Belgium it is a €1,000 fine. In fact, the maximum penalty in most of the countries I can see on the Library’s list is a fine, rather than a prison sentence. I do not think people should get carried away with the idea that if we are not sending people to prison for this offence, we are out of step with the rest of the world. That is not the case.

**Dr Julian Lewis:** To save my hon. Friend a little bit of breath, I should put on the record the fact that there is an appendix to the Defence Committee’s report that sets out the long list of countries that have criminalised the fraudulent wearing of medals, several of which have sentences ranging from a fine up to six months or a year in prison. Surely the point is that we are debating whether the Bill should be given a Second Reading. If my hon. Friend feels so strongly that a prison term is disproportionate, it is up to him to apply to join the Bill Committee and then argue to amend it, rather than to try to prevent from becoming illegal something that so many other countries—two pages’ worth—have made illegal, whether punishable by a fine, prison, or a sliding scale between the two.

**Philip Davies:** As I have been setting out, I object not only to the sentence, but to the purpose of the Bill. The sentence is part of the Bill, as my right hon. Friend knows. He said he has two pages of countries that have made this an offence; given the number of countries there are around the world, he must therefore accept that the majority of them have not made it an offence.

**Dr Lewis:** Just for the sake of it: Australia has made the fraudulent wearing of medals an offence; Austria has made it an offence; Belgium has made it an offence; and Canada has made it an offence. It is not known whether Croatia has made it an offence, but the Czech Republic has made it an offence; Denmark has an unknown fine scale; Estonia has made it an offence; Finland has not made it an offence; and France has made it an offence. Germany and Greece have an unknown fine, but it is still an offence in both countries. Hungary has made it an offence and Ireland has made it an offence. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that neither Latvia nor Lithuania has made it an offence, but Luxembourg has as have the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Russia. In Slovakia it is not an offence, but in Slovenia it is, and in Sweden and the United States it is an offence. I think that covers most of the main bases and should reassure my hon. Friend.

**Philip Davies rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. May I gently say to the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who chairs the Defence Committee with such aplomb and distinction, that his intervention was somewhat longer than the list?

**Philip Davies:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. What my right hon. Friend said is right, but if he thinks that that is the full list of the countries around the world, he is doing his geographical knowledge a disservice. As he well knows, there are far more countries than that around the world.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Does not that great big long list that has just been read out indicate that many countries have such offences with prison sentences and fines? That acts as a deterrent, but without the Bill we have nothing.

**Philip Davies:** My hon. Friend says that we have nothing, but I have just pointed out that we already have legislation to cover the one case we have heard as the basis for the Bill: it is called the Fraud Act 2006, which covers people who are trying to make any kind of financial gain from the fraudulent use of medals. If the point is having a deterrent, what are we trying to deter? We have not yet heard any credible cases, apart from one that is already covered by the 2006 Act.

A range of offences is covered among all the countries listed. There is a distinction between wearing medals, wearing medals with an intent to deceive in any way, and wearing medals with a view to making a financial gain. I am not going to encourage my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) to rise again to break down the list he read out, making the distinction between those three different categories of offence. He grouped them all conveniently together, but as he well knows they cannot all be grouped together so neatly, because they include different categories of offence.

As we know, and as I have made clear, there is already protection in this country under fraud legislation. As my right hon. Friend said, some of the countries that do not appear to have any offence relating to the fraudulent wearing of medals include Finland, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia. I shall deal with the penalties in the Bill later, but it is clear that there are different penalties in different countries. Of the countries that do have a criminal offence of the kind in the Bill, some have only financial penalties and in some the offence is imprisonable.

**The Royal British Legion** notes in its written evidence to the Defence Committee:

“We are aware that the Awards for Valour (Protection) Bill is modelled, to some degree, on the Stolen Valour Act, which was first introduced in the United States in 2005, before being repealed and significantly amended in 2013. The provisions of the 2013 Stolen Valour Act are very similar to the provisions on false representation found in the UK’s Fraud Act 2006. Both pieces of legislation state that impersonation of members of the Armed Forces is only a criminal offence if it is used to make a financial gain or cause a financial loss. In short, simply claiming military awards, service, or injuries to gain sympathy or recognition, while certainly disappointing, is not in itself illegal under the US legislation. The original 2005 Stolen Valour Act had sought to punish all those who lie about their military service, but it was struck down by the Supreme Court as it was deemed to violate the First Amendment.”

This Bill seems to extend the scope of arresting someone for wearing a medal beyond those who aim to benefit tangibly via fraud to those who aim to benefit in an intangible way, such as to gain respect. The situation in America is a good example of how that could be unworkable in addition to being a step too far.
The Stolen Valor Act of 2005 came into US law in 2006. Its purpose was "to amend title 18, United States Code, to enhance protections relating to the reputation and meaning of the Medal of Honor and other military decorations and awards", which is similar to the purpose of today’s Bill. The law made it a federal misdemeannour to falsely represent oneself as having received any US military decoration or medal. If convicted, individuals could be imprisoned for up to six months, except for falsely claiming to be a medal of honour awardee, in which case the imprisonment could be for up to a year.

However, in 2012 the law was struck down by the US Supreme Court as a result of United States v. Alvarez. Xavier Alvarez had falsely claimed that he had received a medal of honour and thereby violated the Stolen Valor Act of 2005, resulting in a $5,000 fine, three years on probation and 416 hours of community service. The penalties in the US tend to be sterner than in the UK for most offences. Subsequent appeals eventually reached the US Supreme Court, which ruled that lying about military heroics was constitutionally protected speech unless there was intent to gain some benefit or something of value by fraud. When announcing the Supreme Court’s decision, Justice Kennedy wrote:

“The Nation well knows that one of the costs of the First Amendment is that it protects the speech we detest as well as the speech we embrace. Though few might find respondent’s statements anything but contemptible, his right to make those statements is protected by the Constitution’s guarantee of freedom of speech and expression. The Stolen Valor Act infringes upon speech protected by the First Amendment.”

It seems as though we are trying to go the opposite way from the US. Following that Supreme Court decision, new legislation was drafted in the form of the Stolen Valor Act of 2013, which, in an effort to meet the Supreme Court’s objections to the 2005 Act, made it a federal crime for an individual falsely to claim to be a recipient of any of several specified military decorations or medals with the intent of obtaining money, property or another tangible benefit. However, as I have made clear, that is already covered under UK fraud legislation.

On the US situation, the Defence Committee’s report states:

“Whereas Alvarez was specifically concerned with the offences relating to false representation, the position in the United States concerning the physical wearing of medals remains uncertain. As well as amending the scope of the offences relating to fraudulent representation, the 2013 Act also removed the word ‘wears’ from the Federal Code. Litigation is currently ongoing to determine whether placing restrictions on wearing medals to which one is not entitled violates the First Amendment in the same way as the offences of fraudulent representation which were struck down.”

In the over-lengthy intervention of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East, he prayed in aid the United States for having the law in place, with penalties of up to a year in prison, but that law is not in place, as he well knows, as the Defence Committee made abundantly clear and as the Alvarez case stated. The law in the United States is exactly the same as the law in the UK’s Fraud Act 2006. My right hon. Friend must have known that when he made his intervention and tried to pray in aid the United States.

Like the US Supreme Court in its judgment, I believe in freedom, warts and all. That sometimes means the freedom to do daft, stupid, even annoying things without the threat of being criminalised. I would hate for such a case to be taken to the European Court of Human Rights not only because I would rather we had nothing to do with such a Court, but because it is avoidable. We managed to stop the use of insulting words and behaviour from becoming a criminal act under public order legislation, and it seems as though criminalising people for pretending that they are servicemen is similar in nature. We heard that the reason for the legislation is that people are offended by what other people do. There are all sorts of things that go on in this country to which people take offence—far too many in my opinion. I get very offended by how easily other people are offended, and I am unsure where being too easily offended will take us when passing laws. Are we going to pass a law to stop any offence ever being taken? That would be a ridiculous state of affairs, but that is the motivation behind this Bill: we want to pass a law because some people are offended. If that is the way that this House is going to go—I fear we already have in too many cases—it will be a sad day for the House of Commons.

The Defence Committee further considered the point following the issues of freedom of expression that arose in America, stating:

“The ECHR case of Donaldson v. United Kingdom demonstrated that it is possible for the outward wearing of badges or devices to be considered as ‘expression’ for the purposes of Article 10, although emphasis in this case was placed on the device in question being worn as an expression of the applicant’s political views, which may not be so straightforward where medals are concerned. Even where the rights in Article 10(1) are engaged, Article 10(2) sets out the conditions in which it is legitimate for these rights to be restricted, including for the purposes of preventing disorder or crime (such as fraud) or to protect the reputation or rights of others (which could include the legitimate recipients of awards). The inclusion of an intent to deceive as an element of the offence, and the defences relating to family members would also be likely to assist in the legislation passing the Court’s test of proportionality.”

The competing rights are clear. We already have an offence for the purposes of fraud, but if the intent of the deception is simply to impress a woman in a bar, the threat of three months in prison may suddenly seem rather extreme.

I also asked the Library how effective the legislation was in other countries and how often it was used; the answer was even more illuminating. It is interesting to see how many times the offence was committed in some of the countries with the stiffest penalties. I will not read out the situation in every single country, Mr Speaker, because that would test your patience, but it is pertinent to point out some examples for the purposes of this debate. In the United States, federal prosecution statistics are published each year by the US Department of Justice. The latest figures, which are for 2012, were released last year. Even then, it has not been possible to ascertain specific figures for successful prosecutions or instances when individuals were arrested but not charged are those reported in the media or on websites dedicated to exposing such individuals.
The thrust of my speech is that the media highlighting such behaviour is sufficient. To expose such people for what they are and open them up to ridicule is the best way of dealing with them, not a whole Crown Prosecution Service prosecution that leads to such people going to prison, which strikes me as rather ridiculous.

In Canada, similar to the US, statistics are compiled on criminal code offences by the Public Prosecution Service of Canada and grouped into categories. It is therefore difficult to obtain figures for such offences as it is unclear where the information is held. The only examples of prosecutions in Canada that the Library could find were those that were reported in the media. There was one particularly high-profile case in 2014-15 involving Franck Gervais, but that related to impersonating a soldier at a Remembrance Day ceremony in uniform, not to wearing a medal.

Simon Hoare: To the best of my knowledge, my hon. Friend has spent all his adult political life asserting the rights of this House and this country to be sovereign and independent. I am slightly confused as to why he is now praying in aid what other countries do and saying we should predicate what we do in this place on it.

Philip Davies: I am not entirely sure whether my hon. Friend has been following the debate thus far, but it seems to me that what I am doing for the benefit of him and others is demolishing bit by bit the points made by the people who are proposing this Bill. It is yet another of the arguments we have had for the Bill that we should be doing these things because that is what other countries are doing. That was one of the key planks of the opening remarks by my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford, but I did not hear my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset pull him up on that point and say it was irrelevant. If he had said at that point, “Why on earth are you on about other countries? That is irrelevant,” or if he had made a similar intervention after my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East had made similar points, I would have had a bit of sympathy with them, but it seems that he is now clutching at straws to try to defend a Bill that is becoming increasingly indefensible because it is completely unnecessary. I have been knocking down each point that has been made, and he cannot actually answer my points; all he can say is, “The point we made at the start also holds, this Bill is so weak, it is not really one of our main points.” I cannot second-guess what the real points are, and I can base my points only on the arguments that have been made by the people who propose the Bill. If people want to make other arguments, I am prepared to listen to those, but, thus far, I have not heard any. One of the key planks was that we have to do these things because other countries are doing them—my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East made that point himself.

With regard to Australia, the Library said:

“Australia’s Federal Prosecution Service publishes some slightly more useful figures but even then it is difficult to say with certainty that they were related to stolen valour. In 2012-13— the latest year for which figures are available—the service “dealt with 2 cases under the Defence Act 1903. However, the statistics don’t state what the specific offences were.”

The Library also states:

“much of the information found has been the result of media searches. For example, an article in The Herald Sun in September 2014 suggested that in the state of Victoria alone, over the last ten years... five people have been charged by police with impersonating a returned soldier, two people have been charged with impersonating a member of the defence force and seven people have been charged with improper use of defence service decoration.”

In New Zealand, statistical information of this nature is presented in the same way. The offence of wearing an unauthorised military decoration could feasibly be included in fraud, public order or miscellaneous offences in the country’s database, so it is difficult to pinpoint the extent of the problem.

In Australia and New Zealand there is a group called ANZMI—the Australian and New Zealand Military Imposters group—which is dedicated to exposing military imposters. It has a section on its website that lists individuals it considers to be military imposters. The information it provides is not official, and has not necessarily led to a prosecution, so it should be treated with some caution. It does not appear that there are lots of prosecutions for all offences, never mind for the offence of wearing a medal.

Some people who wear medals to deceive will be evil characters—most likely with the intention of gaining something for themselves. That will be something financial in a lot of cases, or it may be to impress other people. The ones who set out to deceive for non-monetary purposes must have a different reason for doing so—maybe to gain respect, to big themselves up or to attract a member of the opposite, or the same, sex. Who knows?

However, I am concerned that people with mental health issues may be disproportionately affected by this offence, rather than by the fraud offence.

Craig Mackinlay: I thank my hon. Friend for the list of countries that have already enacted similar pieces of legislation. He finds very few cases of people being taken to court because of them. Is that not entirely the purpose of the Bill—to have a powerful deterrent effect? Given the small number of cases abroad, that legislation has obviously worked.

Philip Davies: The problem with that argument, attractive though it is superficially, is that we have not been able to find a great many cases of these things happening in the UK when there is no legislation in place. It seems that these things are just as rare in countries such as ours, that do not have legislation, as in countries that have legislation. In fact, I suspect that one reason why many countries do not have legislation is that nobody has ever found this to be a problem. That is the whole reason why many things are not legislated for in countries; things tend to be legislated on when there is seen to be a problem, and something needs to be done. The fact that nothing is happening in countries with these laws would indicate that there must be even less happening in those countries without them. I do not follow the logic of my hon. Friend’s position.

Rebecca Pow: I am coming at this very much as a layman, but my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) clearly indicated that there is a problem, and that there are really serious cases of people wearing medals when they should not. Does that not clearly indicate that whatever legislation we have is not working, and that we need something stronger?

Philip Davies: I do not share my hon. Friend’s confidence in the evidence from my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford. I have not heard evidence that there is a problem; I have heard an assertion that there is a big
problem, but an assertion is very different from evidence. As I made clear earlier—I will not repeat myself, Mr Speaker, because you would not want me to—the Royal British Legion gave evidence to the Defence Committee saying that it did not think this was a big problem. Somebody coming to the House and asserting that there is a big problem is not what I would call good enough evidence for us to pass an Act of Parliament.

Let me come back to the point I was making about people with mental health problems. In its written evidence to the Defence Committee, the Royal British Legion said:

“...The Legion is not presently clear if the proposed Awards for Valour (Protection) Bill is intended to replicate the 2005 or 2013 Stolen Valour Act. If based on the former [which it now seems it is], careful consideration may need to be given as to how vulnerable people claiming to have served in the Armed Forces are punished under the terms of the Bill.”

During the inquiry, my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford said:

“...from my understanding there are different types of Walter Mitty characters. There are people who have serious mental health problems and need help, frankly.”

He went on to say:

“...Therefore, someone with a serious mental health problem who sports medals should not, as is often the case with criminal law in this situation, fall foul of the law to the point where they are incarcerated. The court will presumably go down a hospital order route.”

For me, that is still quite worrying and open to all kinds of risks when the case comes to court. Someone may have a mental health issue, but they might not be suitable for a court hospital order. The fact that they have simply worn medals that were not theirs to wear, even if no gain was made, could mean them facing anything up to a custodial sentence, and that is disproportionate. For people to be criminalised in this way is also a step too far. In some cases, it might be more difficult for someone with mental health issues to show that they did not intend to deceive, if they had no other explanation for wearing the medals.

I have tried to contact a number of mental health charities in recent days to see what their opinion might be on this subject. Unfortunately, none of them was able to give me a firm answer, as they had not been made aware of the Bill. However, I would be very interested to know whether they have any concerns or views on this. One issue with the Bill is that those mental health charities clearly have not been engaged and asked to give their perspective on whether it is proportionate, yet we are in danger of passing a piece of legislation today that may cause problems for people with mental health issues if we do not give it the proper scrutiny, or give those charities the opportunity to have their say. That troubles me greatly.

There is also the issue of Army veterans wearing medals that they did not win—not civilians, but ex-servicemen. Would we call that “stolen extra valour”? Do we really want to prosecute veterans under this legislation? That would surely be an ironic, unintended consequence. However, in the Bill, there is nothing to prevent somebody who served in the armed forces, and did win some medals, from being prosecuted for wearing the wrong medals. Surely the House does not want that to happen.

The Royal Air Force Families Federation touched on the issue in its submissions to the Defence Committee inquiry. It was asked:

“What is the attitude of current and former serving members of the Armed Forces to military imposters?”

It replied:

“We think the attitude of our people will really depend on individual circumstances, and will range from mild irritation and perhaps even amusement where an aged WWII Veteran has ‘upped’ his awards in an attempt to garner respect/recognition—through to outrage and anger at individuals who are trying to defraud people and profit from their quite deliberate and calculated action in claiming awards to which they are not entitled—the more so when the individual has not even served.”

That is a marvellous point. What the federation is saying is that those who big up what they have done are viewed by former service people with mild amusement, and as people whom they can have a laugh at. The people whom they get really angry about are those who do it to try to defraud others, and as I have said time and again, that is already covered by the Fraud Act 2006.

Those who support the Bill are using the armed forces to justify supporting something that the Bill does not deal with. They are the ones who are confusing apples with oranges, to repeat the phrase used by my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset. What former service people get really annoyed about is people who try to defraud others by being imposters. If the Bill is passed, those individuals who cause “mild irritation and perhaps even amusement” will certainly face a criminal record, and very possibly a custodial sentence. Should people have a criminal record and go to prison for causing mild irritation, and perhaps even amusement, to those people whom the Bill sets out to defend? Surely that is disproportionate.

I want to touch on the difference between impersonating a police officer and wrongly wearing a medal. The Defence Committee report states:

“...We also disagree that offences involving an intention to deceive which are not related to fraud may raise practical difficulties on questions of proof. Such offences do exist: for example, the offence of police impersonation under section 90 of the Police Act 1996. Therefore, we conclude that the legal concept of deception is sufficiently well established for this not to cause major difficulties.”

Some say that the Bill’s proposed offence is not a dramatic departure from that of impersonating a police officer, but I disagree: they are completely different issues. Wearing a medal to gain respect or kudos is one thing, but impersonating a police officer is totally different. Police officers have actual powers, which could be used in a most sinister way. Surely that is in a different league from someone wearing a medal that they are not entitled to wear.

Only this week, a good example was reported of the difference between that and impersonating a police officer. Apparently, a man pretending to be a police officer used a blue flashing light on the front of his BMW car to signal to a woman to pull over as she drove in Glenrothes in Scotland at about 20 minutes past 12 in the morning last Monday. He then told her to get out of the car. She became suspicious and drove off to call the real police, who confirmed that it was not one of their officers. What could have happened had she got out of
the car does not bear thinking about. Surely that cannot be classed in the same way as someone wearing a medal to which they are not entitled.

On the detail of the Bill, clause 1(1), which centres on the proposed offence of wearing medals or insignia without entitlement, states:

“Subject to subsection (5), a person who, with intent to deceive, wears, or represents themselves as being entitled to wear an item specified by or under subsection (2) which they are not entitled to wear is guilty of an offence.”

If you do not mind, Mr Speaker, I wish to emphasise that the important part of that subsection is the statement that

“a person who, with intent to deceive, wears, or represents themselves as being entitled to wear an item”

would be “guilty of an offence.” That means that somebody does not actually have to be wearing the medal in order to commit a criminal offence under the Bill, even though the Bill’s supporters have been telling us all along that what they want to stamp out is the behaviour of people wearing medals that they are not entitled to wear. The Bill would not just stamp out the wearing of medals; it also states that those who “represent themselves as being entitled to wear” a medal would be guilty of an offence.

The exchange between my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), and for Dartford during the Defence Committee inquiry dealt perfectly with that point. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View, asked:

“Would the Bill seek to criminalise the false representation of entitlement to a decoration or medal without a person even wearing it? Let me give you an example. Any links to any members of this Committee are purely coincidental”—

I should certainly say that, given that my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) is sitting directly in front of me—

“but say you’ve got Corporal Bob going down the pub and racketing up a not insignificant bar bill and gobbling off about winning a Military Cross in Normandy or whatever. Would this legislation apply in that case?”

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford replied:

“It would. The first subsection of this Bill indicates that someone who wears or represents themselves as being entitled to wear would be covered. So if someone goes along saying, ‘I won a Victoria Cross and look what’s happened to me; it’s dreadful; I need some help and assistance,’ they would fall foul of this law because they are making a false claim.”

The dialogue between my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East, who is Chairman of the Committee, and my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford was very stark. My right hon. Friend asked:

“Is that only if they are trying to gain something, or is it out of just boastfulness that they would still be caught?”

My hon. Friend replied:

“If it was carried out in a way that was intending to deceive people, it would be covered by this Bill.”

My right hon. Friend said:

“Even just to get the prestige or the credit.”

“Yes”, said my hon. Friend.

That means that someone who gets drunk and starts pretending that they have a medal that they have not earned, in any circumstances and in front of any other person, could be guilty of the proposed offence and face a prison sentence. Do we really think that that is proportionate? Are we really going to criminalise those people and potentially send them to prison? Is that really what this House intends to do?

Clause 1(2) states that the medals covered are

“a military medal or insignia meeting the requirements of subsection (4)…the George Cross, George Medal or Queen’s Gallantry Medal…any other medal or insignia awarded for vaour and designated by the Secretary of State by regulations…or an article or emblem resembling any item specified by or under paragraphs (a) to (c).”

Subsection (4) states:

“For the purposes of this section, ‘military medal or insignia’ means a medal, insignia, clasp, ribbon or bar or equivalent authorised by the Monarch or Defence Council awarded to a member of the United Kingdom’s armed forces in connection with an act or acts of valour.”

In its written evidence to the Defence Committee, the Royal British Legion wrote:

“Although the precise wording of the Bill is yet to be printed”—

that was the case at the time—

“the Legion understands that it aims ‘to prohibit the wearing or public display, by a person not entitled to do so, of medals or insignia awarded for vaour, with the intent to deceive’. As the Bill is further developed, the Legion would welcome assurances that those who wear the medals of deceased relatives, or replica medals of official awards they have been granted, will not be captured by the provisions of the Bill.”

We now know that they are not captured by the provisions. The RBL continued:

“The Committee may also want to consider how the Bill will accommodate the practice of wearing commemorative medals. As Committee members will no doubt be aware, many veterans feel strongly that their service during particular military campaigns or periods of operation should be formally recognised, yet there is often no official medal commemorating their service. Veterans have accordingly been known to commission and purchase commemorative medals that highlight their involvement in a particular campaign or demonstrate their service, although they are not officially recognised. Whilst the Legion does not endorse the wearing of commemorative medals on parade, we would not like to see such individuals punished under the terms of the proposed Bill, provided that their service record supports their involvement in a particular campaign.”

The definition of “medals” appears to be narrowly drawn, but it could easily be changed by future regulations, and it is not restricted to medals; it includes clasps, ribbons and bars and, perhaps even more importantly, anything resembling those items. My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford said:

“The challenge in drafting the Bill has been: where do you stop?”

I am sure that he knows where he wants to stop, but as with so many things, once something has started, it is very difficult to stop—

Proceedings interrupted (Standing Order No. 11(4)).
Child Sexual Abuse Cases: Metropolitan Police

11 am

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Urgent Question: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on the recent review conducted by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary into the Metropolitan police’s handling of child sexual abuse cases.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): Today, Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary published the findings of its child protection inspection of the Metropolitan Police Service. The findings of the inspection are extremely concerning; they indicate that the Metropolitan police has been failing in its duty to protect children from harm. Those are serious issues that the Government are clear must be urgently addressed.

It is not acceptable that almost three quarters of the child protection cases reviewed either needed improvement or were inadequate, nor is it acceptable that officers were placed in roles focused on tackling child exploitation with no training on how to deal with that crime. It is simply shocking to hear that the Metropolitan police had to be prompted to take action on cases even after serious issues had been identified that meant a child could be at risk.

Yesterday, my right hon. Friend spoke to the Home Secretary about this report and I spoke to the deputy Mayor. We were reassured that the Mayor’s office of policing and crime intends to take swift action to address those appalling failings. We are also clear that improving the police response to child protection will be a priority for the new commissioner when he or she is appointed.

In the light of the severity of HMIC’s findings, the Home Secretary has commissioned it to provide a quarterly update on action by the Metropolitan police to address the issues and recommendations in the report to help the Mayor ensure that immediate progress is made. The public will rightly expect to see progress being made quickly and will want and need reassurance that clear improvements are being made now. That is why the reports will be published: so that the people of London can hold their force to account for those improvements.

I am sure that everyone in the House will join me in demanding swift progress from the Metropolitan police so that opportunities to protect children are not missed and any child who goes missing or is at risk of child sexual exploitation gets the protection they need and deserve.

Ms Abbott: The Home Office said in its “Annual Report and Accounts 2015-16”:

“We have already recognised CSA as a national threat in the Strategic Policing Requirement, obliging forces to maximise specialist skills and expertise to prevent offending and resolve cases.”

It seems that the only force that the Home Office was not obliging to maximise specialist skills and expertise was the Metropolitan police force—the largest force in the country.

I appreciate that this is technically a matter for the Mayor and for the Mayor’s Office for Policing And Crime, but the Home Office had responsibility for this force as recently as 1999. The public will not understand why the Home Office never asked questions about how the largest force in the country was preventing offending and resolving child sex abuse cases.

This report comes weeks after a damning review found “numerous errors” in Scotland Yard’s Operation Midland probe. The revelations come in a week in which the largest group of survivors—the Shirley Oaks Survivors Association—has withdrawn from the child sex abuse inquiry, which makes me wonder how long the Metropolitan police has been failing victims of child sex abuse in London. This is a shocking report, and the Home Secretary cannot hide behind the Mayor.

Looking at child sex abuse in its totality and at how the child sex abuse inquiry seems to be crumbling, the public could be forgiven for asking how seriously the Government really take the issue of child sex abuse.

Brandon Lewis: I am not quite sure what the hon. Lady’s direct questions were. She referred to a timeframe and mentioned 1999. I am not sure that she has read the full HMIC report—maybe she should do that—but 1999, of course, was at the start of a period of Labour Government, so I am not sure why she is criticising her own Government.

As I said, the Home Secretary has commissioned HMIC to go in quarterly. She has spoken to Mayor of London and I have spoken to the deputy Mayor. They have a plan for how they want to hold the Metropolitan police to account. I have to say, we seem to have more confidence in the Labour Mayor of London than the hon. Lady does, which I am slightly surprised by, but it is important that we focus on this issue, and that the House gives a unified statement of clear intent. We should be united in saying that the Metropolitan police—which, as the report makes clear—is responsible for this, and for the shocking situation whereby nobody in senior management took responsibility for it—needs to get to grips with the situation, deal with it and do that now.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the heinousness of child sexual exploitation means that this should not have happened with any police force in the land but particularly not the Metropolitan police, given its size and London’s geopolitical location, with its access to major airports, ports and so on? The defence that some seem to be putting forward is that the child sex abuse inquiry seems to be crumbling, the public could be forgiven for asking how seriously the Government really take the issue of child sex abuse.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good and powerful point, particularly when we consider London, where we have arguably the best funded and resourced police service in the country, with the largest number of police officers. He is right that we should not have to say specifically to the Metropolitan police—or any police force—that this issue should be dealt with, bearing in mind the public profile of the issue and the fact that the police’s first duty should be defending our citizens, with the most vulnerable at the core of that. It should go without saying.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Problems in this area go well beyond London, so what discussions has the Home Secretary had with Her Majesty’s inspectorate...
Brandon Lewis: I can give the hon. Gentleman confidence about that issue. The report into London is part of an ongoing series of work being done by HMIC, which has been commissioned to do such work on every police force in the country. The report on London has come out in this way for two reasons. First, the London report has just been published, although others have already been published and more will be published in the next year or so. Secondly—we have to be unequivocal about this—it is the most damning report that HMIC has ever written about any inspection it has done on any police force.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Lancashire constabulary has very much focused resource on professionalising training for its officers on child sexual exploitation. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the College of Policing was specifically set up to professionalise the police and provide them with better training?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point and is absolutely right. That was why the Prime Minister, when she was Home Secretary, set up the College of Policing to make sure that we professionalise the police force and share best practice across the country. That, along with the leads provided by the National Police Chiefs’ Council and the Chief Constables’ Council, is exactly how we should make sure that police forces are well equipped to deal with all issues.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): My constituents will be very concerned about this issue. Will the Minister tell me what steps the Government have taken to protect vulnerable and young people from abuse across the country?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We should remember that the independent inquiry is looking at all the issues historically and up to the present. It is important to let it have the space and support to do its job, so we can make sure we learn the lessons of the past and show that there will be justice for anybody who has been through the kind of horrendous ordeal that some people have been through. We have to be very clear that this type of behaviour simply cannot be tolerated. It is right to make sure that police forces are training officers, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) said, and it is shocking to think that the Metropolitan police simply did not put that training in place.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Does today’s report not show that the critical work of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse must continue? We must stop trying to find fault with it and picking holes in it. We need to give the inquiry the space it needs to hear all the evidence and to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Brandon Lewis: As always, my hon. Friend is right. It is important that the inquiry can do its work, has the space to do its work and has support from across the House to get on with the important work of getting to the bottom of the problem.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): There has been a much higher number of prosecutions and referrals as a result of this issue having a much higher profile, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the report shows that the ethos needs to change not only in the Met, but in police forces across the country if we are to protect the most vulnerable?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes an important point. As we have heard, many police forces are getting to grips with changing their culture and making sure that vulnerable people and those at risk of any kind of hidden crime can be confident that they can come forward and will be protected—that is part of the inquiry’s work—but he is right that it is shocking to think that vulnerable people did not get the protection they required from the Metropolitan police, that officers did not have the training they needed and that nobody in a senior position really took ownership of the issue. That has to change. The Metropolitan police has to take on that culture change, and other police forces also need to think about doing so.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to describe the report as shocking. Are there any actions that he believes the Government and Parliament need to take as a result?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend asks an important question. I must say that, from the conversations we have had with the Mayor’s office—the Home Secretary and I have had conversations with the Mayor and the deputy Mayor—I am confident that the work they want to do will hold the Metropolitan police to account and lead to change. There is a meeting that the public can attend at City Hall on Monday.

I know that the deputy Mayor is determined to bring together experts from around the country—Simon Bailey, the NPCC lead, as well as the College of Policing lead—to work with the new Metropolitan police lead, Martin Hewitt, and I think that that is right. From the Government’s point of view, it is right for us to do what we can, and the Home Secretary has commissioned HMIC to carry out inspections quarterly and to report publicly on them so that the people of London can have the Metropolitan police to account and support the Mayor in that work.
Awards for Valour (Protection) Bill

Proceedings resumed.

11.12 am

Philip Davies: Before the urgent question, I was making the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford has said that the challenge in drafting the Bill was where to stop. I am sure he knows where he wants to stop, but, as with so many things, once something has started it is very difficult to stop because people always want to extend it. There may well be the slippery slope towards very difficult to stop because people always want to stop. I am sure he knows where he wants to stop, but, has said that the challenge in drafting the Bill was where of its members. It asked the question of inquiry, the Naval Families Federation quoted the views in question was made.”

Clause (3) states:

“A person does not commit an offence under subsection (1) if the item is worn, or the person represents themselves as being entitled to wear it—

(a) as part of a reconstruction or representation of historical events;

(b) as part of a filmed or theatrical or other live entertainment or production; or

(c) in honour of a family member who meets the requirements of subsection (3).”

The Library briefing on the Bill quotes the Royal British Legion’s advice on the wearing or not wearing of medals:

“Can I wear medals belonging to members of my family?

The official position regarding wearing medals other than your own is that they should not be worn. However, it was generally accepted from soon after the Great War that widows of the fallen wore their late husband’s medals on the right breast on suitable occasions.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham made that point in an intervention. The advice goes on:

“More recently it seems to have become the custom for any family member to wear medals of deceased relations in this way, sometimes trying to give a complete family military history by wearing several groups. Although understandable it is officially incorrect, and when several groups are worn it does little for the dignity of the original owners.”

That is the official advice from the Royal British Legion.

In its written evidence to the Defence Committee inquiry, the Naval Families Federation quoted the views of its members. It asked the question “If criminalisation of wearing unlaced medals was introduced, should there be specific safeguards for family members who wear the medals of deceased relatives?... If yes, which family members should be safeguarded? Please tick all that apply.”

It received these replies: “Husband, wife or civil partner” was the most popular; “Unmarried/civil-partnered”; “Parent”; “Guardian”; “Child”; “Step-Child”; “Grandchild”; “Extended family”; and “Other”. By the look of the chart, “Other”—not including any of the others—had about 14% of the responses.

The Royal Air Force Families Federation said in its written evidence to the Defence Committee:

“Yes, there should most certainly be safeguards for family members. The key question is who ‘qualifies’? The definition we use is ‘anyone who is a blood relation’ but this may not be appropriate in these circumstances and can be difficult to prove on occasions. Interestingly, the MoD is struggling with its own definition of a family member but it may be sensible to align any definition for these circumstances with the MoD definition if and when they decide what it should be. Otherwise, it’s probably a matter for common sense.”

In the Bill, there is an exemption for a “family member”, but we are none the wiser about who is a family member. Does it cover those categories, such as “Guardian” or someone who was “Unmarried”? Does it include someone who is married, but not a blood relation?

Craig Whittaker: I am sure my hon. Friend will realise, like everyone in the House, that the definition of family members will be discussed at length in Committee, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) has already explained.

Philip Davies: I have no doubt of that, but this is a Second Reading debate. There is no reason why we should not discuss the definition at length on Second Reading as well as in Committee, which is what I am doing.

The Defence Committee states in its report:

“A number of our witnesses emphasised the importance of ensuring that relatives of deceased or incapacitated medal recipients can continue to wear their relations’ medals at commemoration events without risk of prosecution.”

Bob Stewart: May we be absolutely precise about this so that there is no lack of clarity? Everyone who is given the Elizabeth Cross, which is awarded to widows and close family members who have lost someone, is entitled to wear it wherever they like on their body.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend, who is an expert in these matters, is absolutely right, but we are talking about all the medals covered by the Bill and the definition of a family member. As far as I can see, we do not have such a definition. People who think they are entitled to wear the medals should be told whether they can wear them or whether they would be breaking the law if they did. As things currently stand, people do not have such certainty. We could have the rather ridiculous situation in which someone who should be able to wear a medal does not because of the chilling effect of not being sure about whether they would be breaking the law. Again, that would surely be a terrible unintended consequence of the Bill.

Crucially, the Defence Committee report goes on:

“The term ‘family member’ must however be defined in terms of the proximity of the relations that it is seeking to include in the defence. It is not a legal term of art with a single definition. Acts of Parliament which use the term commonly carry a definition of ‘family’ within them to be used for the purposes of that Act. Mr Johnson suggested in oral evidence that he was minded that this defence should be quite narrow, so that for example a nephew deceitfully wearing medals could not rely on the defence by claiming that they were his uncle’s awards.”

Do we really want to criminalise a nephew who wears his uncle’s medals? Do we want to send him to prison? Clearly, the promoter of the Bill thinks we should. I contend that we should not.

The Defence Committee report goes on to say:

“The inclusion of a defence to ensure that family members representing deceased or incapacitated relations who are recipients of medals is vital, but ‘family member’ must be properly defined to ensure that there is no room for uncertainty or abuse. We
suggest that the Bill include a definition of ‘family member’ in order to provide certainty over who will be covered by this category.”

The exemptions cover the reconstruction of historical events and productions. Does that exempt people in fancy dress? If my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford would make the point that they do not intend to deceive, why are there specific exemptions for reconstructions and productions, as there is clearly no intent to deceive in those cases, but no exemption for people in fancy dress?

In one unfortunate scenario, someone could start off wearing a medal legitimately, but it could turn into an offence by accident. Imagine that an actor goes to the pub for a drink after whatever it is they are acting in and someone mistakenly assumes that they are entitled to wear the medal they forgot to remove when they came off set. Unless the actor corrected them—perhaps the more drinks the actor had consumed, the less likely that would be—they would be committing a criminal offence. Although they had not intended to deceive anyone when they went to work that day, the intent to deceive could come later, almost by accident.

I said that I would come back to sentencing. The Bill says:

“Any person guilty of an offence under this section shall be liable, on summary conviction, to a period of imprisonment not exceeding three months, or a fine.”

The Defence Committee report states:

“Mr Johnson indicated that he considered that the appropriate maximum penalty was six months imprisonment or a fine of up to £5,000 at level 5 on the standard scale. The rationale behind drafting the penalty in this way was to address three concerns:

First, the potential for a custodial sentence would ensure that there is no need for a separate power of arrest in the Bill. We note here that, since the removal of the concept of an ‘arrestable offence’ by the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005, the need for a separate power of arrest would be unnecessary in any event;

Second, that a level 5 fine on the standard scale would be at a maximum of £5,000. We note here that this upper limit was removed in 2012. Magistrates now have power to issue a fine of any amount for offences where £5,000 was previously the maximum; and,

Third, that this formulation would ensure that it could be dealt with only summarily”...

The appropriate level of penalty has clearly been considered in some detail by the Bill sponsor. We are broadly satisfied that the boundaries of penalties proposed—a period of imprisonment not exceeding six months or a fine—are appropriate.”

The length of imprisonment has been changed from six months to three months, but it is still too long in my opinion.

I am not sure what sentencing guidelines my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford envisages for the offence. Would the type of medal being worn—or not worn, as the case may be—be a factor? Would the type of incident be a factor: the more people deceived, the more severe the offence? Would it depend on the duration of the deception or the place? Would it be worse at a Remembrance Day parade? All those factors need to be considered when we pass legislation in this House, and none of them appear to have been considered for the purposes of the Bill.

I do not think that this offence should be created in the first place, but if it were, would not the confiscation of the medal be sufficient? I cannot support the criminalisation and imprisonment of Walter Mitty types. We have plenty of eccentrics in this country and some, I dare say, in this House. To criminalise someone for this type of behaviour would be very concerning indeed.

I should say, in passing, that all of us in this House know about the Liberal Democrats claiming credit erroneously for other people’s work. Are we really going to get to the point where we send them to prison for doing so?

Dr Lewis: Yes, yes—you’ve just shot your own case down!

Philip Davies: I note the enthusiasm of my right hon. Friend for the concept of locking up Lib Dems who claim credit for other people’s work. Are we really going to imprison people and send them to prison for no more than boasting in the pub?

As I said at the start, we owe enormous gratitude to those who have risked their lives on our behalf. I would stand shoulder to shoulder with them and fight their corner in any way I could. However, the problem the Bill seeks to address seems to be very limited and there are things that can be done, without resorting to the drastic action in the Bill of criminalising and imprisoning people, to improve the situation.

The Defence Committee report states:

“We recommend that the Ministry of Defence should set out the practicalities of creating an online, publicly-searchable database to record those who are rightful recipients of gallantry and distinguished conduct awards, along similar lines to the database instituted by the US Department of Defense. This would allow authoritative verification of claims to entitlement and act as a deterrent to military imposters, whose deceptions would be liable to swift and accurate exposure.”

I absolutely agree. Acting as a “deterrent to military imposters” and making their deceptions “liable to swift and accurate exposure” is actually what the Bill seeks to do. That is what we should be seeking to do; not criminalising and imprisoning people.

There is no reason why we cannot have such a database. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham mentioned during the inquiry:

“I totally agree with the idea of having an online database. There are such things now, but it is very complicated to get answers on gallantry medals and things. If nothing else, let’s encourage the Government to put up a database, so that people can check these things very quickly. That would be very easy to do, actually, for all gallantry awards, including ‘mentioned in dispatches’.”

The point made by the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) during the inquiry was spot on and echoed something I had been thinking:

“Do you think that, considering the disgust people feel at this kind of action, naming and shaming someone is sufficient, rather than taking these people to court?”

I agree with much of the reply given by my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford, apart from the end:

“That can sometimes be an effective remedy. I think you could say that for a whole range of different criminal offences. We know that certain people suffer more because of the naming and shaming they have had to endure, rather than somebody who has
not in other circumstances. Yes, that may be an appropriate way of dealing with instances of this kind. It may still be appropriate for someone to have a quiet word with someone. But that is also the case for a whole range of criminal offences and I do not think that, because that may be an effective remedy, that should prevent this becoming law.’

For that reason and for all the other reasons I have mentioned, we should prevent the Bill from becoming law. It would be a terrible unintended consequence if those who had fought in wars were caught up in this legislation, alongside vulnerable people with mental health issues. I have set out how veterans and people with mental health issues could be prosecuted under this legislation. Anyone who impersonates a serviceman and tries to gain financially can already be prosecuted. That is where I believe we should leave it.

We have fought various battles to protect our much-cherished freedoms. As I said earlier, and as the US Supreme Court has found, those include freedoms involving something distasteful. Criminalising people as this Bill seeks to do helps to undermine that precious freedom. I am afraid that that is why I cannot support the Bill today.

11.28 am

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): During the break for the urgent question, I took the liberty of asking my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) whether I was right in assuming that his default position on issues of this sort was as follows: “When it’s not necessary to legislate, it’s necessary not to legislate.” He confirmed then, and he is nodding now, that that is indeed his position. It is a position that, in most cases, I tend to subscribe to myself.

My hon. Friend has done an amazing job of making the case for why he should be on the Bill Committee once the Bill has got— as I hope it will— its Second Reading. He is a one-man House of Lords—a revising Chamber in a single cranium—and points the ruthless spotlight of logic at many well-intentioned, as he puts it, initiatives that have not always been thought through as fully as they should have been.

In making his points today, some of which have been very strong, my hon. Friend is nevertheless in danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater; there is a very considerable baby in the Bill and it deserves to thrive. He has conjured up scenarios of all sorts of people who are suffering from mental illness languishing inappropriately in prison cells. That is very much a worst case scenario, and is not borne out by experience. As we know, until the legislation was changed a score or so years ago, there were no cases—certainly that I am aware of—of any mentally ill people finding themselves in prison cells.

Philip Davies: Lots of people in this House would say that many people in prison who have been convicted of criminal offences have mental health problems. I am therefore not entirely sure on what basis my right hon. Friend thinks that scenario would be impossible with this proposed offence.

Dr Lewis: I will have to look at Hansard to see the actual words I used, but if I did not insert the words “for this type of offence”, I should have, because I am not aware of any cases on the record—and I am sure that, if there had been such cases, my hon. Friend would have unearthed them in his exhaustive researches—of people languishing in jail as a result of fraudulently claiming to have been awarded gallantry medals that they had not genuinely received.

When looking at the prospective penalties for committing an offence such as would be created once again—as it existed in the past—by the passage of the Bill, we have to apply a modicum of common sense. We have to recognise that there would be very few prosecutions at all, because it is highly probable that most people would be deterred, and I am sure that the vast majority of the minority who would not would end up facing nothing more than a fine. The background possibility of a prison sentence of a few weeks would, as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) will confirm, be there only as a backstop for the most persistent and egregious cases where all else had failed in stopping someone committing this act of abuse—that is what it is for the families of people who lost their lives serving this country and for living former and current servicemen and women who have been genuinely decorated.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley was absolutely right to pick up the United States Supreme Court’s striking down the legislation that he mentioned. That Supreme Court is well known, internationally, for its absolutist stance on freedom of speech—so much so that it is possible to blackguard, libel and defame people in the United States in the name of free speech to a degree that is not possible in this country, thank goodness. Nevertheless, although the United States has taken that very strict interpretation of free speech as being the right to lie and deceive about medals for valour that have not been awarded, the Defence Committee’s report noted that that has not prevented several state legislatures from putting into law offences similar to that in the Bill.

We have to ask ourselves whether there were any obvious disadvantages of the law as it worked in practice when it existed before. My answer to that is no. We also have to ask whether there are likely to be any new ill effects as a result of reintroducing something very similar to the position that obtained in the past. My answer is still likely to be no. If our concern is that mentally ill people might in future be caught by criminal law as a result of their wearing medals to which they are not entitled and so making false claims of valour—if that is the reason for our not having a criminal sanction against such misbehaviour—we should think about what would happen if that reasoning were to be applied more generally to criminal law; I doubt if much criminal law would then remain on the statute book. The fact is that criminal law exists, mentally ill people are out there, and, from time to time, mentally ill people break the law. That is no reason for not having the law there for them to break or observe, as the case may be. That is to do with mitigation of circumstances; if it is found that someone has broken the law, it then becomes relevant to take their state of mind into account.

I do not agree that every factor in a case of the inappropriate wearing of medals not awarded to the people wearing them has to be written into the Bill. For example, the idea that anyone would prosecute a nephew for wearing his uncle’s medals in an appropriate setting is absolutely preposterous, and I do not believe that the Bill’s intention would be misconstrued in such a way that any such case would ever be brought.
I return now to the conclusions and recommendations of the Defence Committee’s report, which my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley put forward in a somewhat selective way in his massiively entertaining account of the report. I will pick out just a few factors. We did not agree with the justifications provided by the Ministry of Defence for repealing the offences relating to the protection of decorations without replacing them. If the offences in the Army Act 1955 were unsuitable for direct transposition into new legislation, the Armed Forces Act 2006 should have included new, more workable offences that were well scoped and incorporated appropriate exceptions.

We do not believe that the main problem is the matter of financial or other tangible gain. It is the devaluing of the respect that people are entitled to have because of acts of bravery in their service careers. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley rightly picked up on the exchange that took place during our consideration of the Bill about whether it was appropriate to include claims about having been awarded medals that are made without actually wearing the medals. That is why I put a query to my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford during the course of the hearing we held with him on his Bill.

At that stage, we did not have the advantage of having the final version of the Bill before us—indeed, it was not available even at the stage when we finalised our report, although it is of course before the House now. But that is what the Committee and Report stages should be all about. The Bill should be amended to deal with any practical points of concern.

Philip Davies: Do I take it, then, from what my right hon. Friend says—it would be useful if he could clarify this—that as the Bill stands it applies not just to people who wear medals but those who present themselves as being entitled to do so? If an amendment were tabled to remove that from the Bill, would he support it?

Dr Lewis: I have not heard the case argued from both sides because we have only had that brief exchange in Committee. However, my hon. Friend deduces correctly from my remarks that I am unhappy about that particular provision, and that I expect the Bill would be improved by its removal. The concern relates to people who strut around wearing decorations they have not been awarded. They do so not primarily for financial gain—as has been repeatedly pointed out, that is already capable of remedy in law—but because they are fraudulently posing as somebody who has done things they have not done; they are wearing awards they have not earned.

My hon. Friend made the distinction between impersonating a veteran who had been awarded a medal and impersonating a police officer. I think he slightly missed the point of the Committee’s conclusion. We were not saying there was any real comparison between the consequences of those two acts of deception; we were talking only about the practical question of whether it can, in a realistic and sensible way, be catered for in law. He read the actual sentence out rather quickly; I shall do so rather more slowly:

“We also disagree that offences involving an intention to deceive which are not related to fraud may raise practical difficulties on questions of proof.”

All we were saying by drawing the comparison with the offence of impersonating a police officer is that the practical difficulties in each case would be the same and that there are ways of coping with both practical difficulties in showing what is being done wrong in each case, even though, of course, the consequences of the two different acts are vastly dissimilar.

We have heard scepticism on how widely the practice is carried out. The report heard evidence from the Naval Families Federation showing that a very considerable number of its members, when surveyed, thought this was a real problem. It conducted a brief survey among its members, receiving 1,111 responses over four days. Some 64% of respondents said they had personally encountered individuals wearing medals or insignia that had been awarded to someone else, with 16% saying they were not sure. When asked to detail the specific circumstances, however—this is what matters, because there are plenty of perfectly legitimate cases of wearing medals not awarded to the person concerned—29% of respondents said that the individual concerned was impersonating a UK armed forces veteran, while another 11% identified the individual as impersonating a serving member of the armed forces. That suggests something that happens on a somewhat larger scale than has been suggested by some of the contributors to the debate.

Another problem, which I urge my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley to consider seriously, is that when the law fails to deal with unacceptable behaviour people tend to take matters into their own hands. This happens to such an extent that we now have, as we heard earlier, groups of Walter Mitty hunters challenging people over the decorations they display. That suggests sufficient concern on such a scale that people feel it appropriate, even though it is not necessarily appropriate, to set up groups to go around challenging people on whether they have earned the medals they display.

I have direct experience of this situation. A couple of years ago, I was at a Veterans’ Day event in my constituency with my partner’s father. My partner’s father is Mr Francis Souness, who is slightly unusual in that he has a post-war Distinguished Flying Cross, a decoration that has not been awarded to the person concerned—even though it is not necessarily appropriate, to set up groups to go around challenging people over the decorations they display. That suggests sufficient concern on such a scale that people feel it appropriate, even though it is not necessarily appropriate, to set up groups to go around challenging people on whether they have earned the medals they display.

Dr Lewis: Does my hon. Friend agree that the example of Flying Officer Francis Scott Souness is quite significant? I have been in a position to know Mr Souness for many years. His grandfather was the famous Walter Souness, who was awarded the Victoria Cross and who was later the Prime Minister of New Zealand. Mr Souness was a very distinguished member of the armed forces. I have been informed that he is still living in the area. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his services in the operations in Malaya between June 1 and November 30 of last year. Aged 24 and a native of Galashiels, Flying Officer Souness is at present stationed at R.A.F. Shawbury…The citation reads—“Since joining No. 110 Squadron in May, 1952 he has completed 148 operational sorties in Malaya and is a navigator who has shown meticulous care and untiring energy while locating dropping zones deep in the jungle. In flights over difficult terrain, often uninhabited, and often in adverse weather, his determination and courage have often exceeded the call of duty. Malayan operations depend largely for success on accurate navigation and map reading and, by his wealth of experience, calm efficiency, courage and high sense of duty Flying Officer Souness has inspired the whole squadron.”

I know Frank well—he is 86 now and was a little younger then—and he is a doughty individual. It did not faze him that someone challenged him—not aggressively,
but pointedly—as to whether he was entitled to wear the Distinguished Flying Cross. I think that that is a bit of a pity, actually. I do not think it should have happened. It suggests that there is a problem out there with the perception of people wearing medals to which they are not entitled. It is their selfishness that can result in genuine heroes being challenged inappropriately. My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford was quite right to point out the dangers of trust breaking down in this situation.

I take what I hope is a measured view. I entirely accept that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley is in a position to make improvements to the Bill in Committee. I believe my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford is entirely right to have introduced the Bill. It is capable of improvement. If the House wants to see the Bill improve, it should be given its Second Reading today.

11.47 am

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I, too, support the Bill, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson). I endorse what my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) said: the Bill can be improved a little as it goes through the House.

It takes some neck to wear medals that one has not earned in front of veterans. Those who do so must have some sort of courage, because it is so easy to out them. One can read what a fellow’s or a girl’s service career has been from the medals on their chest, so it is pretty odd when people think that they can get away with it. As I said earlier, wearing medals that have not been earned is often linked with the practice of wearing the berets and badges of regiments to which one does not belong. Challenging these military imposters publicly is a hellishly good deterrent. It sorts them out very quickly. Ridicule by real service veterans is a very good way to deal with such Walter Mitty characters, because they normally turn up where other people are wearing medals. It makes them retreat very fast. It is very easy for someone like me, who has a fairly good idea of what medals are, to spot an imposter. It is not just the medals they wear but their order—gallantry medals, for instance, should be first on the chest, coming behind other kinds—that gives them away.

I am pleased that my very good hon. Friend the Member for Dartford has enlightened me on theatrical productions not counting, because otherwise I would have been very worried about what would have happened if the cast of “Blackadder” had nipped out for a quick drink, particularly Lieutenant the Hon. George Colthurst St Barleigh MC and Captain Kevin Darling MC, and especially General Sir Anthony Cecil Hogmanay Melchett VC DSO, who wears an MC in the wrong order; I have spotted that. These fellows, if they went for a drink during filming, had better watch out. I am personally saddened—I am sure that everyone in the House will join me in this—that Captain Blackadder had no gallantry medals, because he thoroughly deserved them. He only wears two campaign medals, but I have been unable to identify them.

I often wear fake medals myself. They are fake in that they have not been given to me but are reproductions that I have had made, the real ones being stuck in some safe somewhere, because if I lost them, I would never get them again. If hon. Members ever see me poncing around, proud as a peacock, wearing medals, I ask that they please do not denounce me, because I am sure as hell that my medals would be wrong.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. If the hon. Gentleman used language that was uncomplimentary to any other Member, I would call him to order. He is using language that is uncomplimentary to himself. He may, of course, continue to do so, but the rest of the House objects, because he does not deserve to be so denigrated, by himself or anyone else.

Bob Stewart: I do not know what to say, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am so touched. It is the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. I accept what you say. You do not consider me as bad as I think myself.

We do not want companies such as the Worcestershire Medal Service, which produced my fake medals, to be shut down, because they help veterans to wear medals. By the way, miniature medals are not awarded by Her Majesty the Queen; people normally buy those, so they are not quite the same as other medals either.

I will conclude, because I know that we want to get on. I very much appreciate the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford, and I endorse the comments of the my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). I am not sure that we need to jail people for this, but my goodness we could embarrass the hell out of them and make them do community service. Personally, I think that community service spent spud-bashing at the military corrective training centre in Colchester would be a very good way of dealing with General Walter Mitty.

11.54 am

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I agree with you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that no one could ever denigrate the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for his service and the medals that he has been awarded. An appropriate punishment for anyone contravening this Bill, should it become law, might be the polishing of those medals, or any other medals.

My hon. Friend—I hope he will allow me to call him that—the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) summed up the Bill for me and the Labour party when he said that it was to tackle the stealing of valour from genuine heroes. We in the Labour party support that wholeheartedly. We support the Bill because we firmly believe that anyone impersonating a veteran by wearing medals that they have not earned should face legal sanctions, whether that be spud-bashing, community service, medal polishing or, in extreme cases, serving a prison sentence, as he pointed out.

It is right that we recognise the real offence that wearing unearned medals causes to the community of armed forces personnel, and that we therefore impose the appropriate punishment on these military imposters, in the same way that we punish the offence of impersonating a service member by wearing a forces uniform. The law as it stands does not go far enough. Military imposters can be prosecuted for fraud, as the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) pointed out, but we think that it
should be an offence to wear a medal that has not been earned. For all sorts of reasons, as mentioned, that is currently not an offence.

It is right, however, that we allow relatives to honour veterans by wearing medals on the right breast, as the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham pointed out. I hope that the House will allow me to recount a brief story. Back in 1998, not long after I was first elected to the House, the Lord Mayor of Leeds, the late Councillor Linda Middleton, asked me why I was not wearing my late father’s medals at the Remembrance Sunday parade in Leeds city centre. I was not aware that this was even possible, but she said, “If you wear them on your right breast, everybody will know that you are not claiming them as yours but are respecting your late father, who earned them.” So, every single year, including two Sundays ago, I put on my suit and coat and I wear those medals proudly on the right-hand side, including the one that I am proudest he earned, the French Resistance medal—he fought in occupied France.

Bob Stewart: My good friend makes a valid point, but there is something else: when relatives wear those medals, the person who won them lives again, in their memory and ours. That is terribly important, particularly for those killed in action.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for that point. My father died in 1998, far too long ago, unfortunately, at a relatively early age; it seems a relatively early age to me now that I am over 60, because he was not long past 60 when he passed away. The hon. and gallant Gentleman is absolutely right that in wearing the medals, I am honouring my father’s memory and gallantry. Looking around at the Remembrance parade in the centre of my city of Leeds, I see so many relatives of deceased soldiers, including those who died in battle, proudly wearing those medals. I look at them, and I know that they have not earned them, but they are not pretending that they have. I am pleased that the hon. Member for Dartford has made that point so clearly in his Bill. That is one of the reasons why Opposition Members support the Bill wholeheartedly.

The last Labour Government were mentioned, as was the Army Act 1955 and the Air Force Act 1955, which were repealed when the Armed Forces Act 2006 passed into law. That repeal has meant that for the past 10 years, falsely wearing and misrepresenting military medals has not been an offence. The last Labour Government have a strong record of support for our armed forces, as all Members would acknowledge. We paved the way for the armed forces covenant, which the coalition Government passed into law. We were the first Government to recognise that the forces community should receive priority access to health services. Again, those services have been developed since by both the coalition Government and the current Conservative Government.

Let me respond briefly to some of the points raised in the debate. The hon. Member for Dartford made it clear that family members must continue to be able to wear medals that belonged to their relatives, in honour of those relatives. He stressed that there was no intention in the Bill to stop that practice. The hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) said that fraud legislation had never been used to prosecute dishonest medal wearers, and that the Bill would have a deterrent effect on those who sought fraudulently to wear those medals. He pointed to legislation in Australia and the United States, and made the point that this Bill was long overdue in this country.

The hon. Member for Shipley had a lot to say about the Bill, and he was not entirely happy with it. He pointed to the typical tradition of private Members’ Bills having worthy sentiments, but amounting, in his view, to gesture politics. He said that the idea was admirable, but the Bill was not necessary or helpful. That point was echoed to some extent on Radio 4’s “Today” programme this morning, when a military officer said that he felt that this House could do more useful things for veterans. That, however, is to misunderstand the purpose and effect of private Members’ Bills. If we started tackling something genuinely controversial or more heavyweight in this forum and setting, it is doubtful whether it would see the light of day. I thoroughly support and defend the fact that this private Member’s Bill will do what the hon. Member for Dartford intends it to do.

The Defence Committee produced an excellent report, dated 22 November, on this subject, and I commend the Chairman, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), on producing it. Let me briefly quote from it:

“The protections sought in the Bill are necessary to safeguard the integrity of the military honours system, to reflect the justifiably strong public condemnation of the deceitful use of military honours, and to ensure that legitimate recipients of these distinguished awards should not have to endure the intrusion of imposters. Such sanctions are common in other legal systems around the world and the lack of similar protection in the UK is exceptional.”

The Committee stressed the importance of clarity when framing new criminal offences—a point made eloquently and at some length by the hon. Member for Shipley. It recommended that the awards covered by the Bill be listed in a schedule, or an authoritative external list.

Finally, let me quote my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith)—I hope that I have pronounced her constituency correctly—who is our shadow Defence Secretary and who responded to the Defence Committee’s report on the Awards for Valour (Protection) Bill. What she said sums up the Opposition’s view:

“It is absolutely disgraceful that anyone would seek to impersonate a veteran by wearing medals that they have not earned, and it is right that the law should prosecute these fraudsters who could well be marching side by side with our ex-service personnel at veterans’ parades…Seeing these charlatans who pose as real ex-soldiers causes great offence to the veterans’ community and it is time to put a stop to this abuse once and for all. Labour supports the bill to criminalise this practice and I hope that the Government sees sense and helps bring this into law.”

I hope that we can agree to Second Reading today, and that the Government will enable this excellent Bill to become law very soon.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): It is truly a privilege to be able to respond on behalf of the Government to the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson). I congratulate him on winning a number so high up the ballot for his private Member’s Bill and on his success in bringing forward this measure today.
To some people the impersonation of our military heroes may seem a triffing matter, worthy more of humour than of concern. There is, for instance, the case of a man who claimed to be a member of the entirely fictitious Royal Warwickshire Dog Handlers, and another who went to great lengths to have the commando dagger insignia tattooed on his arm, only to find out that it was pointing in the wrong direction. Men who seemed plausible would, on closer examination—to borrow a phrase—appear to have spent more time in a fancy dress shop than on the front line.

This has been an excellent debate. We have heard not only from my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford, but from my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), who shared with us the example from his constituency of a UKIP councillor who wore the most implausible range of medals and was eventually forced to stand down. At the same time he was discovered to be a bigamist, which demonstrates that people who are impertinent enough to pretend to be recipients of medals to which they are not entitled may well be capable of crossing the threshold of propriety and doing other completely unacceptable things.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), in an extensive, detailed and well-researched speech lasting about 70 minutes, presented the case against the Bill. He argued passionately on behalf of those who wish to continue to impersonate people who are entitled to wear medals. He was on the side of Walter Mitty, but I have to say that the mood of the House is not with him.

Philip Davies: First, as the Minister knows, I was not on the side of Walter Mitty, and it is rather insulting of her to say that I was. Secondly, perhaps she could explain in passing why on 3 May this year the Ministry of Defence agreed with me, whereas now, in November, it agrees with my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford. Can she tell us what has changed in the meantime?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend was certainly making a case for opposing the Bill. In a moment, I shall come to our reasons for supporting it.

We heard a very good speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who chairs the Defence Committee. We are grateful for the time that his Committee spent taking evidence on the Bill, and for the insights that it has shared in its report. He gave another good example of the perhaps unintended consequences of failing to make this a criminal offence by telling us that his partner’s father had been questioned, during an event specifically for veterans, about his entitlement to wear the medal of which he is so rightly proud.

My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) argued passionately in favour of allowing people who wear medals in “Blackadder” and other dramatic events to be covered by the exemptions in the Bill.

Bob Stewart: I hope that the Minister will indulge me, because I wish to make a short comment. Tomorrow I shall have the extreme honour of presenting the order of the Légion d’Honneur to Canon William Clements in Coloma Court home in my constituency. The priest was offshore in a royal naval vessel on D-day, and I am going to his bedside to give it to him. That is a singular honour for me. I hope the Minister will forgive me for that intervention; I think it was appropriate.

Harriett Baldwin: I am glad that my hon. Friend made that intervention. He has rightly put a wonderful example on the record. I know that many people throughout the country are very grateful to be receiving the Légion d’Honneur from the French Government at this time.

I am pleased that the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton)—along with the shadow Defence Secretary, the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith)—supports the Bill. He gave a very good example of how important it is that the Bill should protect the rights of family members to wear their loved ones’ medals, saying he proudly wears on his right breast on Remembrance Day the medals his father won for his service.

The mood of the House today is that the dishonest behaviour and egregious examples we have heard about are not harmless fun or mindless eccentricity; in actual fact, their implications are far greater and their ramifications far graver than many would appreciate at first glance, and all the more so when they involve the unauthorised wearing of decorations and medals. That is, first, because it is a gross affront to those who have genuinely served their country at considerable risk to themselves and who, as is intended, wear their medals with great pride. As Siegfried Sassoon wrote in “Memoirs of an Infantry Officer”:

“...nobody knew how much a decoration was worth except the man who received it.”

But this is about more than feelings, important as they are, which brings me to my second point: wearing unauthorised medals is harmful because it undermines the integrity of our formal military honours system, a historical system that has honoured the bravery and dedication of our world-class armed forces since the 19th century. Thirdly, and perhaps most crucially, by undermining that system bogus medal-wearers erode the vital bond of trust and respect between the public and the armed forces.

It is for those very significant reasons that during the first world war the Defence of the Realm Regulation 41 made it an offence to “wear a decoration or medal without authority”.

As we have heard in several contributions today, that prohibition was transferred into statute after the war, and later incorporated into the Army Act 1955 and the Air Force Act 1955. I should also mention that it is still an offence under the Uniforms Act 1894 to wear a military uniform without authority, and that offence carries a maximum penalty of a fine not exceeding level 3.

In the early years of this century, when the Armed Forces Act 2006 was drafted, the concern about Walter Mittys was not widespread, and the then Labour Government decided not to carry forward the offences into the new Act. The most egregious acts of deception in this regard, where the individual uses medals to which he is not entitled in order to obtain a financial advantage, are crimes of fraud and, as such, are rightly punishable at a much higher level.
The American Stolen Valor Act 2013 covers only the higher military awards for bravery, as well as certain other military awards such as the Purple Heart and some awards for combat service. But that Act makes it an offence only if the awards are being worn for gain. Nevertheless, the Government recognise the concern about the gap not covered by the Fraud Act 2006, which the Bill seeks to address. It is for that reason, I point out in response to the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, that the Government support the Bill. I know that there are questions about the extent of the problem.

Philip Davies: The Minister has explained, as she said she would, why the Government are supporting the Bill, but she has not covered why the Government did not support exactly the same measures proposed in the e-petition in May this year.

Harriett Baldwin: The Secretary of State has been thoroughly convinced by the excellent case put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford, by the power of his argument in the Chamber and by the way he has worked so constructively to address our previous concerns in his proposed legislation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley questioned the extent of the problem in this country. I am grateful to the Defence Committee for producing its extremely thorough report, which acknowledges that the precise level of the problem is difficult to determine. There is clearly a greater awareness of it as an issue, perhaps because of the greater visibility afforded by social media and the appearance of groups dedicated to exposing these Walter Mittys. It is for that reason, and those that I have previously outlined, that the Government are now happy to offer support to the Bill.

The Committee’s report was ably summarised by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East, who chairs the Committee, and it raised issues for the Government to consider beyond those immediately addressed by the Bill—in particular, the question of establishing a searchable database of holders of awards. Details of individual bravery or gallantry awards are published in the London Gazette—indeed, that is the origin of the term “gazetted” in relation to medals. However, the creation of a searchable database of holders would raise concerns about personal data and individual security. There is also the matter of who would be responsible for it and who would maintain it. It would be a long-term task for someone. When it comes to the various types and levels of campaign awards, a different issue arises—one of scale. For example, the Operational Service Medal for Afghanistan alone was issued to 150,000 recipients.

Dr Julian Lewis: I am grateful to the Minister for her support for the Bill. I am always cautious about databases for ex-service personnel. In this particular case, however, provided that the search engine was only able to accept the entry of a name that was already known to the person searching for any awards that that person had received, I do not see that that could create a security problem in the way that including details of ex-servicemen on censuses might do.

Harriett Baldwin: My right hon. Friend rightly proposes a potential compromise, but other questions arise, including the scale of the exercise and whether the London Gazette might be able to maintain such a database. I look forward with interest to hearing constructive suggestions on those concerns from those who are following the debate.

Bob Stewart: My hon. Friend the Minister has hit the nail on the head with her comment that the London Gazette could keep such a database. Every gallantry award goes through the London Gazette, even those awarded to people who have done something for the security services. I am sure that some kind of system could be made available through the London Gazette that would enable the information to be accessed very quickly. At the moment, trying to find gallantry awards using the system at the London Gazette is almost impossible.

Harriett Baldwin: I share my hon. Friend’s support for that suggestion. It will be interesting to hear, as the Bill progresses, of any practical solutions to enable us to bring the system into the 21st century and create a database that is easily searchable and readily trusted. I hope that people will come forward with such solutions. The Government will of course make a fuller response to the Committee’s report in due course, but it is fair to say that we would need to consider carefully the practicalities of such a large task.

The Government support the Bill’s Second Reading today. It has some drafting issues that we will seek to help my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford to address in Committee, and I hope that he will take that as a constructive process, as we want to help him to produce a Bill that will achieve his laudable aims. I look forward to discussing the Bill further in Committee. Above all, I look forward to putting into statute our steadfast commitment to maintaining the solemnity of our military honours system for the sake of our brave servicemen and women, past, present and future, who have served and will continue to serve this country with selfless commitment, loyalty and integrity. I therefore once again congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing the Bill, and I urge the House to support its Second Reading today.

12.19 pm

Gareth Johnson: With the leave of the House, I wish briefly to thank the Government for their support of my Bill, Her Majesty’s Opposition for their constructive support, and colleagues for their supporting comments. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) made some sensible suggestions that I am happy to look at.

I said from the beginning that mine was very much an old-fashioned private Member’s Bill. There are many examples of good private Members’ Bills passing through the House with the support of charities, lobbying groups and various other organisations. Many of them have been off-the-shelf-type private Members’ Bills, but my Bill is not like that. I drafted it myself, but my ego does not prevent me from saying that it has flaws that need ironing out, and I am grateful for the contributions that will enable that to happen. Notwithstanding its flaws, I maintain the central principle of the Bill, which is that we owe it to our veterans to give them legislative support,
and we owe it to the public to ensure that they can have confidence in the system. I hope that the huge debt we owe to each and every one of the people who have served in our armed forces can in some way be repaid through the Bill.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).*

12.21 pm

**David Tredinnick** (Bosworth) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is an absolute pleasure to follow the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on the wearing of medals, which is a really important issue. I very much enjoyed his speech, as I did the forensic analysis of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) and the entertaining speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). He talked about the extra sets of medals he has in his cupboard, but, because he is a very modest man, he did not say that he has the second-highest gallantry award of this country, the Distinguished Service Order, which he won for his active service in Bosnia. He is ever modest, but it is important that he should receive that recognition. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear!”] I was also touched by the contribution of the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), who represents Sir Keith Joseph’s old seat. He spoke about the wearing of medals that were in his family’s possession—a very useful adjunct.

It is my good fortune to be able to introduce my Parking Places (Variation of Charges) Bill, which I understand has the backing of not only the Government but Santa Claus. I had a note down my chimney last night, and I shall explain why. The Bill will be very helpful to local authorities, particularly at Christmas time, when cities and towns are full of shoppers and councils might want to reduce, or waive altogether, some on-street and off-street parking charges.

**Craig Whittaker** (Calder Valley) (Con) rose—

**Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con) rose—

**David Tredinnick**: I give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker).

**Craig Whittaker**: If local authorities already have provision to vary parking charges, which I know they do from my time on Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council—I believe the provision is in the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984—will my hon. Friend elaborate on why there is a need to amend that?

**David Tredinnick**: I certainly will. I now give way to my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray).

**Mrs Murray**: We have seen parking charges in Cornwall increase constantly over the past three or four years. Will the measures on parking charges in my hon. Friend’s Bill help the smaller town centres that need supporting, such as those in my constituency?

**David Tredinnick**: I say to my hon. Friend that I hope I will satisfy her concerns during my speech. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley, I will explain shortly why the Bill is a necessary adjunct. It
issues in Stevenage were addressed in a Westminster Hall debate on Wednesday, which was replied to by the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my neighbour across Watling Street and hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones). My hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) is extremely worried that the local council is making £3 million a year from parking charges, which are depressing Stevenage’s ability to attract business and be a vibrant town.

Mrs Murray: Will my hon. Friend clarify whom local authorities will have to consult? Will the consultations be wide? Will the people who use such car parks be able to have a say?

David Tredinnick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend because her question will help to flesh out my speech. The Under-Secretary will correct me in his speech if I do not get things quite right. The Bill has only two clauses, and I must tell colleagues that I fended off several organisations that wanted to add a whole range of further clauses. However, this is the second Bill on a Friday and I am under no illusions about my needing the support of the Chamber for the Bill to progress.

The Bill amends the existing powers of the Secretary of State at sections 35C and 46A of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 to make regulations providing for the procedure to be followed by local authorities giving notice to vary charges at both off-street and on-street parking places. That allows for new regulations to be made that revise the existing regulations to reduce the burden on local authorities that are seeking to lower their charges. In addition, the Bill allows for a new power that will mean that local authorities will need to consult if they want to increase their parking charges under an existing traffic order. I hope that that answers my colleagues’ questions.

Town centres such as that of Hinckley, the vibrant town in Leicestershire that I represent, are at the heart of our local communities. Parking has the potential to enhance the economic vitality of town centres such as Hinckley’s.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend’s Bill. Does he agree that the Bill will make it much easier for councils to reduce car parking charges? That can only be a good thing not just for local businesses, but for local residents. It will encourage us all to shop locally and support our town centres.

David Tredinnick: I was astonished when I looked into the matter that this was not already in a council’s portfolio of options. That is why I have brought the Bill to the House. I was absolutely amazed. The reform will allow local authorities to react more quickly to market changes and allow greater flexibility if they are looking to put in place reduced parking charges or even free parking. It also puts local authorities on an even footing with the private sector—this is important—by allowing local authorities at short notice to provide free or discounted parking to support town centre events.

That is the Santa Claus aspect. In the run-up to Christmas, councils may want to allow a market to take place at short notice and could stimulate that market by reducing charges or waiving them altogether. Requiring 21 days’ notice, with the notice to be published in the local newspaper and posted at appropriate places on the street, is bureaucratic and totally unnecessary. It is important that councils should engage their local communities when they are raising charges, to help to ensure that the business community is aware of any proposals and to help it make informed comment about them. The Bill will reinforce what should be good practice.

Standing here on behalf of my constituency, which includes the big town of Hinckley on the A5, I can say with some pride that Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council already consults the Town Centre Partnership on changes to charging ahead of publishing any notice of variation in the local media. It also has a joint car-parking working group with the Business Improvement District and the Town Centre Partnership to consider issues as they arise. If I had intervened more fully in last Wednesday’s debate, I might have said that that would be an appropriate way forward for Stevenage; perhaps Stevenage can talk to Hinckley about the way Hinckley does things. I am pleased to put on the record that example of best practice.

I am also pleased to report that, in the past, Hinckley has offered free parking at Christmas. My local council assures me that the Bill would allow it to temporarily reduce charges, meaning that it could still generate some revenue while supporting town centre businesses. There is a good relationship between the council and the business community in Hinckley, but the Bill will add flexibility, which is why it is so important. It will allow Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council to consider a new range of parking incentives, which is very much to be welcomed.

Let me give a couple of examples. The Bill would allow the council to develop temporary incentives for under-utilised car parks, to increase awareness of those parking assets. I pressed the chief executive of the council for more examples locally, and it could—people in my area might be interested to learn that these are not council policy but options that might be put before it—temporarily introduce a 50p charge for all-day parking on long-stays on Saturdays in the run-up to Christmas. It could introduce a 50p all-day charge on the Trinity Vicarage car park, which the council has been trying to get greater use of, until usage increases, and the charge could then be removed. Finally—this is interesting—I am told that councillors might be invited to consider a charge of 50p for three hours on all short-stays in January and February, which are generally quieter months; obviously, that is after Christmas, and there is not much going on.

Hinckley—the town I have had the honour to represent for a long time—has been shortlisted in the large market category of the Great British High Street competition. Let me put that in context. Unusually for a town of its size—it has a population of 30,000—it is signposted pretty much from the moment people leave London, and the signposts are there once people get just outside
the M25. That is because Hinckley is a very important town on Watling Street—the Roman road going to the north-west—or what is now the A5. It has a great history, going back to the making of silk stockings; it was one of two towns in England that produced silk stockings, Wokingham being the other. It has a very proud history of hosiery and knitwear production. It actually has a catchment area of half a million people within a 15-minute drive. I checked the numbers today: Hinckley has over 400 businesses, of which nearly 300 are independent, and the vacancy rate is less than 5%. That is a great thing for the town of Hinckley.

As we are talking about markets, it is worth mentioning that the charter market in Hinckley was 700 years old in 2011, and it is open for business three days a week. Not only that, but we have fantastic town centre festivals, including the Soap Box Derby, which is great fun; St George’s Day; and the largest town centre classic motor show in the midlands. We have also had a rally in the middle of the town; I do not know how the council got permission for that, but it did, and well done.

Mrs Sherryl Murray: My hon. Friend is painting a fantastic picture of his town of Hinckley. If his Bill goes through, and we can park there at a reasonable price, will it have enough parking spaces to accommodate all those of us who are very tempted to visit one of these festivals?

David Tredinnick: I have to say to the House that I did not connive with my hon. Friend before this debate, but she is bowling me some very soft balls. I did not intend to mention this, but recently the Co-op sadly ceased trading. It had a very good car park in the middle of town and local business people and the former chairman of my association, Rosemary Wright, wisely got behind a general campaign to persuade the council to purchase it. It is controversial—I forget, but I think it will cost about £1 million—but there is a shortage of parking in Hinckley, so I welcome that important decision.

Parking is crucial to the success of the events, which are attended not only by thousands of local people, but by visitors from further afield, leading to—I will use the jargon—an increased spiking of 1,000% in footfall. That means a whole lot of new people coming into the town and wanting to park, so making parking easier is much better for business. The flexibilities that the Bill would introduce would go a long way to enhancing the event experience in town, and parking is, of course, often the visitor’s first experience and impression.

As I have said, I understand that the Government support the Bill’s purpose. The Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton, may wish to say a little more about the points that I have raised. I do not need to be psychic—he is on the Front Bench—to imagine that that will be the case. Crucially, the Bill also has the support of Santa Claus, so I commend it to the House.

12.36 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, which notes that I am a serving member of Oldham Council. I thank the hon. Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) for promoting the Bill. To be honest, I felt at times during his speech that I was in a council committee meeting. I was pondering whether devolution in England could work if this is the level of debate in our Parliament. Nevertheless, parking charges are an important issue and are raised regularly by our constituents, so it is right that we consider them.

None of us should allow a picture to be painted that our councils are somehow, in an underhand way and against the public interest, trying to extract as much cash as possible from parking charges. The Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 is prescriptive on what the surplus can be used for; if there is a shortage of car parking spaces in towns, the money can be used to provide additional spaces and improvements. We need to remember that it is not a profit-making service. If a surplus is made, it is reinvested, and that is important.

Many towns and cities acknowledge that parking is an important facility. It is not just about people being able to get in and out, but about supporting the economies of our town and city centres, which are important. Review after review has highlighted the vulnerability of our high streets in particular, and we want to make sure that we give them as much support as possible.

The hon. Gentleman has listed activities and events that are organised in towns. The local authority in Oldham arranges a long list of town centre events that bring a lot of people into town. It ensures that parking charges are suspended for the duration of those events, so that people can get in and out freely and enjoy them. Our preference should be to give as much power, responsibility and accountability as we can to local councils and their communities to do what is right for their towns. I am inclined to think that Parliament should step back rather than continually introduce legislation, but it is only right that we support this Bill, given the spirit in which it is intended.

In my constituency, there are no parking charges in the town of Røyton or in Chadderton. In Oldham town centre, which is the largest, serving a population of a quarter of a million people, the council decided to have free parking at weekends to encourage people to come into the town and spend money. After six o’clock, people can park on the streets as well—that is about supporting local restaurants and the new cinema that has opened in the town centre—and those decisions have public support.

However, the public also supported greater enforcement, particularly outside schools, where people were parking inconsiderately, blocking school access and potentially endangering children’s lives. It was therefore a great knock to the council and the local community when the then Government introduced legislation to restrict the CCTV vehicle from being able to catch offenders. That restriction means that, a staff member now has to sit in a car and see the parking rules being breached. It would have been far more efficient to allow the camera car to be placed on the pavement.

The camera car is loved by the children of Oldham. It has a name—Oscar—because of a competition in which young people were encouraged to come forward with their ideas about what the new enforcement car could be called. Seven-hundred and eighty youngsters took part across 17 schools, so there was great community spirit, and great demand was put on the council for that
car. Parents wanted to know that there would be enforcement outside schools. If the community wants that and if the council is willing to act in response to the community interest, it should not be for this place to say that it cannot happen. That is why I tend to believe that we should allow local communities to do more for themselves, instead of always passing legislation to restrict and determine such things.

We need more clarity about what the Bill means by consultation and who needs to be consulted. That could be straightforward and involve the business improvement district board, which is easy to consult. A board meeting could be called—such meetings happen regularly anyway. The area of interest may be wider, with more people consulted and considered to have an interest. We need to understand what burdens may be involved. It would be ridiculous, would it not, if a council seeking to reduce car parking charges had to go through a prolonged consultation period to get to the number of people that it considered would be affected by that decision, when putting a notice in a newspaper would have been far easier. There will also be times when charges go up, but modestly, sometimes just in line with inflation. Would that require a large public consultation for people who would be affected? Just how large might that be? A bit of clarity on that would help during the next stage of the Bill.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: The hon. Gentleman is obviously basing a lot of what he is saying on his experience in his constituency. May I suggest that he looks at how car parking charges have increased in Cornwall over the last four years? That will give him a real picture of what things are like in rural communities.

Jim McMahon: I thank the hon. Lady for that. It is important to recognise that no two areas are the same and that different local communities and local economies experience very different pressures. I do not challenge at all the view that there are particular issues in Cornwall. My position, as always, is that the best people to determine that are the people who live in Cornwall and their elected representatives. Parliament should not always see the need to pass legislation on what are minor issues. If there are issues about car parking charges in Cornwall, my advice would always be to take that up with the local authority in the most appropriate way.

Mrs Murray: I think the hon. Gentleman has completely misunderstood what I was saying. It is the local authority that has been increasing the car parking charges, against the views of local people, so how can he suggest that the people make representations to the local authority?

Jim McMahon: I thank the hon. Lady for raising what is turning this into a bit of a Committee debate about car parking charges in Cornwall. I absolutely understand that it is a matter for the council or the local authority there, and I absolutely accept that some people will disagree with its level of car parking charges. I was just pointing out that it is a matter for local determination, and people should hold their local authority to account. If people are not happy with how their local authority is performing, they of course have the right and the ability to change the leadership of the council through the ballot box.
at the request of Rosemary Wright, whom my hon. Friend mentioned, to speak to the Hinckley chamber of trade. I met some excellent and very well-informed business people, who seem to have an excellent rapport with their local authority.

**Craig Whittaker:** I understand my hon. Friend’s longing for his neighbour to do well in the Great British High Street awards, but I am sure that, as a Minister, he will wish Hebdon Bridge in the Calder valley, which is also in the running for the awards, equally well.

**Mr Jones:** My hon. Friend tempts me to support Hebdon Bridge. I certainly support the people of Hebdon Bridge and wish them well in the competition. I wish all the finalists well. I understand that the judging process is ongoing and that local people have had the opportunity to vote for their high street or town centre. I hope the people of Hebdon Bridge and Hinckley have voted in their masses to support their local high streets.

**Wendy Morton:** I cannot let this moment pass without saying that, although the towns and villages in my constituency have not entered the awards, they have excellent town and village centres. Does the Minister agree that we should all support all our town and village centres to thrive and prosper, and to play their important part in supporting local communities?

**Mr Jones:** My hon. Friend makes a timely intervention because today is what is now called “Black Friday”, when many people take to high streets, town centres and out-of-town shopping centres, or go on the internet. At a time when we are all starting to think about Christmas shopping—some of us have planned more than others in that regard—and when we are spending significant amounts of money, people should think about shopping in their local high streets and town centres when they can. People often complain when high street shops close because there has not been enough demand to keep them going, but at the same time they often buy things on the internet from a range of retailers, so I encourage people at this time of year to use their local high street or town centre. I suspect that parking is an issue with which most Members of this House are very familiar. Both as a constituency MP and as a Minister, I find that my postbag is kept very busy by this important issue. Indeed, many of my hon. Friends write to me about it regularly on behalf of their constituents. I suspect that even after this important Bill has gone through the House, as I hope it will, this will remain a subject for which the Royal Mail is very grateful, such is the general public’s view of excessive parking charges.

High streets and town centres continue to play an essential role in the lives of our communities, and parking plays a major role as the gateway to our town centres. That was recognised by the Conservative-led coalition Government in a number of reforms of parking facilities owned by local authorities. They made it mandatory for local authorities to provide 10-minute grace periods for all on-street parking bays and off-street car parks. That gives town centre shoppers far greater flexibility, and allows them to complete their shopping and other business in the town centre without having to worry that they are going to overrun by a few minutes on the parking meter.

The previous Government were also concerned by the use of closed circuit television cars, which were mentioned by the Opposition spokesman, whom I welcome to his place. In many cases, those are being used as nothing more than a revenue-generating tool. That is why, in addition to the grace period, the previous Government banned the sending of parking tickets through the post by local authorities, so individuals now have a far greater degree of certainty. If, when they get back to their car, they unfortunately have a ticket, they know that the ticket is there and has to be dealt with, rather than not knowing about it on the day and ending up with a ticket through the post weeks later, when they cannot recall whether they were at that particular location, and so whether they can challenge the ticket. That was an extremely important move forward.

We are also looking at further reforms to the local government transparency code, following a recent consultation. We intend to amend the code so that motorists can see at first hand a complete breakdown of the parking charges that their councils impose and how much they raise. My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) mentioned that we must be careful that our car parks are not used simply as revenue generators or cash cows, because although it is important that local authorities are able to pay for the provision and maintenance of council car parks, it is also extremely important to recognise that car parks are there for the pure and simple reason that they allow people who want to do so to come into a town to use the shops, restaurants and bars. We should never forget that.

**Mrs Sheryll Murray:** Has my hon. Friend seen situations similar to those in some of my local car parks, where charges have increased to such an extent that they are half empty, and the local roads are completely congested with people who are trying to avoid the charges?

**Mr Jones:** My hon. Friend is a powerful advocate for her area. I talked about my postbag; I know that she has given Royal Mail plenty of letters to bring to the Department for Communities and Local Government. She has made representations on many occasions on this important issue, and I am sure that she will continue to take it up with her local council in Cornwall. She is absolutely right. The Labour council in my area has increased parking charges, and revenue has dropped like a stone, because people do not want to pay those charges and so come to other arrangements. The worst-case scenario is that they do not visit the town or high street in question. When that happens, it is disastrous for businesses and the people who work on those high streets and in those town centres.

We have conducted a consultation, as I say, and will amend the code so that motorists can see how councils charge for car parking, and how that money is spent. Since 2014, councils have been required to be transparent about how much money they raise through parking charges and penalties, but our proposals go even further. They enable drivers to see far more information about the level of fines imposed, how many were paid and how many were cancelled.
The Bill brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth continues in that vein, recognising councils’ need for flexibility, but also the need to involve local communities in the decision-making process. The involvement of local communities in these decisions is extremely important. As has been said, the local community has a backstop, when it comes to any decision that a local authority makes, as it can kick that particular administration out at an election. However, given how councils are often made up and how often elections occur, that is not always that easy, and it can take some time. This issue is important to the vitality of high streets and town centres, many of which create the jobs in our constituencies, so it is extremely important that local people and local businesses are consulted before any changes are made that could have a detrimental effect.

Wendy Morton: This topic affects anybody who drives into a town centre or a car park owned by a council. Does the Minister agree that the Bill would enable those who use those services to make their voice heard, through the consultation, directly by the council? That can only be a good thing for community engagement and democracy.

Mr Jones: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. A question often asked, in this House and in the country, is how we can engage our communities more, to get them to get out and vote. The more a local authority engages, the more it will encourage people to do that.

The good thing about the Bill is that when a council is doing the right thing for a local area by dropping parking charges to welcome businesses on to their high street or into their town centre, and to facilitate things for them, there will be no obligation on them to go through a lengthy consultation. They will need to consult when they wish to increase car parking charges—a change that could well be against the will of local people.

Craig Whittaker: With 30 years of retail experience, I know that car parking charges can be good for the high street, because they encourage turnover and footfall. Does the Minister agree that excessive car parking charges can be bad for bringing people into town centres, and that the Bill, through the consultation, will help to address that situation?

Mr Jones: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Friend, who has tremendous experience in this area and very much knows his onions. He is absolutely right that there is a balance to be struck. Excessive parking charges will deter people, but if short-stay parking is not done right, shoppers will be deterred by other people using the car parking spaces that are intended for them. We are not saying that this is a one-size-fits-all situation. We are saying the Bill will make it quicker and easier for local authorities to do the right thing where they think it necessary.

The Bill offers a real opportunity for councils to take a far more flexible approach to supporting their high streets, for example by responding to the opportunity of town centre festivals. We are seeing many councils reduce car parking charges over the festive season, and the Bill will facilitate that by removing bureaucracy.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): I want to give a quick plug to Small Business Saturday, which is a week tomorrow, and is important for all our local communities. May I commend the work of South Ribble Borough Council, which has suspended parking charges in Leyland for that day?

Mr Jones: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend and South Ribble Borough Council, which is obviously thinking very carefully about how it can promote its town centres. Small Business Saturday is a great way to do that. Our larger businesses on our high streets and in our town centres are extremely important, but our small businesses provide an additional vitality that many people appreciate. They distinguish our high streets from many out-of-town retail parks, which do not have that level of small business involvement. It is therefore great to hear what my hon. Friend says.

This is a real opportunity. The Bill will allow councils, when there are festivals, to use the celebrations to demonstrate how good our town centres and high streets are. People lead busy lives and they do not necessarily pop to the high street or the town centre to do their shopping. They might do their shopping and even banking—through apps and so on—on the internet. We often find that because people do not have a reason to go to a high street or town centre, they forget to frequent them. That is a real pity. Any festival, or anything else, that can bring them back into town, make them think, “This is somewhere I should visit and do a lot of my shopping”, and refresh their memory is a good thing.

One thing I learned from my involvement in the Great British High Street competition when I was the Minister with responsibility for high streets last year was that people up and down the country had a passion for their high streets. When I was chairman of the all-party group on town centres, I led a Backbench Business Committee debate in this Chamber. I think that was when you, Madam Deputy Speaker, were the Chair of the Committee, which I later had the great pleasure to serve on under your chairmanship. If I recall correctly, about 70 right hon. and hon. Members attended that debate, which filled a full six hours. It just showed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth did in introducing the Bill, what passion there is for our high streets and town centres. If a place can get its high street and town centre right, it can create an experience that visitors will not get on the internet or in an out-of-town shopping park, and that is why we should do everything we can, as legislators, to facilitate the use of our town centres and put them on a long-term, sustainable basis.

The Bill offers flexibility on car parking charges, but as has been discussed by hon. Members, there is concern about local authorities deciding to raise charges without consulting businesses, as does happen. The Government think it fit and proper, therefore, that where councils intend to put them up, they are responsive to local concerns and should have to consult local people before seeking to do so.

The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) mentioned the consultation and how it might work. I am sure that he is well aware that after the Bill was passed, it would be necessary to implement the changes through secondary legislation that stated exactly how places needed to consult. It is important that those
measures be there, because without a measure allowing for consultation, local people might not get an opportunity to comment. I have seen such decisions taken within a matter of weeks, and even in a day. A council might hold a cabinet meeting, propose a budget and through it an increase in car parking charges, and then in two hours be in full council and pass the measure without the public knowing. We need to guard against that, and the Bill certainly does.

The Bill brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth, which provides for consultation if local authorities want to raise the charges on an existing traffic order, is a sensible reform that strikes a balance between the need of local authorities to set fair car parking charges and the need to consider the views of local communities. I appreciate the points made and thank him for introducing this important Bill. The Government support its intentions, not just because it delivers on one of their objectives, but because it encourages a model of more effective support for our great British high streets and town centres. As we can see in the Chamber, such is the enthusiasm for our high streets among Members from across the country that we should think carefully before doing anything that might cause harm or detriment to them; we should applaud councils that want to reduce charges and welcome more people into their area, and enable them to do so. This matters to local people, and it should matter to the House.

1.9 pm

David Tredinnick: Whenever I have got to my feet in this House over the years, I have always tried to keep in the back of my mind that our job as Members of Parliament is to improve the quality of life of the people we represent. Having listened to today’s debate, I can say in all honesty that this modest two-clause Bill will improve the quality of life in every city and town in this country. I am most grateful for the Government’s support.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Local Audit (Public Access to Documents) Bill

Second Reading

1.10 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Before I come on to the detail of my Bill, I would like to say what a pleasure it has been to spend time in the Chamber this morning, and particularly to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) and what he aptly calls his Santa Claus Bill. I remember introducing my first private Member’s Bill last year, which we fondly referred to as the Peter Pan and Wendy Bill.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing her second private Member’s Bill in her first term in Parliament. If she is successful, as we hope, she will have equalled my record in the last Parliament. I wish her every success.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention. If I am successful with this Bill, I will perhaps have to try to beat her record and go for a hat trick. There is a challenge for her.

Going back to my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth, it struck me that there is a link between my constituency and his—the A5, which runs to Hinckley, but also through Brownhills in my constituency.

Although the title of my Bill is the Local Audit (Public Access to Documents) Bill, it is not really about audit at all. I was going to say that the title might be a little misleading, but I am not sure whether I am allowed to use that term, so let me say that the title does not really encapsulate what the Bill is all about. Let me explain that a little further.

The aim of the Bill is further to improve the transparency and accountability of local public bodies. Because it would amend the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 in respect of the people who are able to inspect accounting documentation, the title has to reflect that parentage. I hope Members will indulge me in explaining that point today. This is a very short piece of legislation, but I believe it is one that we should welcome, because it would make a single and very simple change to the 2014 Act.

The Bill is designed explicitly to amend legislation so that journalists, including citizen journalists, can have the right for one month to inspect the accounting records of the financial year just ended of any relevant authority and to request copies of those documents—with being required to have an interest in that authority.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): When I sat on the Investigatory Powers Public Bill Committee a few months ago, we spent quite a bit of time talking about journalists and how we should define journalists for the purpose of the legislation. Could anybody with an iPhone, for example, legitimately call themselves a journalist? Will my hon. Friend explain in greater depth to assuage my concern that her Bill might put an undue cost pressure on local authorities if officers had to find time to meet any requests, particularly when anybody could classify themselves as both a citizen and a journalist?
Local Audit (Public Access to Documents) Bill

Wendy Morton: That is an interesting point. I shall deal later in my speech with the definitions of “journalist” and “citizen journalist”.

My Bill seeks to increase transparency and openness, but—I must stress this—not to place an unnecessary burden on local authorities that work very hard and often have to handle a great many requests for information.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): I know that the Bill is about openness and transparency, but—this is in the same vein as the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare)—has my hon. Friend conducted an analysis of the extra cost and burden that would be placed on local authorities that are already burdened with huge numbers of freedom of information requests, as she has just said, and the requirement to publish numerous responses?

Wendy Morton: That is another interesting point. We need to get the balance right. We want openness and transparency, but we do not want to place an unnecessary burden on local authorities. On the basis of indications that I have received, I do not believe that the Bill would impose a huge burden on them. As for the cost, they will still be able to charge for requests for information, and I shall say more about that later.

A complete list of the local bodies that would be affected is set out in schedule 2 to the 2014 Act and includes local authorities, police bodies, fire and rescue authorities, parks authorities, combined authorities, and parish councils with an annual turnover of £25,000 and above. It is worth recognising that the Bill provides for that threshold.

Section 26 of the Act enables “any persons interested” to “inspect the accounting records” of such bodies, and to request copies of any part of those records or related documents. However, under previous case law it has been determined that the definition does not include journalists, although it would include, for example, local business rate payers or others who pay fees or charges to the body in question. Section 25 gives local electors the right to inspect and have copies of a wider range of accounts-related information from their council, such as the auditor’s opinion or any public interest report. They can also question the auditor and make an objection to the accounts, which the auditor is required to investigate unless he deems it to be vexatious or a duplicate of another request. That, I think, is an important provision, because it provides some safeguards for local authorities.

In all cases, whether the requester is an interested party or a local elector, the relevant authority is able to charge “a reasonable sum for each copy” of any document that is made. I hope that that goes some way towards answering my hon. Friends’ questions.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her Bill. I spoke during the debate on her previous one.

I have some reservations about “reasonable” charges. We know about the pressures on local authorities and, despite references to reasonableness and vexatiousness, I am slightly wary of the possibility that serial troublemakers might submit requests to numerous councils. Can my hon. Friend reassure us that they will be protected from people who are just digging around?

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention and for speaking in the debate on my previous Bill; I hope she will support me again this time. Reasonableness is important, and including the words “vexatious” and “duplications” should offer some reassurance, but if the Bill makes progress we could seek more clarity on this in Committee. We all work under tight budgets these days, so a balance always needs to be struck between openness and transparency, and unreasonably high charges.

Members may wonder why I am introducing this Bill—why I have given up another Friday to stand here in the House of Commons, as I happen to quite enjoy Fridays. Members may also be a little puzzled as this is a rather technical amendment to audit legislation.

Hon. Members may recall my predecessor as MP for Aldridge-Brownhills, Sir Richard Shepherd. He has probably not had a mention in this place since I made my maiden speech, but my constituents often remind me about him. Sir Richard was a staunch defender of whistleblowers and fought for a more transparent and accountable government and greater freedom of information: if we googled him, we would find many references to the work he did in this place on those topics. His principled stance on those issues resonated with many inside the Chamber and outside, and I am keen to see that that continues. The Bill speaks to those interests by seeking to make local government more transparent and subject to more effective public scrutiny of their spending, and I am sure we can all recall occasions or circumstances when such scrutiny might have been able to help.

The new rights I propose for journalists would provide access to the accounting records of any local authority, thus giving them an important tool. They would be able to access spending information across the piece that would aid their journalistic investigations and the publishing of their findings would provide local electors with information that might enable them to question the auditor or raise an objection, thus enabling them to better hold their local authority to account for poor spending decisions.

Why “journalists” and how do I define that term? I am conscious that Members might want to know why I do not propose extending the inspection rights to everyone or whether “journalist” is a suitable category for the definition of interested person.

Proposed new subsection (1A) defines a journalist for the purpose of this new right as “any person who produces for publication journalistic material (whether paid to do so or otherwise).”

As well as accredited members of the press, the term is intended to cover citizen journalists, by which I mean bloggers who meet the conditions, although it would not extend to anyone who simply has social media access.

Craig Whittaker: My hon. Friend makes a valid case for what she is trying to achieve, but why journalists? Why not open it up to everybody to access these accounts?
If we really want to be open, honest and transparent, surely we should not put any criteria or restrictions in place.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend makes an interesting and fair point, and I would not be against looking at that further in Committee, but I think it is the best way to strike a balance between openness and transparency, and making requests reasonable for councils to deal with. Furthermore, a journalist or citizen blogger would be requesting information that they would then share with the wider public.

Seema Kennedy: I am pleased to hear that my hon. Friend is willing to consider the definition of a journalist in Committee, but we all have to recognise that journalism is changing. Accredited journalists will always come back for a comment and seek to put forward a balanced argument, but I am sure that we in this place have all been subjected to so-called citizen journalists who do not present their arguments with the same critical nature. Furthermore, journalism will probably have evolved another step by the time the Bill receives Royal Assent. Would it not be better to extend these rights to all people?

Wendy Morton: This power is already available to electors, but this group of journalists cannot currently access the information in question. I am trying to achieve that access for them in the Bill. I hope that I will be able to give my hon. Friend more clarity as I proceed with my speech. Otherwise, should the Bill go through today, she will be most welcome to serve on the Bill Committee.

Careful consideration has also been given to the language in the Bill. For example, by referring to “journalistic material”, the Bill focuses on what the person does. This would exclude someone who worked at a newspaper but compiled classified ads. I am trying to keep this really focused. Use of the term “publication” would exclude student journalists who compile journalistic material but do not publish it. I want to keep the focus on openness, transparency and the public.

Furthermore, other legislation defines “publication” as material having a public element. So, while the Bill might include journalistic material tweeted on Twitter, it would not include material circulated to a small, invitation-only Facebook group. It would also be unlikely to include material sent as a direct electronic message. It probably would include a blogger such as Guido Fawkes but not campaign groups such as 38 Degrees or SumOfUs. The extension of the rights to journalists alone has been the subject of careful consideration.

I understand that hon. Members have raised concerns today, and they are exactly the kind of points that I would be more than happy for us to consider in Committee. If the rights were extended to anyone and everyone, there would be great potential to make mischief through multiple requests to inspect or copy documents, without the accompanying ability to make a meaningful contribution towards raising awareness or improving the accountability of the body concerned. I hope that that answers the question raised earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker), who is no longer in his place.

The matter of costs has been raised. Like others, I am conscious of budget pressures; I am, of course, keen not to place further burdens on councils. Therefore the Bill would not enable journalists to question the auditor about a local authority’s accounts. Nor would they be able to make a formal objection to the accounts, as a local elector can. Furthermore, the body would be able to recover the cost of providing any copies from the requestor.

I understand that the number of objections and questions received from local electors is small and, although the publication of articles detailing high or unorthodox expenditure in an area could result in more local electors asking questions of the auditor, the number who will take that next step is still likely to remain small, especially given the short time window available for inspecting the accounts. Again, I hope that that gives reassurance to Members who have asked about those matters today.

Oliver Colvile: May I also suggest that universities write to their students to tell them how they are spending their tuition fees? I tried to encourage that with a ten-minute rule Bill some time ago.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is making some interesting interventions this afternoon, but to expand my Bill to that extent might be a little beyond its remit.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill builds on the requirement in the Localism Act 2011 that any local authority that wants to increase its council tax revenue by more than a certain percentage has to take the matter to a referendum? The Bill will bring more transparency and enhance what there is already.

Wendy Morton: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is right, and her point goes back to what I am trying to say about openness and transparency, which are at the heart of my Bill and which I believe the public want to see more of.

Following the abolition of the Audit Commission, it could be argued that local electors should have more awareness of their rights and be prepared to challenge councils on unacceptable spending, especially in the light of reducing resources. The Bill has the potential to
provide local electors with information that will help to raise their awareness, which surely can only be a good thing.

I understand that the Government support the Bill’s intent and have previously signalled their intention to legislate on this issue at the earliest opportunity. My hon. Friend the Minister might wish to say a little more on that point in due course, but I hope that all right hon. and hon. Members present will support me in taking forward the Bill so that it receives its Second Reading and can go on to Committee and beyond.

1.32 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I take my hat off to my hon. Friend. The Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for her bravery in entering the private Member’s Bill raffle for two years running. I entered last year and was drawn ninth, and I am only just recovering from the process. For my hon. Friend to do it for two years running is either commendable or just downright greedy. I will leave the House to work out which it might be.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is being very generous in his comments. Should he wish to follow the direction I have taken, perhaps I could point him down the route of presentation Bills. If one is willing to queue outside the Public Bill Office, it is possible to get a presentation Bill slot. If he would like me to explain a little more about that after the debate, I will be more than happy to do so.

Simon Hoare: Tempting as the thrill of being inducted overnight by my hon. Friend in the arcane rituals of securing a place for a Bill is, I hope she will not be too offended if I find I have a prior engagement when that invitation arrives at my desk.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Simon Hoare: If I can make a little progress, I will of course give way.

Mrs Murray: It is on that point.

Simon Hoare: If it is on that point, I will of course give way to my fellow Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Mrs Murray: May I offer my hon. Friend some advice that I heeded when I took two private Members’ Bills through in the previous Parliament? Pick the same number—336 was very lucky for me.

Simon Hoare: That might explain why my hon. Friend has never won the national lottery.

Oliver Colvile: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Simon Hoare: Well, if I have given way to Cornwall, I must of course give way to Devon in this west country pincer movement.

Oliver Colvile: My hon. Friend is missing a chance, because he could then have told me how the whole process works.

Simon Hoare: This could almost become a parliamentary orgy, and we should probably avoid that at all costs. Rather than risk the wrath of your chastisement, Madam Deputy Speaker, by having a slightly arcane debate that may be more appropriate for the Procedure Committee, let me return to the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills introduced the Bill with her customary eloquence, and I support the principle behind it—who in all honesty would not? Government of all types, whether local or national, has no funds of itself and merely acts as a clearing house for council or national taxpayers.

We are not spending our money: that fundamental principle underpins a lot of Conservative party thinking, in sharp contrast to the Labour party, for example, which always believes that the state knows best and wants to take as much as it possibly can—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), a former leader of Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council, is chuntering from a sedentary position, but I will leave him to defend his council tax-raising powers to his electorate at the appropriate time. It is absolutely pivotal that voters and members of the public have access to as much information as possible about the finances spent on their behalf.

My next point was also made by some hon. Friends. There will be some issues to be teased out in Committee—I hope the Bill reaches that stage—but I fear that the Bill could in some respects be described as an analogue Bill for a digital age. For example, proposed new subsection (1A) in clause 1 refers to both “journalists” and “publication”. As I mentioned in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills, we spent quite a bit of time during the Investigatory Powers Public Bill Committee desperately trying to wrestle with what a journalist is in 2016. Not even the towering intellects of the Solicitor General and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) could come up with a definition that adequately reflected what a journalist is in today’s world. In the 1950s and 1960s, it would have been rather easier: journalists would have carried a NUJ card; they would have written for their local newspapers or broadcast on their local radio station; or they would have published in a national newspaper or periodical.

I move on to the word “publication”. We would have understood what it meant in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s; it was either publication by verbal broadcast or in hard copy. Today, the lines are not so clear. If I use my iPhone to take a photograph or write something on my Facebook page or blog, am I a citizen journalist? I do not know. Would my rights be enshrined within the Bill?

Seema Kennedy: Does my hon. Friend agree that different standards are exercised by, and expected of, journalists who are members of the National Union of Journalists and citizen journalists, and those do not always go to the same level of criticality and balance?

Simon Hoare: I agree entirely. I would add another differential, which is that, as much as I am a champion of a free press, there are many who publish online today without knowing that they are actually covered by the libel laws, as we have seen in a number of cases, and without the double-check of a sub-editor, an editor or a
chief news reporter—there will be nobody to sense-check their work, and I will come on to that in a moment or so.

If we turn to clause 1(2), we see the phrase “related documents”. Again, I am absolutely certain that the issue will be teased out in Committee, which will add value, cogency and clarity to the Bill.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Clearly, the aim of the Bill is to throw the light of transparency on council proceedings where taxpayers’ money is being spent. In that regard, it is vital that commercial confidentiality is not used as a tool to hide documents and that these proceedings become more open. Whether it is citizen journalists or NUJ journalists, we need that transparency and the expertise of armchair accountants.

Simon Hoare: “Up to a point, Lord Copper” is how I would answer that. My hon. Friend perhaps has very good eyesight, and she would have to in order to read my notes, but she slightly pre-empts something I am coming on to. First, however, I want to talk about “related documents”.

Before coming to this place, I was a district councillor and a county councillor, like many people in the House. I was involved in trying to raise additional funds for our local authority by purchasing commercial property. Some of those transactions would take a little time, but there was documentation available to cabinet members so that we could look at the figures. I take my hon. Friend’s point, because it goes back to my earlier point that local councils have no money themselves, only council tax payers’ money, but we need to think about the precise time when often commercially sensitive financial data would be available and would fall under the Bill.

I also note—I do not say this necessarily with overt seriousness—that I take exception to one word in the Bill, and my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton, my hon. Friend, has hit the nail on the head. If the journalist behind a small publication lived in Poole in Dorset, that person—or subject, as my hon. Friend puts it—would not be able to get the information under discussion. He is showing why the Bill is so important.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is clearly exploring the opportunity for another career; I will leave it to the House to consider what it might be.

This important Bill is required because, as was said when we discussed Lords amendments to the Investigatory Powers Bill and section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 on freedom of the press and Leveson, we are seeing a big diminution in local and regional media, and that is having a significant and damaging effect on how information is shared nationally. The days when the local newspaper reporter, with his or her pad and pencil, attended the finance committee, full council, cabinet or the planning or housing committee have, regrettably, gone. It is now often the case that one journalist covers a very large geographical area, and that is not restricted to rural areas; it is also a phenomenon in town and cities.

My own part of the world, North Dorset, does not have a daily or weekly newspaper. We have the most excellent publication, Blackmore Vale Magazine, and Valley News. The first is weekly, the second monthly. Those free publications are available to the subjects of North Dorset—if you live by the sword, you have to die by the sword when you make those sorts of remarks—and they are excellent. That is how people get news, but they do not have the staff or the journalists to cover district or council meetings.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. If the journalist behind a small publication lived in Poole in Dorset, that person—or subject, as my hon. Friend puts it—would not be able to get the information under discussion. He is showing why the Bill is so important.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend demonstrates his perspicacity, and that is why he is a Minister of the Crown and I am not. He gets my point entirely. A vacuum is being created and it needs to be filled, if for no other reason than democratic accountability.

In all seriousness, we need to consider a couple of caveats, if and as the Bill proceeds, which I hope it will. When the Freedom of Information Act went through this place, it was said that it would not represent a financial burden to local authorities, but it has and it does. We have to consider the Bill against the backdrop of a prevailing picture of a change in local authority funding and a reduction in the direct grant, as we continue to hoover and shovel up the mess left by the Labour party at the end of its period in office.

We also have to take into account the fact that there has been—I welcomed this when I was a local authority member and championed it hugely—an enormous local government reorganisation of shared and combined services. It is also the case—I am sure that this will resonate with the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton, given his experience of local government—that there are far fewer local authority officers who are able to deal with requests from the public. Moreover, local government reorganisation—this is certainly the case with my own council in Dorset—will involve unravelling, over probably the next three to 10 years, the financial meshings and harmonisations of council taxes.

Oliver Colvile rose—
Simon Hoare: Let me just finish this point, because it is very important. That will take the integrity and knowledge of a chartered accountant at least to be able to follow it.

Let me go back to the point I made a moment ago about the sad absence of local journalists in the council chamber. The fact that they are there, and that the information can be provided to them, does not necessarily mean that they understand what they are seeing. I can well recall a headline in my local paper that said, “Council to Slash Flood Defence Budget,” but we were not going to. I had the local journalist in and we sat and discussed it for an hour. Literally the same sum of money was being moved from one budget head to another. Could he grasp it? No, he could not, even though I explained it to him on at least half a dozen occasions. Therefore, with the right of access to information has to come an obligation from the person accessing it to be responsible for at least making sure that they understand and can contextualise what they are being made privy to. If, particularly in a local authority setting, these sorts of things are viewed in a silo and not seen as a bigger picture, that will often lead to a huge amount of confusion.

Oliver Colvile: Does my hon. Friend not think that the public could write to the local authority explaining where the council could be making savings and help them with priorities? That could appear in such wonderful organs as the Plymouth Herald in my constituency—a daily newspaper that is always looking for copy.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend tantalises the House with the wonder of his organ, but we had better be careful on that one as well. I happen to know the Plymouth Herald pretty well. It is a great champion of local stories, which it covers extremely well. I never quite think it gives enough coverage to my hon. Friend—hopefully the editor of that journal might listen to me. I also wish to say a few words about vexatiousness. I think that is fantastically important because the key word in the title of the Act that this Bill will amend is not “local” or “audit”, but “accountability”. We are accountable to our constituents in whichever forum we seek to represent them for the money we spend or allocate on their behalf—there should be no opportunity to hide, mask or obfuscate in relation to the audit trail—and we must ensure that people have confidence in how public bodies spend the hard-earned money of hard-pressed taxpayers.

1.55 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for bringing forward the Bill. It is a very simple Bill, which many of us will find quite refreshing for a Friday. It is really a Bill to repair things, following the passage of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014. I thank my hon. Friend for introducing it, because it has given me an opportunity to get a greater feel for the existing legislation. I perhaps should have had a little more awareness of it, given that in a former life I was the chairman of an audit committee in a unitary authority. In that role, I was very aware of what we should do: how we should be open and transparent, and how we should listen to the public when they raise queries about how their money is spent by their elected representatives.

My hon. Friend explained why she has given up a Friday to be in the Chamber. I am giving up my Friday for a very similar reason, which is to try to advance a Bill. Unfortunately, my Bill is No. 5 this afternoon, but I am very pleased to be able to consider and support my hon. Friend’s Bill.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): May I take a moment to congratulate my hon. Friend on his Bill, at No. 5, which is extremely important? He and I are most passionate about it, because we do not like exports of live animals.

Craig Mackinlay: I thank my hon. Friend for the support he would have given my Bill, had we reached it, but we have not. Let us therefore consider very carefully the Bill to amend the Local Audit and Accountability Act. Very soon after it became law, the Government...
recognised that the terminology of “persons interested” should be expanded, and that is what the Bill is trying to achieve.

We would not have got to this point had a council not tried to hide behind the legislation and examined what “persons interested” actually means. Bristol City Council obfuscated on a request by HTV, the western brand of the ITV network, in 2004. It is quite remarkable that the council felt that it was reasonable to spend taxpayers’ money on fighting, under the legislation at the time, what I imagine was a reasonable freedom of information request for transparency about what it was doing. Journalists can be troublesome people—

Wendy Morton: Not all of them.

Craig Mackinlay: No, indeed, and I will explain how good some journalists are. Journalists have benefited from FOI legislation, and many public authorities see them as something of a scourge, but I do not agree.

Charlie Elphicke: My hon. Friend is being very generous with interventions. First, does he agree that journalism and investigative journalism are important in ensuring that there is full accountability in our democracy? Secondly, does he agree that FOIs are incredibly important in finding out information that large authorities often try to conceal?

Craig Mackinlay: I was about to explain the power and importance of a free press to a democratic society. To my mind, FOIs are very important. It is important that journalists and members of the public can shine a light into areas of government—today, we are considering local government in particular—that might otherwise have remained in the dark. Many right hon. and hon. Members, including those present, will have experience of journalists. They often give us a tough time, and so they should. Sometimes it is deserved, though sometimes it is not.

Antoinette Sandbach: A very good example of that type of journalism is when the BBC looked into the Circuit of Wales. A £10 million grant that was given to it led to more than £1 million of public money being wasted. It was transferred to the private company of the Circuit of Wales’ director, Aventa Capital, and many thousands of pounds were spent on gardening fees for his garden. Good journalism can highlight those wastes of public money.

Craig Mackinlay: I thank my hon. Friend for putting that on the parliamentary record. That shows that we cannot always rely on external, or even internal, auditors of councils, who have materiality levels to consider. It is often individuals, particularly the press, working through FOIs who shine a light on various areas.

As I was saying, we are sometimes deservedly, and sometimes not deservedly, investigated by the press, but bodies that spend public funds deserve no protection whatever from the eyes and ears of the press. I say again how important a free press is to democratic accountability in this country, whether in central Government, Departments, quangos or local authorities.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills for explaining the extent of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014. It covers fire and rescue authorities, police authorities, parks, local and combined authorities, and parishes and town councils, beyond the £25,000 threshold. The 2014 Act does not restrict the definition of individual electors. Indeed, that was expanded through the case that was brought against Bristol City Council. It allows members of the local press to make inquiries, because they are likely to be local electors.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) for making a relevant point about the sad demise of local reporters and the local press. I have two local newspapers, the Isle of Thanet Gazette and the Thanet Extra. Once the homes section of the newspaper has been shaken out, there is not much left. The opportunity for local reporters to go to council meetings and attend civic events has diminished greatly. That reflects changes in advertising revenue, which often underpins local newspapers, as more and more material goes online—a point ably made by other colleagues. The whole movement online raises the question of what “publication” means. It means something very different from what it did in the 1950s, ’60s, ’70s and ’80s.

That brings me on to the question of what a journalist is. Given my ideas on open and democratic government, accountability, and people’s ability to ask questions, I would be more comfortable allowing anyone to make a request under the Bill. However, I fully understand how vexatious those who seem to be serial question-askers can be. We have to balance that tendency with the cost to local government of supplying information that has been asked for.

The term “citizen journalist” has been mentioned, although I fully agree with my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset. I do not subscribe to being a citizen; I would rather remain a subject, so “subject reporters” may be a better term. However, am I a subject journalist? Possibly; I do Twitter and Facebook, and my Facebook account is open, not closed, so perhaps I, too, am a subject journalist. It worries me when legislation that comes through the House has slightly vague terminology, as a lot of it does. We may have an opportunity in Committee to get rid of any vagueness about the term “journalist”, and to get to what I feel my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills intends, namely that this type of inquiry is narrowed down to people who really have an interest in reporting and looking at matters rather more closely, in the public interest.

Craig Whittaker: In the same vein of getting some context on what is defined as journalism, is my hon. Friend aware of the huge rise in fake news websites around the world, which specifically—I have just googled this—attempt to “play on gullible people who do not check sources”, and will simply pass the fake news on, as if it were really true? How do we get around that problem?

Craig Mackinlay: My hon. Friend makes an enormously interesting point. In the modern world, there are new websites that simply drag in bits of information from other, more credible, websites and pass it off as their own.

We are now struggling with what “journalist” really means. Perhaps that can be batted down a little more in Committee. Arguably that definition could be even wider—as I have said, I would be comfortable with that—with anyone being involved, given that arguably...
every voter in the UK has an interest in every single authority because of the national grant that passes from this place, through the Department for Communities and Local Government, to local authority level. Perhaps everyone has an interest, but we need nevertheless to narrow the definition down away from the vexatious inquirer with whom we are all very familiar.

I will leave my remarks there, but in support of the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills, I say that it is quite right that journalism should play a key role in our democracy. People have the right to ask questions about any fund-holding body spending money in their name, so I struggle to find any reason to be against the Bill. I wish it every support possible in its next stages. Any rough edges will be ironed out in Committee.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker; I was beginning to think that the time would never come. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests; I am a serving member of Oldham Council. I thank the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for bringing the Bill forward for debate.

We share the same end: when spending public money and making decisions, public bodies need to be accountable to the public. We need to make sure that information is easily accessible, and that people can access it in more ways than by viewing it in the cold reception of a council office; we need to do something about making it available electronically for people to view.

We should also explore why the Bill narrows down the definition of journalist. That point has come out slightly in the debate, but I am not sure that we have quite got to the spirit of what the Bill is trying to achieve—namely that anyone with a legitimate interest in finding information should have the right to access it. We should not predetermine the motives of an organisation or individual; a spirit of openness should be the foundation for providing information. We can imagine a situation in which an academic might want to carry out legitimate research into how public money is spent, and might require that deep dive into the accounts. We can also imagine a situation in which a resident of a neighbouring or similar authority, investigating his local authority’s spend and wanting a comparator, would like to be able to look at such information. We can see that a wider group of people than just journalists might legitimately want that information.

I am not sure that it is necessary for this place to judge the motives of journalists, or to debate the quality of journalism. I often go into the Members’ Tea Room and question why we waste money on some of the newspapers on the rack, but it is right that people have access to information, and that journalists put that information out in the right way. However, journalism is changing very quickly and we need to review this issue. Rather than being prescriptive, perhaps the answer is to offer it out to a wider group of people and let them access it, and to recognise that what people choose to do with it is a matter for them; it is public information. That is how it should be dealt with. The Bill has the support of the Government, which is good to see. It is also good to see that it has the support of the Local Government Association, which is a champion of transparency and open government.

It is a shame that we have been so busy today that the private Member’s Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) has not been debated. It is on a very important issue that affects many communities. Family homes are being amended for a use that may not be in keeping with local neighbourhoods, taking away vital family housing and having a negative impact on the community. I pay tribute to him for at least putting this very important issue high up on the list of private Members’ Bills.

The Local Audit (Public Access to Documents) Bill appears to be quite technical, but I fully recognise that it is very important, in terms of the spirit of democracy and transparency.
them in their investigations, and publication of their findings could alert local taxpayers to poor spending decisions. As a result, local electors might wish to seek information from the auditor or object to the accounts, thus enabling the auditor to investigate. The measure could therefore increase town hall transparency and accountability.

On the costs, we are not introducing a new right, but extending an existing one to include journalists. Furthermore, the timeframe for these requests is limited to a month in each year, and the body concerned can recover the costs of providing any copies from the requester. The Bill will enable journalists only to examine the documents and seek copies; they will not be able to question the auditor or make objections. Those rights could still only be exercised by local electors, as is the case now.

Oliver Colville: Would it not help if local authorities were much more proactive in revealing information, rather than people having to depend on FOI requests or journalists picking up the phone? If local authorities could be much more aggressively transparent, it would be incredibly helpful.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point. It is often easy to forget that some local authorities are extremely good, have high-quality members and officers, are open and transparent and offer up the type of information to which he alludes. That said, others are not so transparent and open. It would be great if they could all follow the examples of best practice to which he refers, but that is regrettably not always the case, which is why we support the Bill.

Seema Kennedy: My only hesitation concerns the role of the auditor. Might another burden put off some auditors and thereby call their role into question? I am sure that will be teased out in Committee.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I can reassure her that the role of the auditor will not change. The current situation is that local electors can make requests of the auditor for further information and objections to the audit, but those who are not electors in that area cannot.

Craig Whittaker: While we welcome the extension to include journalists, might not the Government—in the interests of honesty, openness and accountability—consider in Committee opening things up completely, well beyond the intention of the Bill, so that anybody can access this information?

Mr Jones: I hear what my hon. Friend says, and I shall come on to that point a little later and explain why the balance is right.

To return to the issue of costs, it is our view that only a relatively small group of journalists or bloggers might wish to take advantage of the new rights. We recognise the potential for increased costs if a journalist running a national campaign asked for particular information from a raft of local authorities on issues such as salaries in local authorities or the cost of refurbishment. I suggest that that might not necessarily be a bad thing.

Mr Jones: I shall make some progress, if I may.

This provision might make local public bodies think more carefully about high levels of expenditure on certain items and how it might look to the general public during periods of financial constraint and reduced public spending.

I should also point out that the 2014 Act includes an explicit power for auditors to refuse to consider vexatious objections, and even if several electors were to ask the same question or make the same objection, the auditor need undertake only one investigation, although a reply to each individual with the outcome might be necessary. The auditor is able to recover any reasonable costs of carrying out this work from the authority concerned. However, if the work results in increased costs, it could be argued that that might cause the authority to consider its future expenditure more carefully.

Charlie Elphicke: The Minister is making a passionate speech and is being so generous in taking interventions. I want to push him a bit harder on one aspect. Under this measure, journalists cannot raise objections or question the auditor. I used to sit on Lambeth Council in the days when it was called “loonyland” and was as bent as a corkscrew. Will the Minister reconsider whether, in such cases, journalists should be able to question the auditor and press him a bit harder, because if that had happened, things might not have come to such a pass in the London Borough of Lambeth as they did under old Red Ted Knight?

Mr Jones: I thank my hon. Friend. The overarching objective here is to enable a journalist who might not be an elector in a particular area to uncover that sort of information and bring it to the public’s attention, so that the public can then question the auditor. There are a number of examples of where that has happened to positive effect, with changes having to be made by a local authority as a result.

The overarching objective of external public audit must be the proper use of public money, and if an auditor objects and it results in investigations by the auditor, he is doing his job and any resulting delay in completion of the audit or additional cost to the body must be seen as a secondary consideration.

Jim McMahon: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones: I apologise, but I will not because I want to make sufficient progress so that the Bill receives its Second Reading.

It might be helpful here to illustrate the difference between this provision and the powers provided by the Freedom of Information Act 2000, which my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) mentioned. The ability to inspect and make copies of the most recent accounting information from a local authority during a specific period could provide compelling and timely evidence of poor spending decisions in the last accounting period that would enable a journalist to
bring them to the attention of local electors by publishing the evidence uncovered. That would provide electors with the opportunity to ask the auditor about the issue or raise an objection so that the auditor can investigate the matter further, and it would potentially enable action to be taken to investigate poor spending, potential fraud or maladministration within a local public body. FOI requests, while being subject to timing constraints in terms of providing a response, do not have the same capability for potentially engendering swift action that could have the effect of stopping illegal activity.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills, the smallest parish councils—those with an annual turnover of £25,000 or less—will not be subject to the Bill, because they are subject to separate provisions under the 2014 Act. They must follow a different transparency code, which we believe works for them.

I know that some stakeholders have expressed reservations about the value of the Bill, and about whether the potential costs will outweigh the benefits, but I firmly believe that enabling journalists to inspect the accounting records of a range of local authorities could uncover more poor spending decisions by councils, which in turn would lead to more potential objections from electors. Although the existing rights are not often exercised, this kind of transparency has, in the past, enabled illegal activity and poor governance in local authorities to be uncovered. My hon. Friend the Member for Dover gave a good example involving failings on the part of a local authority, but there are other examples. In the event of poor decision making and maladministration in councils, it is entirely reasonable for local electors to be able to obtain information and shine a light on what is going on. They may not be financial experts, but the Bill will add another tool to the box, and enable them to hold their local authorities to account.

I stress that the timescale for action would be limited, and that the window of opportunity, and thus the additional cost that Members have mentioned, would be restricted to the 30-day period in which the previous year’s accounts would be available and the inspection rights could be exercised. Any questions or objections would also have to be received within that period to enable an investigation to take place.

The measures in the Bill are proportionate and they could help to uncover poor practice so that people could hold their local councils to account. I am delighted to be able to support the Bill, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills for introducing it.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Protection of Family Homes (Enforcement and Permitted Development) Bill

Second Reading

Debate resumed.

Question (28 October) again proposed, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

2.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): Again, I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for introducing the Bill. I welcome the opportunity to return to this important topic.

The Government have set out their ambition to create a country that works for everyone, but if we are to deliver that, we must ensure that the housing market works for all parts of our community.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): As I think I said on a previous occasion, I used to be the Government Whip on Fridays, so I bear the Minister no ill will in respect of the task that lies ahead of him. However, if he does not want to accept the Bill, will he acknowledge the existence of the hardship and injustice suffered by the individuals who prompted me to introduce it, and will he agree to a meeting to discuss ways to provide remedies for those problems?

Mr Jones: The hon. Gentleman raises extremely important issues, and I will come on to how many of the issues he refers to are addressed by current legislation, the enforcement of which is critical. It would be an important—

2.30 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 13 January.

Business without Debate

HARBOURS, DOCKS AND PIERS CLAUSES ACT 1847 (AMENDMENT) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March.

KEW GARDENS (LEASES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 2 December.

REGISTRATION OF MARRIAGE BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 13 January.
Leaving the EU: Aviation Sector

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

2.31 pm

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): The last time we sat back in our airline seats we might have asked ourselves several questions. How does this big metal tube stay in the air? Will I have to show my awful passport photo? How many gins and tonics is too many to ask for without feeling an abiding and deep sense of shame? One question we almost certainly did not ask, unless we were a Government lawyer perhaps, is whether we would even be able to go on that plane after Britain leaves the European Union.

In my constituency of Luton South that is not an academic question, as tens of thousands of local jobs depend on a successful and thriving aviation sector. Luton airport serves in excess of 14 million passengers each year and is growing at double-digit rates every year. Almost all of those people are travelling to other EU destinations. TUI Travel has a significant base in Luton and through its brand, Thomson Airways, drives a huge amount of traffic through UK airports, and easyJet, of course, is the UK’s largest airline today: a FTSE 100 company that has changed the way we fly and, indeed, think about flying. In the words of its current chief executive, it simply would not exist if it were not for the EU.

Aviation is a permissive regime, not a free-for-all. That means there must be an agreement in place between the countries we wish to fly from and to to get off the ground in the first place. The UK has agreements with some 155 countries, which vary in both their scope and specificity. Some are extremely restrictive, governing down to individual flight slots and specified airlines. Far and away the most permissive that we are signatories to are the 42 air service agreements in place through our continued membership of the EU. To make an obvious point explicit, they account for, and enable, the largest share of UK aviation traffic.

Twenty-five years ago, the deals we participated in across Europe were at the restrictive end of the scale. But, largely at the UK’s behest, these liberalised massively through the 1990s. Today, any British airline can fly anywhere it likes in the EU—that is anywhere, at any time. The EU single aviation market is separate from the single market in goods, services, capital and labour, but is no less significant in terms of the freedom it has enabled. A UK airline can sell tickets to anyone across the 28 member states without restriction; it can fly between member states, or even within another member state.

Let us consider what that means for easyJet, for example. Luton-based, it can operate flights from, say, France to Germany all day long without the aircraft ever touching down wheels at a British airport. It can operate between Milan and Naples, both of which are in Italy—I know that because I did a fact check just before the debate—with no problem whatever. As well as benefiting the local economies through direct employment, enabling connectivity and all the other benefits that aviation brings, that company’s profit today flows back into the United Kingdom. The single market in aviation does not just benefit UK airlines; it has transformed our everyday experience of flight. Fares across Europe are down by around 40% in real terms, with greater choice and competition, and new routes across the EU opening up all the time. Britain has done particularly well under this regime, with about 1 million people in work today because of aviation. We are a world-leading nation in aviation services, and we represent a quarter, by nationality, of all European passengers. Should the Prime Minister stick to her original Brexit timetable, in a little over two years the UK will be out not just of the EU but of the European single aviation market. With no automatic fall-back for the governance of aviation rights, and no World Trade Organisation framework, there will be no legal right to operate flights to Madrid, Munich, Malaga or anywhere else in the 42 countries covered by the current EU-level framework.

It is true that we retain an experienced and capable air services negotiation team at the Department for Transport, but I must point out to any Brexiteers who are still in denial and saying, “Don’t worry about Europe; our future lies elsewhere” that the end of our membership of the EU will have a knock-on effect on many other nations as well. What could be more Brexity than leaving old Europe behind and traversing the jet stream on a flight to the United States? Well, even Concorde as she was in her heyday could not get us there after we exit the EU. Our agreement with the US is in place—yes, you guessed it—through our relationship with the rest of Europe.

The 2008 open skies agreement enables any EU or US-based carrier to fly any transatlantic route it likes. This has opened up new destinations and enhanced regional economies here in the United Kingdom. We have done particularly well under this arrangement, given our fortunate geographical location to the west of the continent. Should we be forced to fall back on our previous agreement, Bermuda II, which dates back to 1946 and was last amended more than 25 years ago, we would be lumbered with a document that considered it necessary to make regulation about flights into London airports alone. And that is not the only deficiency in that agreement or the others that are in place as back-stop provisions to the current EU agreements.

So before we even begin to think about the additional complicating issues, the effect of Brexit on UK airlines and export revenue alone should make us realise that we have a real headache here. Additional issues include: the need to reconfigure immigration reception at UK airports, where e-passage port gates can be used only by EEA nationals; the replacement of a soft border regime by a more restrictive one; and the lengthening of process times, resulting in the need to expand Border Force staff numbers significantly. We also need to consider the role of freight. Heathrow is currently the UK’s largest port, and the customs code will add complexity and cost. Similarly, airports such as East Midlands derive much of their revenue from goods travelling on a just-in-time basis.

The UK is a leading and active member of the European Aviation Safety Agency, the rule-setting body that deals with the safe operation of civil aviation. That body has reduced costs to UK airlines, and indeed to the taxpayer, and enabled interoperability across the continent. We must also consider the significant implications
for UK aerospace engineering and manufacturing. Airbus is our national project and it is showcasing some of the best that Britain can do, but it could now face uncertainty about the wings we manufacture in Wales. It certainly faces additional cost and complexity.

Let me say a word about why singling out aviation among the myriad small disasters wrought by Brexit is not special pleading, but a necessary task. Aviation agreements are different. They have always been treated separately from other trade agreements, even within the EU, because they are a prerequisite for getting such deals done in the first place. An aviation deal is a necessary first piece of the puzzle that is the process of negotiation with the rest of Europe, and it needs to be done ahead of any final settlement. The freedoms that the single aviation market have brought us are an enabler of negotiations and of trade and co-operation. This issue not only affects our relationship with the EU 27, but shapes our air routes, customers and markets in the rest of the world.

In 2015, UK airlines transported 250 million passengers to destinations around the globe and contributed £50 million to the British economy. The Government say they do not wish to pick winners, but we are first class at this. As I mentioned earlier, easyJet is not only the biggest UK airline, but the fourth biggest EU airline. Just consider that for a moment: from Luton to the world. EasyJet’s chief executive, Dame Carolyn McCall, has said:

“We are not saying there will be no agreement”, and for the record, I take the same view. Nevertheless, she went on to say:

“We just don’t know the shape or form. We don’t have the luxury of waiting...we have to take control of our own future.”

EasyJet will never leave Luton as an operational base, but it is in the process of establishing a new and separate operation outside the UK to ensure that it can continue to fly as it does now. That is entirely understandable, and its commitment to the UK is laudable, but the uncertainty is having an effect right now.

What is to be done? First, the Government must take action, and rapidly. Aviation should be at the head of our negotiations. We have very little to fall back on, and the uncertainty is affecting us today. An agreement on the air services market should be reached early in the two-year window for article 50 negotiations, with the aim of securing maximum continuity for both UK and EU operators when we exit the European Union in spring 2019. To do so would benefit us and the remaining 27 states. It is not about cherry-picking from the single market, and it is not a trade issue that should be entangled with the wider negotiations. The deal I am describing is exactly the kind of thing the EU tries to achieve with third countries—in effect, an open skies agreement that maintains the continuity of access and equality across the UK and the EU 27.

Secondly, we need to push for a deal that is as close as possible to the one we have today, and it should include the right for UK airlines to operate between and within member states. The package we negotiated in the 1990s worked well because we worked together. The balance of rights has enriched us all, so we should be clear about the impact on UK airlines should we not achieve the aim of maintaining it.

Thirdly, we should seek to retain not only membership but influence of those bodies, such as the European Aviation Safety Agency, that set the rules and regulations for safe flying. Absolutely no one has a problem with one common set of standards across Europe when it comes to aviation safety. The EASA has benefited considerably from the UK’s expertise; we are a strong voice that should not be lost.

There are a couple of ways to achieve the aims I have set out, and I hope the Minister will be forthcoming about his negotiating stance when he responds. The first step would be to become part of the European common aviation area, which extends the liberalised aviation market beyond the EU and covers 36 countries, including our friends in Iceland and Norway. The other step would be a bilateral air transport agreement, as, indeed, Switzerland has negotiated, but such an agreement would necessarily take longer to negotiate and carry its own complexities. It is essential, however, to avoid slipping back with no deal at all and having to rely on age-old agreements that are no longer fit for the times that we fly in. A series of bilateral agreements would be bad, but falling back on past agreements would not be desirable either.

Exiting the EU cannot be done without some cost to us. The price of doing business will inevitably be a loss of influence over the rules and direction of the single market, but that should be minimised to the maximum degree. Certainty is the most important thing. The Government must not use aviation as a bargaining chip; they should come out and say that a separate agreement is required and that they will seek one out on the existing terms. Whatever the reason for the UK’s voting to leave the EU, it was not to make flying more restrictive, with more red tape and at a higher price, or with less choice for the passenger. For all our sakes, with our future now dependent on our being able to trade with the whole world, we need the first deal of the post-Brexit universe to be a good one.

2.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to be here today. I congratulate the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) on securing this debate and on speaking so passionately and strongly on behalf of Luton airport, which is in his constituency. This is a particular pleasure because we started our parliamentary careers together on the Transport Committee and here we are today discussing transport almost seven years on.

Let me start by reiterating the Prime Minister’s views on the issue. She made it clear that Members of this House will have the opportunity thoroughly to discuss how we leave the EU, and in a way that respects the decision taken by the people on 23 June. This debate is an important part of that process, as was the opportunity the House had to discuss the implications of Brexit for transport on Wednesday, when many of the themes to which the hon. Gentleman referred came up. It is also important to realise that aviation is one of the Secretary of State’s top priorities and will play a huge role in fulfilling our wider aspirations around leaving the EU: being stronger and more ambitious as a country and more outward looking and open for business. Aviation will play an even more important role in strengthening existing links with countries near and far and in building fresh links across the world.
As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, our aviation industry is world class. It underpins the UK economy and international trade. Our airports, including Luton, are our gateways to the world. We are a big global player. We have the largest aviation network in Europe and the third largest in the world. In 2015, goods worth £155 billion were shipped by air between the UK and non-EU countries—over 40% of the UK’s extra-EU trade by value. The UK’s location and extensive aviation network make us an attractive location for global business. Some 73% of visitors to the UK come here by air. The aviation sector is a significant industrial actor in its own right, directly contributing around £20 billion to the economy in 2014, including the wider aerospace sector. The CBI rightly points out that, if the UK retains its aviation market share, air traffic growth in Asia alone will create an extra £4.7 billion in exports over the next 10 years and 20,000 high-value jobs.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have taken the significant decision to support a new north-west runway at Heathrow, which is a clear sign of the importance that the Government place on the aviation sector and of our commitment to improving global connections. With room for an extra 260,000 aircraft movements a year, the new runway will deliver more flights, more destinations and more growth. The benefits to passengers and the economy will be worth up to £61 billion. It will bring more business and tourism to Britain and offer more long-haul flights to new markets. By expanding Heathrow, we will show that we are open for business, confident about who we are as a country and ready to trade with the rest of the world. It will also provide a key hub for connections across the UK, improving domestic connectivity, but there is more to the story than Heathrow.

In October, we announced the go-ahead for a brand new £344 million expansion programme at London City airport. That, too, will increase connections within the UK and Europe, and support business opportunities and investment, as well as improving passengers’ journeys. Furthermore, regional airports such as Manchester and Bristol have each been spending £1 billion on improvements for passengers, with the Government supporting surface transport connectivity on road and rail around those airports. Then there is Newcastle, with a £14 million redevelopment of its departure lounge, transforming facilities for passengers before they take off on their journeys.

Last month, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad, the aviation Minister, signed a deal with China that will more than double the number of flights able to operate between our two countries, boosting trade and tourism. He was also recently in Manchester, welcoming Singapore Airlines to the city—the airline is operating its first connecting route to Manchester and onwards to Houston, Texas.

Looking wider than aviation for a moment, there are also extremely positive signs for investment in the wider transport industry in the UK. Since the referendum, we have seen several major companies announce major investments. In August, Bombardier in Derby received an order for 665 new pieces of rolling stock, delivered for Greater Anglia, which is great news for jobs and skills in the east midlands—as rail Minister, that gives me particular pleasure. Siemens, too, has committed itself to railway rolling stock manufacturing in the UK, as has Spain’s tram manufacturer CAF. In addition, Hitachi Rail’s new rolling stock manufacturing and assembly plant in Newton Aycliffe will create 730 new jobs. We also have Nissan’s commitment to investment, which is great news for not just the north-east but the British economy and the automotive sector as a whole.

I can understand that the referendum outcome has caused some uncertainty in the aviation industry, but the future of aviation does look bright for the UK. By expanding Heathrow, we will open up new opportunities at airports throughout the country. We should be incredibly proud of our UK airlines; they are among the best and most innovative in the world. More people fly with British airlines each year than fly with carriers from any other country, outside the US and China.

Other countries want to do business with us, our airlines and our airports, and I do not believe that that will change after we have left the EU. We must not lose sight of the momentous opportunities there will be for aviation. Aviation remains the top priority for the Department for Transport in the negotiations that will now ensue.

We are working hard across Government to ensure that our exit strategy addresses the priorities of the aviation industry. To do that we have been engaging proactively with our aviation industry to fully understand its views. Just last week, Lord Ahmad and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union had a very constructive roundtable with the aviation industry, including senior representatives from airports, airlines, industry bodies and regulators. That was part of a series of roundtables to allow our industry to express its views directly to Ministers and to discuss the risks, but also the opportunities, that Brexit has created.

We have released a joint statement with Airlines UK that reinforces just how important the aviation sector is in the upcoming negotiations—a point reiterated by the Secretary of State for Transport when he attended and spoke at the Airport Operators Association conference earlier this week. We remain focused on securing the right arrangements for the future, including with Europe, so that our airlines can continue to thrive and so that passengers will continue to have opportunities, choice and attractive prices.

Other areas of critical importance are the efficient regulation of safety, security measures and a seamless air traffic management system. We are considering the implications for our continued participation in the European Aviation Safety Agency system, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, and the single European sky. However, until we leave the EU, it is worth bearing in mind that EU law will continue to apply, alongside national rules.

Leaving the EU will give us more freedom to make our own aviation agreements with other countries far beyond Europe. It is vital that we seek to quickly replace or amend our EU agreements with countries such as the US and Canada. The Secretary of State for Transport has already held positive discussions with his counterpart in the US, and the aviation Minister has met numerous airlines that already operate into the UK from outside the EU. We are confident of reaching an early agreement and we will continue to engage with the industry on those issues throughout the coming months.

Alongside our preparations for Brexit, we are developing a national aviation strategy to address industrial concerns. The strategy will seek to champion the benefits that the
third largest aviation market in the world already brings to this country. It is a long-term framework, covering airports, safety, security, competitiveness, consumers, regulation and capacity, and it will help to maximise the opportunities presented by our exit from the EU, along with the benefits of emerging technologies. Although it is at an early stage, we will look to have full, frank and constructive engagement with the industry and other partners in the aviation sector.

As Members know, the Government are not going to give a running commentary on aviation negotiations with our European partners, however tempting that prospect might occasionally be to Opposition Members. I can assure the House, however, that our negotiating position will be informed by our continued engagement with the aviation sector, as well as with colleagues who have an interest in it. The hon. Member for Luton South said that aviation has always been treated differently in such negotiations, and I see no reason for that to change in the immediate future. I assure him and the House that the views of all Members will be taken very seriously—not just on aviation, but across all sectors—for ultimately we are working hard to achieve the best possible outcome for our aviation industry and for Britain as a whole.

*Question put and agreed to.*

2.56 pm

*House adjourned.*
Oral Answers to Questions

**COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

The Secretary of State was asked—

**EU Funding: Community Groups**

1. Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): What the Government’s policy is on the replacement of EU funding to community groups after the UK leaves the EU.

   The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The Government have guaranteed support for projects that have signed agreements for EU funding. This guarantee applies even when those projects continue beyond EU exit. We are considering future arrangements regarding domestic support for local growth.

   Thangam Debbonaire: A key aim of European funding for community groups is to promote skills and employment. Last week’s autumn statement appeared to have no long-term strategy for investment in skills and employment. Given how important this is for the UK to compete globally post-Brexit, does the Secretary of State agree that this shows yet again that the Government simply have no plan for Brexit?

   Sajid Javid: I completely disagree. I have noted that the hon. Lady’s constituency has seen a 49% fall in unemployment since 2010, and I hope that she would welcome that. What we saw in the autumn statement were further measures to keep the strength in our economy, including the announcement of regional allocations of a local growth fund—it will apply to the hon. Lady’s area—that will go on to generate both growth and jobs.

   Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that for every £2 we give to the European Union we get only £1 back? Under our own scheme, we could potentially be more generous than the EU is at the moment and we could give to community groups in our own constituency. Given that we have now voted to leave the EU, can the Minister give us an update on the progress of this application, so that communities that are still dealing with the consequences of flooding can be reassured that they will receive this money?

   Sajid Javid: I am happy to tell the hon. Gentleman that we have made an application and that it is now being considered by the European Commission. We hope to update Members as soon as we can.

   Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): Planning permissions were granted in the most recent period for which figures are available.

   The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Some 100,900 planning permissions were granted in the quarter April to June 2016. This is a 6% increase on the same quarter in 2015. However, people cannot live or work in planning permission without delay, and we are taking steps to speed up development through our Neighbourhood Planning Bill and the new £3 billion home building fund. In addition, the national planning policy framework expects councils to plan for a mix of housing to meet local needs.

   Jason McCartney: What measures can be brought forward to get developers who are sitting on land with planning permission to get building? When I say “get building”, I do not mean four or five-bedroom detached properties, but two and three-bedroom properties that are affordable to my constituents?

   Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We are clear that sites with planning permission should move ahead without delay, and we are taking steps to speed up development through our Neighbourhood Planning Bill and the new £3 billion home building fund. In addition, the national planning policy framework expects councils to plan for a mix of housing to meet local needs.

   Heidi Alexander: Planning permissions mean absolutely nothing if homes are not actually built. Can the Secretary of State confirm the figures that were released last week, which show that funding that will meet all our national priorities, provide value for money for British taxpayers and lead to more jobs and growth.
just over 141,000 homes were built in the year to September 2016—20% lower than the 176,000 that were built at the peak under Labour in 2007?

Sajid Javid: It is true that under the previous Labour Government, housing starts fell to their lowest level since the 1920s, and I can also confirm that the housing supply numbers for the latest year available are up by 9%.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Does the Secretary of State understand the anger and disappointment felt throughout Sutton Coldfield at his decision last week to back Labour’s wholly unnecessary plans to build on Sutton Coldfield’s green belt? Does he realise that this is a breach of the Conservative party’s election manifesto and his own words from just a few weeks ago? Does he now understand that we will seek to oppose his decision by all legal means and amend future legislation to give the protection that he has shown himself unable to provide?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend has been a passionate and committed campaigner on this issue, and I respect that tremendously. The Government placed a hold on the Birmingham local plan precisely because they value the green belt: it is very, very special. However, when a local community has come forward with a robust plan, has looked at all the alternatives, has considered its housing needs and has prioritised brownfield sites, and when the independent planning inspectorate has said that the plan conforms to all the rules and regulations, the Government have no valid reason to stand in the way.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Where on earth does the Secretary of State get his figures from? According to his Department’s own official figures—I have them here—there were 140,000 fewer permissions last year than in the peak year under Labour. More important is the fact that, as he says, people cannot live in planning permissions; what they really need are decent, affordable homes. Will he tell us how many new affordable homes were built in this country last year?

Sajid Javid: Unlike the right hon. Gentleman, I get my figures from the Office for National Statistics. According to the ONS, housing supply amounted to 189,650 additional homes in 2015-16, which is an increase of 11%, and the level is the highest for eight years. I believe that when the right hon. Gentleman was the Housing Minister, housing starts fell to their lowest level since the 1920s.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about affordable homes. We have provided more money for affordable homes than any previous Parliament, and there has been an increase of 304,000 since 2010.

John Healey: Those figures are just not accurate. Even if we include the money that has been announced, the Government’s investment in new affordable homes over the current Parliament is still only half the level of Labour’s investment in its last year in office. The number of new affordable homes built last year was the lowest for 24 years, notwithstanding 750 separate announcements on affordable housing since 2010. This is a disaster for families who are struggling to cope with housing costs. When will we—after six years of failure—see a serious plan to help people on ordinary incomes with housing to rent and buy, and when will we see a proper Government plan to fix the housing crisis?

Sajid Javid: What was a disaster was a decline of 410,000 in the number of social housing units during the 13 years of the Labour Government. Since then, the number has risen by more than 60,000. If the right hon. Gentleman does not agree with me, perhaps he will agree with his former colleague, now the Mayor of London, who said of the money allocated to affordable housing in last week’s autumn statement: “This is the largest sum of money ever secured by City Hall for affordable housing.”

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) must know something about these matters. He is an estate agent. Let us hear from him.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I tend to spend more time here these days, Mr Speaker.

Does the Secretary of State agree that if we are to create more opportunities for small and medium-sized house builders, we need to allocate more small sites in local plans?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I do agree with my hon. Friend. He will be pleased to know that the new accelerated construction fund will ensure that allocations of that kind are more forthcoming, and that the £3 billion home building fund will provide more support for small and medium-sized builders.

Neighbourhood Plans

3. Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): What plans he has to enhance and extend neighbourhood plans. [907496]

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

Mims Davies: Well-supported neighbourhood plans and agreed local plans are critical to good local planning and housing. How does the Secretary of State aim to hold accountable councils that fail to deliver agreed and well-supported local plans by early 2017, and those that fail to support and encourage neighbourhood plans and hence the right mix of local housing?

Sajid Javid: We expect all authorities to have a plan in place and to keep their plan up to date. We have put that requirement beyond doubt by legislating for it in the Neighbourhood Planning Bill. My hon. Friend’s local council, Eastleigh Borough Council, has not taken the issue seriously and has let down local residents. She is right to stand up for her constituents. Her council should follow her example.
Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware that, as part of the neighbourhood plan for Hexthorpe in my constituency, a selective licensing system was introduced for private landlords, which reduced all types of antisocial behaviour by between 20% and 45%? Will he look at how those schemes can be extended? Will he also look at how the planning process can be modified to allow councils to make quicker decisions about houses in multiple occupation, which can often be linked to antisocial behaviour?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Lady makes a good point. We should always be looking at what more can be done to combat antisocial behaviour. She has raised an excellent example. I was not aware of it but, now that she has raised it, I will take a closer look to see whether we can extend it.

High Streets

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

[907497]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): The Government are committed to supporting high streets. We are cutting business rates for many retailers and developing digital high street pilots in Gloucestershire. In the run-up to Christmas—my hon. Friend’s background is in retail—I hope that we can all take the opportunity to support our local high streets, shop local and support Small Business Saturday this weekend.

Luke Hall: The Sodbury chamber of commerce is starting a programme to help local businesses to use social media to promote the high street. What are the Government doing to support initiatives such as that being demonstrated so skilfully in Chipping Sodbury?

Andrew Percy: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Last week, I chaired my first future high streets forum, where we heard about the excellent work undertaken in the digital pilots across Gloucester, Cheltenham and Stroud. That is an important tool through which we can attract people back to our high streets. We will be doing further work through the forum on these digital roll-outs.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): In my constituency, many small towns, such as Flint, Mold and Holywell, have to impose car parking charges because of the financial situation that they are in, yet large, out-of-town retail developments such as Cheshire Oaks, which is just over the border in England, have free parking. Has the Minister had a chance to look at how we can help to support small businesses on the issue of town centre parking?

Andrew Percy: I would be more than happy to welcome the right hon. Gentleman to North Lincolnshire Council, where, when we took control from the Labour party, we scrapped parking charges, introduced two hours of free parking and all-day free parking on Saturdays and Sundays. It had a wonderful effect: it brought people back to the high street. I would be delighted to see him in Brigg and Goole any time soon to discuss the matter further.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): When it comes to supporting our high streets, will the Minister join me in welcoming Small Business Saturday this weekend, because it plays such an important part in helping our smaller, independent retailers on our high streets? Will he join me in congratulating North Devon Council, which has just announced an hour’s free parking in Barnstaple in the run-up to Christmas?

Andrew Percy: I am more than happy to congratulate North Devon Council on its announcement on free parking. As I have said, free parking has made a huge difference in my area in bringing people back to our town centres. I reiterate that I hope that Members will get out and support Small Business Saturday throughout the country.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): At the recent world town centres summit in Edinburgh, many things were on display, including apps that allow people to put entire towns, including high streets and small traders, online. What plans do the UK Government have in that regard?

Andrew Percy: We are working through the future high streets forum on the issue of connecting people better to their high streets through digital media, including social media. I point to the example of Bishy Road, York, which last year won the Great British High Street award and used its winnings to develop an app with Newcastle University to do just that. A lot of work is going on in that regard.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Fixed odds betting terminals, the crack cocaine of gambling, have led to an explosion in the number of betting shops on our high streets. What are the Government going to do about it? Aside from my amendment, what is in the Neighbourhood Planning Bill to tackle the explosion in betting shops, which no one wants?

Andrew Percy: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s comments. It is important that we have a mix of different outlets on our high streets and I know that there are concerns about this in many town centres. It is of course for local councils to make appropriate use of the powers available to them, but I am happy to look into the issue further and discuss this with the hon. Gentleman if required.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Minister has just referred to alternative uses in our town centres, and one of them can be tourism. Does he agree that a great example is provided by Rugby Borough Council in its development with World Rugby in creating the Hall of Fame, opened earlier this month, in the most appropriate place: the birthplace of the game of rugby?

Andrew Percy: There can be no better place for such a venue and I congratulate Rugby on that development and my hon. Friend on his support for it. It is true that we need our town centre spaces to include a mix of different uses to attract people back into our towns, to support the retail offer there too.

Mr Speaker: It is obviously a very remarkable facility if it is situated in the high street; it certainly has to be acknowledged.
House Building

5. Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): What steps he is taking to build and develop more homes. [907498]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The Government are investing over £25 billion over this spending review period. Our home building fund will help small builders, our accelerated construction programme will see more homes built faster, and we announced a further £1.4 billion for our affordable homes programme in last week’s autumn statement.

Michael Gove: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. He will be aware that communities welcome development all the more if the architecture is sympathetic to the local vernacular, artisan builders are involved in the development, and the environment is respected. In achieving all of those ends, what role do garden villages have to play?

Sajid Javid: We will be supporting a number of garden villages—those that are committed to being well-designed communities and that will stand out as exemplars of good development for years to come. We will ensure that there are real and important benefits that are rightly secured from the outset: quality, design, cutting-edge technology, local employment opportunities, accessible green space, and fantastic access to public transport.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give a bit more information about last week’s statement? Will the extra money for additional affordable homes be for affordable homes to rent, which have so far been lacking from the Government programme? Will the relaxation of restrictions on Government grant to allow a wider range of housing types mean that the whole of the Homes and Communities Agency’s £8 billion fund can be bid for with packages involving affordable homes for rent? At the same time will the Secretary of State say that, on section 106 agreements, priority will continue to be given to affordable homes for rent?

Sajid Javid: We have so far been lacking from the Government programme. Will the relaxation of restrictions on Government grant to allow a wider range of housing types mean that the whole of the Homes and Communities Agency’s £8 billion fund can be bid for with packages involving affordable homes for rent? At the same time will the Secretary of State say that, on section 106 agreements, priority will continue to be given to affordable homes for rent?

Sajid Javid: The Chairman of the Select Committee asks a number of questions. [Interruption.] I will answer most of his questions, but we have a number of opportunities to speak and perhaps I can give more detail then. The high priority the Government place on affordable homes was made clear by the Chancellor last week, and I can confirm that the £1.4 billion he announced is additional money. We estimate that it will lead to about 40,000 additional units. We have given housing associations the flexibility to decide on the types of unit—whether they are to rent or otherwise—which is precisely what they have asked for.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Under Labour, when more homes were built there was not the investment in infrastructure in constituencies such as mine. That has changed under this Government, particularly with last week’s announcement of £2.3 billion in the housing infrastructure fund. Can the Secretary of State confirm to my constituents that they will also see the sort of investment we need to see in roads and rail, particularly on the Wessex route, which is now chronically overcrowded?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the importance of infrastructure if we are to unlock our housing sites. She rightly referred to the £2.3 billion of additional funding announced last week. There is over £1 billion of new money for transport projects as well, which will also go towards releasing homes and easing congestion, which she can also make use of locally.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Secretary of State was a bit vague in his answer to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Select Committee, on the Government’s intention to build and develop homes for social rent, which ought to be a significant part of their intentions to help people who do not want to, or cannot afford to, buy their home. When will he bring forward a plan—such as the Scottish Government plan to build 35,000 social rented houses—for England.

Sajid Javid: I have referred to this at the Dispatch Box a number of times. We have seen a massive increase in affordable homes in England, involving more than £8 billion during this Parliament and an additional £1.4 billion announced last week. This is leading to thousands of new affordable homes, which is something that Scotland could learn from.

Alison Thewliss: Shelter has said that starter homes “will be a non-starter” for those who are just about managing. People on low incomes simply cannot afford the deposit for those houses. Would the Secretary of State not do better to look at how Scotland is investing in social rented housing and affordable housing for people who are just about managing?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady might be interested to know that Shelter’s chief executive welcomed the autumn statement for increasing the number of affordable homes and for providing some of the flexibility that had been asked for. Shelter is an organisation that we work with and listen to, and we will continue to do so.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Given that half the new homes will be leasehold, and that part of the problem stems from the present and potential abuse of the system, will my right hon. Friend please get together with representatives of The Sunday Times and The Guardian, and others who are covering these abuses, to ensure that ordinary people buying their first home do not find that it is unsaleable and of no value when they decide to leave it?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We must ensure that the kind of abuse he mentions is stamped out. We work with a number of stakeholders, and we will certainly see how we can do more.

Local Authority Planning Departments

6. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that local authority planning departments have sufficient resources to carry out their enforcement and other duties. [907499]
The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): We have recently consulted on increasing planning fees, and we will be setting out our response in the forthcoming White Paper.

Steve McCabe: As the Minister might know, I have been pursuing the issue of protecting family homes. I am not against permitted development, but I am against rogue developers who are able to cause untold misery to ordinary homeowners through ruthless exploitation and breaches of permitted development because they are better resourced than local authorities to deal with enforcement. Will the Minister agree to look again at the issue of enforcement in that area?

Gavin Barwell: I share the hon. Gentleman’s concern that local authorities should use their enforcement powers. The Housing and Planning Act 2016 has given local authorities substantial additional powers to tackle rogue landlords through the creation of a database, the use of banning orders, the extension of rent repayment orders and an increase in civil penalties. The powers are there, and I would be happy to meet him to discuss how they should be used.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): One of the best ways to ensure that local planning departments have sufficient resources to carry out their duties is to allow local authorities to charge the full cost of planning applications. This is something that the Government promised to introduce a long time ago, and I very much hope that this Minister will bring it in.

Gavin Barwell: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. As I have said, we are consulting on the issue of greater resourcing for local authority planning departments, and virtually everyone I have met in the four months since I became Housing Minister has said that there is an issue that needs to be addressed. If my hon. Friend bears with us, he will see a solution in the housing White Paper.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): The Minister will know that, due to Government cuts, spending on planning in local authorities has fallen by a massive £1 billion since 2010. We have heard warm words from the Government this afternoon about plugging the huge funding gap, particularly in relation to allowing fees to rise, but will he tell us what more he plans to do to resource planning departments properly, so that they can produce local plans and make plans for the new settlements, new towns and garden cities that we so desperately need if we are to solve our housing crisis?

Gavin Barwell: The hon. Lady is quite right to say that local authority planning departments have a crucial role to play in tackling the housing problems that this country faces, but she underscores their record of achievement under this Government. She talked about local plans. When Labour left office, 17% of councils had a local plan; today, the figure is 72%.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Will the Minister also bear in mind that there is great support for local flexibility on planning fees and that many respectable developers and builders would value that flexibility, provided that it was ring-fenced and reinvested in local planning authorities? That is particularly important in areas such as London, where the cost pressures are especially great.

Gavin Barwell: My hon. Friend makes an important point. If we increase the resources raised through planning fees, it is essential that that money is spent on extra resourcing in planning departments. He is quite right to say that both local authorities and developers are pressing the case to solve the issue.

Planning Applications

7. Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What guidance his Department provides on the weighting of site allocations in local plans, neighbourhood planning and town frameworks when (a) local authorities consider planning applications and (b) planning inspectors consider appeals.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): Our guidance is clear that decisions on planning applications, whether by local authorities or by planning inspectors, must be taken in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

Steve Double: I thank the Minister for that answer. Housing developer Wainhomes recently submitted a planning application for 300 homes on a site in St Austell that was not allocated for development in the town framework. The local council consulted widely when producing the framework and found that 95% of local residents who responded did not want the site to be developed. I know that the Minister cannot comment on specific applications, but does he agree that if permissions are granted on sites that are not allocated for development, that does little to promote the public’s confidence in the planning system?

Gavin Barwell: I share my hon. Friend’s determination that we have a plan-led system. It is vital that local authorities get plans in place, so I was delighted that Cornwall voted to adopt its local plan on 22 November.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the Secretary of State's actions last week completely undermined the neighbourhood plan of Newick in my constituency with the overturning of the decision on the Mitchelswood Farm site? Some 89% of people in Newick voted for their neighbourhood plan, which excluded that site. Does that not suggest that neighbourhood plans are not worth the paper they are written on?

Gavin Barwell: Neighbourhood plans are a vital part of an area’s development plan. Where a local authority does not have a five-year land supply in place, my hon. Friend is quite right that that is an alternative consideration. With the White Paper, we want to consider how we can change policy so that the people who work hard to produce such plans have more confidence that they will have an effect on all applications.

Mr Speaker: I gently remind right hon. and hon. Members that they should not leave the Chamber until all the exchanges on the question to which they have contributed have been concluded. One fellow has just
beetled out of the Chamber having popped his question, taking precisely zilch interest in anybody else’s. I am sure that the discourtesy was inadvertent, but it is in breach of a long-standing convention of this House, of which all Members ought to be aware. Modesty and kindness forbid me to mention the name of the offending individual on this occasion.

Community Pubs

8. Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with local authorities on support for community pubs.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): I note my hon. Friend’s interest as chairman of the all-party beer group. I am happy to work with local authorities to develop community pubs. Listing a pub as an asset of community value gives communities time to bid to buy it should the owner decide to sell. We have supported community buying through the £3.6 million “More than a Pub” programme.

Graham Evans: Many pubs will have welcomed the news about rural rate relief in the autumn statement, but they still face an immense challenge on business rates. What further steps could the Minister take with local authorities to help ease the burden of business rates on pubs?

Andrew Percy: We are permanently doubling the level of small business rate relief from next year, meaning that 600,000 small businesses will pay no business rates at all. In addition, 17,000 pubs may be eligible for small business rate relief from 1 April next year, depending on their rateable value. Around 13,000 are potentially eligible for 100% relief, compared with some 4,000 now.

15. Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Why are business rates on pubs calculated using a method different from that used for other business premises?

Andrew Percy: Before the review, we agreed a methodology with the industry through which the revaluations would take place, so that is why that mechanism is used.

23. Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Like other businesses, pubs in my constituency are grateful for the raising of the threshold for the payment of rates, but they can suffer following bizarre Valuation Office Agency reassessment decisions that cancel out the benefit. As local authorities such as Somerset are now highly dependent on growing their rates revenue and on 100% rates retention, how can it be right that businesses face uncertainty from such a source?

Andrew Percy: This is an independent process and it would not be appropriate for Ministers to intervene in it. We have, of course, provided £3.6 billion of transitional relief for those businesses affected by the revaluation, but I refer back to the statistics I gave in an answer a moment ago about the number of businesses that could now qualify for 100% relief.

House Building: Rural Areas

9. Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that new homes can be built in rural areas.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): We want to see all areas with an up-to-date plan in place that meets housing need. We are doubling annual capital spending on housing over the course of this Parliament, and we will be announcing further measures, some specific to rural areas, in the forthcoming White Paper.

Huw Merriman: I thank the Minister for his response, and I am keen to see more local housing. With 75% of my constituency designated as areas of outstanding natural beauty, my district councils are in the midst of delivering a much-needed five-year land supply. Will he assure me that the Government will implement robust measures to prevent opportunistic developers from applying to build anywhere in our AONB in the meantime?

Gavin Barwell: I am delighted to hear that my hon. Friend’s local councils are getting their five-year land supply in place, as that is crucial. In the meantime, I can reassure him that the national planning policy framework says that great weight should be given to conserving landscape and scenic beauty in AONBs, so the protection is there in national policy.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): What will the Minister be doing to ensure that British-made ceramics—tiles and bricks—will be used for rural housing and, for that matter, for all housing?

Gavin Barwell: That is a good question and I am happy to meet the hon. Lady to explore what opportunities exist, as she is a doughty champion for her area and for her industry.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that under the national planning policy framework, unmet housing need does not constitute an exceptional circumstance necessary to warrant building in the green belt?

Gavin Barwell: That is a timely question. The answer is that the NPPF does not define what the exceptional circumstances are that should justify changing green belt boundaries. That is rightly a matter for local communities to decide on.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: Infrastructure Projects

10. Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): What his policy is on the ability of organisations responsible for areas of outstanding natural beauty to intervene in important infrastructure projects; and if he will make a statement.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): Any individual or organisation can make representations on planning applications for infrastructure projects, and it is of course for the decision maker to decide what weight, if any, should be given to those representations.
Charlie Elphicke: For more than a year, my constituents have been battling to get rid of a 40 mph speed limit on the main motorway to the port of Dover—a road of national strategic importance—but the infrastructure for this to happen is being held up by the AONB. What measures can be taken by the Department or through legislation to make sure that a better balance is struck?

Andrew Percy: I am aware of this issue and my hon. Friend’s advocacy on behalf of his constituency. Clearly, legislation does require Highways England to have regard to the AONB’s purpose to conserve and enhance that natural beauty. I am more than happy to meet him or to pass his concerns on to the appropriate Department.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): The Minister’s colleague has just confirmed that the NPPF makes it clear that AONBs should have the highest status of protection, yet the Chilterns Conservation Board, the public body set up to protect the Chilterns AONB, had its proposal for a fully bored tunnel under the Chilterns rejected. When it comes to projects such as HS2, it appears that there is one rule for some AONBs and another for the Chilterns AONB. What is the Minister going to do to try, still, to persuade the promoters to have a fully bored tunnel under the Chilterns and to live up to his promise to protect our AONBs?

Andrew Percy: It is absolutely appropriate that AONBs receive the protection they do in the planning process. I am more than happy to pass on my right hon. Friend’s question and concerns about the tunnel and the Chilterns to the Secretary of State for Transport.

Troubled Families Programme

11. Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the cost-effectiveness of the troubled families programme.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): Between 2012 and 2015, nearly 120,000 families on the troubled families programme saw their lives improve. In October, we published a report on the programme’s costs and potential fiscal benefits based on local authority data. A first assessment on the cost-effectiveness of the new programme will be available next year.

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the Minister, but I am not sure whether he has had a chance to thoroughly read the report commissioned by his own Department on the scheme; it found no evidence of a significant or systematic impact on the key objectives of the programme. Will Ministers set out why the decision was taken to spend hundreds of millions of pounds expanding the programme before they could even know whether that was money well spent?

Mr Jones: This party is absolutely focused on outcomes, not process. Nearly 120,000 families have had their lives improved, and I for one am proud that there are more children back at school, that youth crime is down and that more than 18,000 adults involved with the programme are back in work.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that the report shows that although this was purportedly designed around the payment by results model, it was no such thing? Local authorities simply delivered the number of families for which there was funding. What do the Government intend to learn from the failure to design an effective contract? How will they ensure that in future taxpayers’ money is well spent?

Mr Jones: As I said in my previous answer, we are confident that a significant number of families have benefited from the programme, but the new programme will be subject to a more robust evaluation, particularly of its cost-effectiveness.

Adult Social Care

13. Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): What steps is his Department taking to ensure adequate funding for adult social care.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I fully recognise the pressures on adult social care, which provides a vital service to millions of people across the country. That is why the Government have provided extra funding for adult social care, with up to £3.5 billion available during this Parliament.

Lilian Greenwood: Yesterday, the former Health Secretary, Stephen Dorrell, commented on the Chancellor’s autumn statement, saying that it was “a mistake” not to provide extra investment in the social care system, which was “inadequately funded”. Last week, directors of social services said social care was “in real jeopardy”, and the Conservative leader of Warwickshire County Council said that “it is no exaggeration to say that our care and support system is in crisis.”

The Minister says that he is providing extra money, but when are the Government going to wake up and provide the funds needed to prevent the whole system from collapsing?

Mr Jones: During the spending review last year, we consulted the sector carefully. We spoke with the Local Government Association, and looked at length at what it said. It said that we should have £2.9 billion of extra funding available for adult social care across this spending period, but we have provided up to £3.5 billion.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Social care should not be a party political matter, and there are concerns on both sides of the House. Would it not be a good idea if the Government worked with the Opposition to see whether we could agree on a way forward so that social care progresses satisfactorily? Perhaps an independent body responsible for social care could be created, rather than the issue being left to local government and the national health service.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend makes a sensible point. These issues are often important, and we need to speak to a wide group of people to make the right decisions. We are certainly interested in speaking to anyone who wants to come up with sensible and practicable solutions in relation to this vital issue.
20. [907514] [R] Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Care Quality Commission says that the social care system is about to topple over. The LGA says that councils cannot cope with the cost pressures, and much of the funding that the Minister has discussed is either repackaged funding or funding that will not kick in until late in this decade. When is he going to come clean about the scale of the crisis, take his head out of the sand and lobby the Treasury to make sure that the promised money for 2020 is brought forward and we get to grips with the care crisis?

Mr Jones: This is not repackaged money: this is new money for adult social care—up to £3.5 billion across the spending review period. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the report by the LGA, which is absolutely right that the key is better integration of health and social care. The £1.5 billion that we are providing through the better care fund is the best way to continue to promote that.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab) rose—

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I am loth to come between sisters, especially twins, but I call Angela Eagle.

Ms Angela Eagle: Thank you, Mr Speaker; you may have caused me some trouble later this evening. In the past six years, the Government have cut social care funding by nearly £5 billion. In my authority of Wirral, there is a £3.5 million hole in the budget only halfway through the year. The system is on its knees, and there has been an 18% increase in emergency admissions to hospital as a result. The Prime Minister did not have an answer to this last Wednesday. When is the Minister responsible going to have an answer?

Mr Jones: We have enabled councils to raise additional funding through the adult social care precept, but this is all about priorities and the way in which local government allocates its finance. The hon. Lady might want to have a word with her local council leader and group, as they have sought to spend £270,000 on a propaganda newspaper. Is that good value for money when they say that they need more for social care?

Mr Speaker: I call Maria Eagle.

Maria Eagle: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to follow my sister—as I always have.

Liverpool City Council, which covers most of my constituency, raises £146 million in council tax every year from its council tax base. This year it has spent £151 million on adult social care, yet since 2010, this Government and their predecessor have cut 58% of the budget that the council has to fulfil its statutory obligations. Is the Minister really saying that Liverpool City Council is in a position to spend any more on adult social care, which it needs to do, without more money coming from central Government?

Mr Jones: I refer the hon. Lady to the indicative allocations that have been made through the better care fund, which takes into account councils’ ability to raise council tax. In terms of its average spending power per dwelling, Liverpool gets £100 more than the national average. She might want to discuss with her council leader how the council can improve its collection of council tax, which in Liverpool is well below the national average.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): It has been interesting to listen to the Minister’s responses, which demonstrate that the Government do not accept that there is a crisis in adult social care. That denial leads me to worry about the 1.2 million people who cannot even access a service. Local authorities have had to cut between 40% and 50% of their budget. Blackburn Council raises £900,000 with a 2% precept, but to stand still it needs £1.2 million per year and it already has a £5.8 million black hole. Are we seriously saying that we will wait to have conversations to see how we can take things forward? There is a crisis happening now—we are heading for winter and we are putting old people in danger. Will the Secretary of State find the £2.6 billion that is needed now?

Mr Jones: I am not sure that the Secretary of State has that money down the back of the sofa or of the green Benches. We recognise that this is an extremely important issue, and that is why we are giving additional precepting powers, which will have a cumulative effect over time. I note that the hon. Lady is looking for an extra £2.6 billion off the cuff. That is interesting, given the fact that at the last general election, the then shadow Chancellor said that if the Labour party were in power, local government would be subject to cuts.

Property Management Agents

16. Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): What recent representations he has received on the effectiveness of the regulation of property management agents working on newly developed housing; and if he will make a statement.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): My right hon. Friend is right to raise concerns about the quality of service provided by some managing agents. That is why we are introduced legislation to ensure that property management agents belong to an approved redress scheme.

Alistair Burt: I am working with constituents who, despite a number of complaints about management services on a relatively newly built estate, find that the management agents are not prepared to meet them as a group. They find that their local parish council has discontinued contact with the management agents, and the management agents have not held an annual general meeting, as they promised in their agreement. If this is in any way familiar to my hon. Friend, will he tell me what more my constituents can do to redress the balance of power between themselves and the people who seem to have them over a barrel?

Gavin Barwell: Sadly, the situation that my right hon. Friend describes is familiar, and something that he has raised before. The Government are looking to address it. Although there are existing legal powers, we are exploring whether further changes are required to address this problem.
Mr Speaker: To speak with exemplary brevity, I feel sure, I call Mr Andrew Slaughter.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Thank you for squeezing me in, Mr Speaker.

Speaking of regulation, the Housing Minister thought two months ago that Labour’s ban on letting fees was a bad idea. Does he agree that, if we want security and affordability in the housing market, he should, in addition to signing up to that ban, sign up to Labour’s other manifesto promises—three-year tenancies and control of inflationary rent increases in the private sector?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman can now breathe.

Gavin Barwell: It certainly would be good to see longer tenancies in the private rented sector, but in terms of regulating to force all private landlords to let for longer periods and to introduce rent controls, we have only to look at the record in our own country and around the world to see what the result of such policies would be: a smaller private rented sector, which would make our housing problems worse.

Topical Questions

T1. [907519] Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I am sure that the whole House will welcome the latest official house building numbers showing housing starts at an eight-year high, but there is still a lot more we need to do. That was why last week’s autumn statement contained billions of pounds of funding to get Britain building, and it is why our White Paper, which is due to be published in January, will set out a range of radical plans to boost the housing supply. I can also confirm that we will start announcing local growth fund allocations later this week, and I hope to have all the deals announced before Christmas.

Mims Davies: Further to my recent question to the Leader of the House and a written parliamentary question, I would like to raise once again the importance of protecting ancient woodland from hostile development. In terms of delivering much-needed appropriate housing, do Ministers agree that once we bulldoze ancient woodland, it can never come back, and that options B and C in Eastleigh Borough Council’s emerging local plan are completely inappropriate and will destroy a valued local community landscape?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right: ancient woodland is an irreplaceable habitat. The national planning policy framework is clear that "planning permission should be refused for development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats, including ancient woodland" unless there are very exceptional circumstances. However, without a local plan, local people do not have the certainty they need. Once again, my hon. Friend has demonstrated that Eastleigh Borough Council is letting its residents down.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Changes to the local government pension scheme that recently came into effect were debated in a statutory instrument Committee last week. During the debate, the Minister indicated that EU directive 41/2003 does not apply to the LGPS, yet a letter I have here from his own Department says that it does. Will he confirm that the directive does apply and that it has been applied?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I can assure the hon. Lady that the directive, firmly believe, does not apply. If she would like to meet me to discuss the issue further, I would be more than happy to do so.

T2. [907520] Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): The Valuation Office Agency appears to be a law unto itself. At the click of a mouse, it seems to be able to change the way in which large sites such as the Vodafone headquarters and the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston are rated, wiping millions off the income of a small unitary local authority such as West Berkshire. Will the Minister agree to look into this matter?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend raises an important question. When a council’s income is impacted by a successful business rates appeal or other losses in business rates income, there is a safety net, as I am sure he will be aware. However, he will be reassured by the fact that, during the design of the new 100% business rates retention scheme, we are looking at how risks around business rates income will be managed in the future.

T3. [907521] Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agree that the actions announced in last week’s autumn statement will improve not only access to housing but the living standards of ordinary working people and their families?

Sajid Javid: I could not agree more. Definitive action is what is required, and that is exactly what the Government are providing. The autumn statement detailed £7.2 billion of investment in housing, which is the biggest dedicated investment in housing in a generation. The Government expect to double in real terms annual capital spending for housing over the course of this Parliament. That is great news for Essex and great news for the country.
Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Through no fault of its own, Hull has struggled to be part of any devolution deal in Yorkshire and the Humber, despite accepting the elected mayor model and recognising the importance of devolution to economic regeneration for the city. Will the northern powerhouse Minister agree to meet local MPs, councillors and others to discuss what has worked elsewhere in the country and how we can take Hull forward?

Andrew Percy: I would be delighted to do so. The situation is deeply disappointing. I met Councillor Steve Brady, the Labour leader of Hull City Council, only on Friday, when we discussed devolution. The hon. Lady can of course turn up at this afternoon’s meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire, where she will see a devolution double whammy with the Secretary of State and me talking about Yorkshire devolution.

Andrew Percy: I absolutely congratulate local leaders in the west of England on their grown-up approach, and my hon. Friend will know, Bath and North East Somerset Council recently voted in favour of entering the west of England devolution deal. Will he join me in congratulating the council on making this decision, which will devolve powers to the region and allow it to invest in affordable housing projects across Bath and the west of England?

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Did the Minister see last week’s shocking report from the Alzheimer’s Society showing that only 2% of people affected by dementia feel that their home carers have adequate training in dementia, that only 38% of home care workers have any dementia training at all, and that 71% did not have accredited training, with dreadful consequences for dementia sufferers and their families and carers? Does he accept that until social care is properly funded, this situation will just get worse?

Mr Marcus Jones: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. By 2020, we expect all social care providers to provide appropriate training on dementia to all relevant staff. Over 100,000 care workers have already received such training. As I said with regard to the funding of adult social care, we have provided a package that will provide up to £3.5 billion of extra funding during this spending review period.

T5. [907523] Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): Leeds City Council is developing a local plan, but reports suggest that it is unable to demonstrate that it has a five-year land supply, which is endangering sites that the plan seeks to save. Has the Department considered giving some leeway to councils that are in the process of developing a local plan so that they do not need such a long-term housing supply?

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): My hon. Friend is right to underline the importance of local authorities having a five-year land supply and an up-to-date local plan, because that ensures that local communities can decide where development should go, what kinds of development should happen, and which sites should be protected. I am looking forward to visiting his constituency shortly, and I hope we can discuss these issues in more detail then.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The amount of money that has been cut from social care since 2010 dwarfs what the Secretary of State’s Department is going to be putting in over the next five years. He might wish to deny it, but there is a crisis in our health and social care services, with too many people stuck in our hospitals because there is no care available to enable them to come out. Why did the Secretary of State fail to make adequate representations to the Chancellor to ensure that funding was allocated in last week’s autumn statement?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady rightly points to a very challenging situation. I am sure she will welcome the additional £3.5 billion of funding that is being provided during this Parliament. The other thing that I know she will welcome—she pointed to it in her question—is the need for more integration between the NHS and adult social care, which we are seeing in parts of the country such as Manchester. We want that to continue and to ensure there is a plan in place in every local region by 2020.

T7. [907525] James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): While I welcome the £55 million of funding for the South East local enterprise partnership, it falls well short of the £229 million that was applied for, which would have secured a great deal of business growth and economic development in the area. Will my hon. Friend point me in the direction of any future funding that might bring us to the table to secure the economic growth that is needed?

Andrew Percy: We have only announced regional allocations, so it is not correct to say at this point that the South East LEP will receive £55 million. The final figures will be announced in the coming weeks, and the initial funding allocations given to LEPs for discussion may change somewhat.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): In Kirklees, the amount spent on social care has gone down in real terms by 15.7% since 2010, despite demand increasing with a rapidly ageing society. What steps are the Government taking to help local councils with the £1.9 billion funding gap in adult social care this year?

Mr Marcus Jones: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. We are taking the situation extremely seriously. We have enabled councils to raise additional funding through the adult social care precept—up to 2% on top of the council tax—and in a few weeks’ time, she will be able to see the allocation for the better care fund, which will come into effect in April 2017 for the next financial year.

T8. [907526] Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): With £3.15 billion allocated for 90,000 new homes in London and a doubling of the money spent to combat rough
sleeping, what action can Ministers take to ensure that that money is used quickly to provide the homes that people desperately need, so that no one is forced to sleep rough?

Gavin Barwell: That was a great question from my hon. Friend. The Greater London Authority will be launching its affordable housing programme tomorrow. It is worth reiterating what the Mayor has said, which the Secretary of State quoted:

“This is the largest sum of money ever secured by City Hall to deliver affordable housing.”

That is just the beginning, because last week the Chancellor announced another £1.4 billion, and London will get a share of that budget. That is a clear sign of the Government’s commitment to tackling our housing problems.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): People who live close to recreational airfields such as Hibaldstow do not have the same protection from noise and nuisance as people who live near to similar recreational activities that involve staying on the ground. Will the Secretary of State have a look into this and see what can be done about it?

Gavin Barwell: The Minister for Housing and Planning is very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss those issues.

T9. [907527] Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): If we are to have a local plan-led system, what is the Minister going to do to make sure that local plans are saluted, especially by planning inspectors?

Gavin Barwell: Provided that local plans have a five-year land supply, the expectation should be that planning applications are decided in accordance with those local plans, unless clear material considerations suggest otherwise. My message to my hon. Friend is that his local authority has a local plan in place with a five-year land supply.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The housing waiting lists that apply to my constituency have been growing for a long time. Can the Secretary of State answer earlier questions and tell us what proportion of the much-vaunted new houses will be rented, and what proportion will be for social rent?

Gavin Barwell: What we have done with the affordable housing programme is to give complete flexibility, so I cannot give a specific answer, because it will depend on the bids that housing associations make from the programme. There is complete flexibility in relation to tenure. The Government have had a policy of focusing on affordable rent rather than social rent, because that allows us to deliver far more homes for a given level of public subsidy.

T10. [907528] Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Many of my constituents are keen to see an ambitious devolution deal secured for the west of England. Will the Secretary of State update the House on the progress that is being made on that devolution deal?

Sajid Javid: I know that my hon. Friend is a big fan of this deal. Devolution will support jobs in the west of England and many other parts of England. The next step for that deal is for the Government to seek the consent of all three councils involved for the parliamentary order, and we are well down the course with that. I congratulate my hon. Friend on supporting this transformative deal.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the new White Paper address the fact that under the Government’s flawed right-to-buy proposals, more socially rented houses are currently being sold than are being replaced?

Gavin Barwell: We are very proud of the right-to-buy policy, which gives ordinary working people the chance to buy their homes. Where I agree with the hon. Gentleman is that it is absolutely essential that we replace the affordable rented accommodation that is sold, and the Secretary of State and I are absolutely determined to make sure that that happens.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Will the Minister meet me and representatives from the Royal Marsden hospital, the Institute of Cancer Research at my local Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust and Sutton Council to see what more can be done to bring publicly owned land at the Sutton hospital site back into use to deliver a world-class London cancer hub providing 13,000 highly skilled jobs?

Sajid Javid: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend. I know he supports our accelerated construction programme on public land, which seeks to do just that.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The increase in family homelessness has meant that more and more children are in unsuitable temporary accommodation in bed and breakfasts. When did any Minister in the Department last discuss with Education Ministers the impact of homelessness on children’s achievements, and what are they planning to do about it?

Mr Marcus Jones: I can reassure the right hon. Lady by telling her that we have a ministerial working group that covers a multitude of different issues in relation to homelessness, and one of the Ministers around the table is from the Department for Education. I can also tell her that we are looking to change the way in which the temporary accommodation management fee works, which should lead to a far better situation in which local authorities can plan with regard to temporary accommodation to make sure that people are not in such accommodation for so long.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Over the years, planning has not taken enough notice of local and regional designs, so will Ministers get planning authorities to concentrate on that? A great garden village is being promoted at Cullompton—it has a water park and everything—which will be a very good design.

Gavin Barwell: My hon. Friend makes the very important point that getting good-quality design is key to the acceptability of building more housing. I had the great privilege recently of meeting him and some of his constituents to talk about the contribution that neighbourhood planning can make towards achieving that goal.
Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Our countryside is not littered with advertising hoardings, unlike in other countries in Europe, because of the action taken by a Labour Government through the Town and Country Planning Act 1947. However, lots of farmers and other landowners are now circumventing the rules by parking great big lorries with hoardings by roads. What are the Government going to do to stop this?

Gavin Barwell: We have made sure that local authorities have the powers to take enforcement action in such places. As I said in response to an earlier question, we are determined to ensure that local authorities are properly resourced to take that enforcement action.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Further to the excellent question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), the right to manage is a safety valve for leaseholders, but this complex legal issue often thwarts residents, so what more can the Minister do to share best practice and to advise frustrated residents?

Gavin Barwell: Some excellent organisations already exist to provide advice to people dealing with these problems. I can, however, tell my hon. Friend that there is a clear sense on both sides of the House that this issue needs addressing. The Government intend to take action, and I am keen to discuss that with him.
Aleppo

3.37 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Aleppo.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): We are appalled by the entirely preventable humanitarian catastrophe now taking place in eastern Aleppo and across other besieged areas in Syria. The UN Under-Secretary General, Stephen O’Brien, has described what is happening in Aleppo as an “annihilation”. Over the weekend, Syrian regime forces captured several opposition-held districts of Aleppo, potentially bisecting the besieged eastern part of the city, and there are reports of further advances today.

The regime’s two-week assault on Aleppo has been backed predominantly by Iranian and Shia militias. There have been unconfirmed reports of Russian airstrikes, but our understanding is that since airstrikes resumed a fortnight ago, the vast majority have been by the regime. During that time, hundreds have been killed and thousands more have been forced to flee. The last functioning hospital was put out of action on 19 November. Humanitarian access has been deliberately blocked by the regime and its allies for over four months now, leading to the 275,000 civilians in eastern Aleppo facing imminent starvation. Across the rest of Syria, there has been almost no progress in delivering the UN humanitarian plan for November. The latest UN plan to deliver humanitarian aid was agreed by armed opposition groups last week, but the regime is still blocking it. This is just the latest of many failed efforts.

I make it clear to Russia that using food as a weapon of war is a war crime. So, too, is attacking civilian infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools—another favoured tool of the regime and its backers. We call upon those with influence on the regime, especially Russia and Iran, to use that influence to end the devastating assault on eastern Aleppo and to ensure that the UN’s humanitarian plan can be implemented in full. As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said this morning, that requires an immediate ceasefire and access for impartial humanitarian actors to ensure the protection of vulnerable citizens fleeing the fighting. All those involved in the siege and assault on Aleppo have a responsibility to change course to protect civilians.

Addressing the dire situation in eastern Aleppo and the wider Syrian conflict is a priority for this Government. I spoke to Britain’s ambassador to the UN this morning to discuss what more we can do in the Security Council to bring diplomatic pressure to bear on the conflict. There can be no military solution to this conflict. What is needed is for the regime and its backers to return to diplomacy and negotiations on a political settlement, based on transition away from President Assad.

The Government stand ready to engage fully in discussions and offer whatever support we can in the quest for a political settlement, working in partnership with the international community, including Russia. We need to maintain international pressure to that end. That is why we are strong supporters of the recent EU effort to extend 28 new sanctions designations against the regime in October and November. In the meantime, we continue to work with our key partners to look at every option to alleviate the suffering of millions of Syrians, especially those in Aleppo.

For as long as the regime and its backers deny humanitarian access, whether by land or air, such options, I am afraid, are difficult to come by. By the same token, the real solution is straightforward: the Syrian regime must simply agree to allow UN aid agencies to access those in need. All that is needed is the decision from Damascus, nothing more.

Alison McGovern: Last week, I and the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) welcomed the head of the Syria Civil Defence force, the White Helmets, to Parliament. Raed Saleh told us of the terrible situation in Aleppo: the lack of food, the lack of medical supplies, and the constant bombing by Assad and the Russians. Since then, the situation has worsened. A renewed assault by Assad has recaptured a large part of the city, as the Minister described, forcing thousands to flee with just the clothes on their backs.

This morning, I was sent a statement from the White Helmets, which read:

“Dear Friends in Britain,

Aleppo is in a state of emergency. 279,000 people have been under siege for 94 days. In the last 13 days the Syrian Regime and Russia have launched more than 2,000 airstrikes and unleashed a variety of banned weapons...

We are calling on you, as the friends of the Syrian people to act. The Syrian Regime and Russia are refusing to let aid into the city so we are calling on you to airdrop aid to provide urgent relief to the starving civilians trapped...

We can not believe that one of the world’s most powerful countries, in the full glare of the media, will allow 279,000 people to be starved and bombed to death.”

My question is this: is the counsel of despair that we heard this morning from the Defence Secretary on the radio really all we have left? There is something we can do. We can airdrop aid into the besieged areas, as the White Helmets are calling for and as a cross-party letter signed by 126 Members of this House has demanded. I ask the Minister to respond to that letter to the Prime Minister here. We can renew the push in the UN for the creation of a humanitarian corridor to get help to civilians. Will the Minister confirm that he raised that in his conversations with our ambassador?

The Government have always said that airdrops are a last resort and I understand that, but Gareth Bayley, the UK special representative for Syria, has tweeted about Aleppo today, saying:

“Situation in #Aleppo could not be more dire: every hospital out of service; official food stocks run out; nowhere for civilians to run.”

He called Aleppo “a coffin”. Does the Minister agree that the Government need an urgent strategy to protect civilians? When hundreds of thousands of civilians are being starved and bombed into submission, we must consider airdrops. It is time for the last resort.

What Britain stands for on the world stage is being challenged. This is a test. There is no risk-free course of action left, but I believe there is a right course of action. Let us not stand and watch as one of the great cities of the world is destroyed. Let us not allow 100,000 children to starve in eastern Aleppo.
When Kosovo was under attack, Britain led the response. When people in Sierra Leone cried out for our help, Britain led the way. The people of Syria need us to show that leadership. Jo Cox said that our response to Syria would be “emblematic” of our generation, and “how history judges us”. Her words are ever more true today, so let us not fail.

Mr Ellwood: First, may I say how grateful I am to the hon. Lady for her work in raising this matter in the House through urgent questions and by working with other colleagues as well?

I had the opportunity to meet the head of the White Helmets at the same time as the hon. Lady. He stressed his frustration that the west—indeed, the world—was not doing enough as we saw the annihilation of an historic city. It is a city that goes back to the sixth millennium. It is the financial centre of Syria, its largest city, and now condemned, almost, to ruin.

The hon. Lady touches on the letter, now with 126 signatories. I made it clear in my statement that we are looking at all options, but she must understand that, as has been repeated in this House, unilateral or even multilateral aid drops would place us in harm’s way, in what is already a complicated air environment. The question therefore has to be asked whether that is the best and safest way of getting aid to where we need it to go. We are not ruling out options, but we have to ask ourselves whether introducing British aircraft into that air environment would compound or improve matters, and whether there are other, safer ways of getting the aid in.

The hon. Lady also raises a larger point, namely what Britain and the international community are doing. She also mentioned the work of Jo Cox. We all agree in this House that Britain has the ability and the aspiration to play a significant role on the world stage. In August 2013 we had that opportunity and we blinked. We had an opportunity to hold Assad to account. As a result we have ended up with a situation where both Russia and Daesh have now come in. The question I pose to this House—

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): What are you doing now?

Mr Ellwood: The question I pose to this House, and to the right hon. Lady who is screaming from her seat, is that, unless this Parliament gives the Executive the support we need, our hands are tied in terms of what we can do. I therefore turn to the Labour Front-Bench team, who I think are of a different opinion to some behind them, and say that Britain wants to engage on this, but five resolutions have been vetoed at the UN Security Council by Russia, so we need to look at other, safer ways of getting aid to where we need it.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for the work we did in Sierra Leone, and now condemned, almost, to ruin.

The hon. Lady raises the point again of air strikes, and British aircraft have not been involved. The British people asked us to take action, and we have to ask ourselves whether that is the best and safest way to get aid into that city, and whether there are other, safer ways of getting aid in.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The whole House will welcome the Minister’s unequivocal statement on behalf of the Government that Russia is committing war crimes in Aleppo and in Syria. The position in Aleppo is unclear today, but there are two things we can surely say. Will the Government put in their undoubted diplomatic efforts and bend every sinew to secure unfettered access for UN and humanitarian support? Secondly, will they also bend every sinew to secure a ceasefire, so that negotiations under UN auspices, through Staffan de Mistura, can begin?

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for engaging with this and doing his best to make sure that Parliament is up to date and involved in what is happening in Aleppo. He touches on the issue of war crimes. It is important to understand that it is unlikely that we will be able to hold the perpetrators to account today or tomorrow, but we will hold them to account in the future. We are keeping lists so as to understand who the military leaders are who are conducting the air attacks, no matter what country they come from, and all those participating in these crimes and supporting the Syrian regime must remember that their day in the international courts will come. We are collecting that evidence to make sure we can hold them to account.

On the important question of air strikes, the UN has ten thousand of thousands of pieces of kit and material that it wishes to get into these areas, but it is being denied access by the Syrian regime. We cannot enter the regime’s airspace, or use its roads, without their permission. If we sought to do so without its permission, we would end up with exactly the situation we had on 19 September, when a UN-led convoy moved into Aleppo and was destroyed from the air by Russian aeroplanes.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern). As she made clear, there is no more urgent situation in the world right now than the humanitarian crisis in east Aleppo. With no functioning hospitals to handle the mounting civilian casualties, food supplies exhausted and tens of thousands of people already facing starvation, we truly have reached the point of last resort, and the Government have previously made it clear what that should mean. The former Foreign Secretary said in June:

“While air drops are complex, costly and risky, they are...the last resort to relieve human suffering across many besieged areas.”

To be clear, nobody in the House underestimates the complexity and risks involved, but with no alternatives and thousands facing death if they do not get immediate supplies of food and medical equipment, these are risks that we must be prepared to take. Will the Minister take the urgent steps required today to agree a plan for air drops by British planes with the UN and our international partners, as has been called for by the White Helmets, whose representatives I too met last week? The UN’s humanitarian adviser, Jan Egeland, was asked at the weekend what plan B was if Russia and Assad kept up their criminal assault on east Aleppo and continued to block supplies of aid by road. He said:

“Plan B is that people starve. And can we allow that to happen? No, we cannot”.

He is quite right, and I hope that the Minister will agree.

Mr Ellwood: Britain’s humanitarian effort should be praised by everyone in the House. We are providing £2.3 billion—that makes us the second-largest donor—
£23 million of which is going directly to UN organisations geared to making sure that the aid gets to where it is most urgently required. We are now debating the tactics of how to get the equipment into place, and the hon. Lady is advocating that British aeroplanes—Hercules aircraft or otherwise—go into Syrian airspace and make those drops.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mike Penning): They would be shot down.

Mr Ellwood: They would be shot down, as my right hon. Friend says. I am not even aware that the UN has requested airdrops. I am not saying that they will be ruled out or who should do them. It may be that we can co-ordinate and make them happen. They are not being dismissed; I am simply telling the House that it is hugely complicated. I have been in the armed forces and involved in several airdrops, so I know that very often, when the drop zone is particularly small, the kit lands in the wrong place and goes to the very people we do not want to receive it. As I touched on before, the scale of the aid required means that an enormous number of sorties would have to be conducted; but with transport trucks, we could get the aid to the exact locations, if they are given the permissions. I am sorry to labour the point, but were we to conduct airstrikes, it would require Syrian support. If we can get that support, it is better that it be for the trucks, which could get through to the exact people requiring the aid.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I think my hon. Friend meant airdrops rather than airstrikes, but he is right that we can be proud of what we have done as a country for those who are in the camps surrounding Syria. Today’s urgent question is about those who are trapped in the most hideous situation in Aleppo.

What I believe Members are trying to convey to the Minister is that we regard this as possibly one of the most urgent issues in global politics today. We think this is an opportunity for the British Government to show leadership, to convene likely partners, to kick-start the peace process and the peace talks, while at the same time coming to the House with some concrete ideas about how we can alleviate the appalling, biblical suffering of the men, women and children in what remains of one of the great cities of Syria.

Mr Ellwood: My right hon. Friend gives me licence to pay tribute to the neighbouring countries of Syria for the work they have done in taking on board literally millions of refugees—Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan in particular. One reason why we organised the Syrian support conference this year was to make sure that there were funds available so that those countries can look after those refugees, ensure that they are educated and have the health services they need and make sure that they can eventually move back to Syria once the guns fall silent.

My right hon. Friend talks about Britain wanting to do more. I hope that what I said earlier is not being misconstrued. My request is that I want and would like to, but we are at the will of Parliament when it comes to ensuring that it happens. [Interruption] Opposition Members are shouting, but the Leader of the Opposition had five opportunities to vote on Syria, but we ended up not having the opportunity to check Daesh before it had been created and to hold Assad to account. We cannot afford to go down that road again. If there is an appetite in this House, I absolutely welcome it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I entirely understand that passions are running high. It might help the House to know that I intend to call everyone, so there is no need for any hon. Member to speak from her seat, when she will have the opportunity to speak on her feet in due course.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I congratulate the hon. Member. The Minister for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on securing this urgent question and, indeed, on the work she has done to get cross-party support for calling on the UK Government to authorise the airdropping of aid. A quarter of a million people, including 100,000 children, have been trapped in deteriorating conditions in Aleppo’s eastern district since the summer. There are no functioning hospitals; there is no more food. Independent observers have estimated that yesterday alone, at least 219 civilians were killed.

I understand that finding a practical and political solution to this horrific, almost unimaginable situation is complex and challenging. I say to the Minister, however, that no practical challenge should be too tough and no political obstacles too insurmountable to do the right thing by these people whose suffering is growing day by day. Who could fail to be moved by the seven-year-old Bana al-Abed who was tweeting live from Aleppo, asking for help when bombs were falling on her. That is a serious call for help, and we must act. What discussions have taken place with Russia to demand that it sign up now to the agreement brokered by the UN to provide aid? What practical assistance has been offered by UK forces to support the delivery of aid?

Mr Ellwood: On that last point, as I say, we are doing all our work through the UN agencies, which are best placed and neutral. There is an important difference in that if we start to act as a unilateral operator in this very difficult, complex and multi-sided environment, we could be seen and labelled as some form of antagonist by the Russians and, indeed, the Syrians. That is the main complication. Alternatively, we can do things neutrally through the United Nations and on a humanitarian ticket, which is why we are pushing forward our efforts and our funds to support the work of the UN.

The hon. Lady’s other point has been raised before, and I view it as well summarised by two pictures that I have used before in this House. The first is of Omran Daqneesh, the boy photographed after being bombed. He was alive and hon. Members may recall he was thrown in the back of an ambulance. The other stark image that reminds us of the hell of Syria is that of Alan Kurdi, the poor boy who was washed up on the Turkish beach. Is that the choice that we are leaving the people of Syria? I do not want that. I very much want us to do more, and I hope that—together—we will be able to achieve that.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have organised airdrops in a benign environment. That is the ideal situation, because airdrops are not high but low, and aircraft carrying them out are very vulnerable. If the
House wants airdrops to be carried out in a non-benign environment, it must expect our aircraft to be brought down. If that is the risk that this Parliament wishes to take, let it please, in future, vote for it—and everyone in the House should take responsibility for that vote when an RAF aircraft containing seven or eight people is brought to the ground and everyone is killed: that is the responsibility that the House will have to bear.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend, with the experience that he brings to the House, articulates the challenges that we face. We must work with the United Nations, and receive its advice on how best to get the aid in. I do not rule out the use of airdrops, but it must be a last resort when we are unable to get the trucks in by gaining permissions on the ground.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I think that, in truth, all of us in the House, and in the world, feel ashamed by the fact that we are unable to bring food and medical supplies to the 250,000 people who are trapped in eastern Aleppo, including, as we have heard, 100,000 children. They are in harm’s way today. I understand—we all understand—the difficulties involved in airdrops, such as the one raised by the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), but back in the summer—as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry)—the then Foreign Secretary told the House that agreement had been reached for airdrops to be used if necessary. I simply say to the Minister that if this is not the last resort, given what is being reported every day, what on earth is?

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman and the work that he has done in this regard, and I have listened carefully to what he has said. I spent some time discussing what we could do with Matthew Rycroft, head of the United Kingdom Mission to the United Nations in New York. Unless we have permission for aircraft to enter that space—not necessarily British aircraft; any aircraft—the dangers that those aircraft are likely to face will be considerable. We need to weigh up the options to ensure that we are content for those risks to be taken.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I have immense sympathy for my hon. Friend. The people of Syria could have had no better friend than him and the Government over the past few years, and I fully appreciate the difficulty in which he finds himself. Whatever we may have asked of the Prime Minister—I signed the letter as well—it is important for us to remember that the United Kingdom is not the perpetrator here and that we are seeking to do something good in very difficult circumstances.

May I follow up the question asked by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn)? In May, the International Syria Support Group, which includes the United States and Russia, agreed that if by 1 June the United Nations had been denied humanitarian access to any of the designated besieged areas, it would call on the World Food Programme to immediately carry out a programme for air bridges and airdrops. If it was possible at that time, in those circumstances, for people to secure the agreement that my hon. Friend is seeking for airdrops, is it not possible—bearing in mind that we are at the last resort—to redouble those efforts to receive the permission that he, and those whom we would be asking to drop the food, require to proceed?

Mr Ellwood: The work of the International Syria Support Group has been difficult, and has been tested. The most recent meeting took place at the United Nations General Assembly, and I attended that meeting with the Foreign Secretary. It was clear that Russia was starting to split away from its intent to provide support and to seek a political settlement, which had been the purpose of bringing the group together. Again, we are left with the problem of gaining the necessary permission for the aircraft. However, I will certainly consider what my right hon. Friend has said, and I will write to him with more details.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I have a lot of time for this Minister, but he should not rewrite the history of what happened in 2013. As one of the Labour MPs who did support action against Assad back then, may I gently point out to him that two of his colleagues who were recently Foreign Office Ministers, a former Secretary of State on his own Benches, the Labour Front-Bench team and Labour Back Benchers are all calling for the Government to bring something back to the House on airdrops, so why does he not just do it?

Mr Ellwood: I will answer that in two parts. First, why do we not just do it? Because of the very challenging issues that we face. We do not have permission to send in aircraft. We saw what happened to the Russian aircraft that wandered into Turkish space. It is a volatile environment and we would need to gain the permissions at this point to make that happen. On the other part, I do not wish to antagonise the House and try to rewrite the history. It is as much the Government’s fault for failing to win across all parliamentarians. For me, that is the biggest error from our Government—we did not take with us Parliament itself. We collectively need to work together to ensure we are all up to date and, in that way, the Executive can be empowered to do such things, whether no-fly zones or airdrops. However, only with the will and support of Parliament can we make that move forward.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Has any estimate been made of the willingness of refugees to return to Syria if the regime prevails?

Mr Ellwood: Yes. My understanding is that the absolute majority wish to return to Syria. That is their homeland, where they grew up and where they want to return to. That is one of the reasons why—this is debated regularly in the House—the amount of money that we spend in taking on refugees in this country, compared with the amount of money we pour into looking after refugees in the region, is not the same—we cannot offer the same support—but the same amount of money goes 20 times further per number of individuals. That is why we invest so much in supporting Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Those people want to stay in the region, where the language is similar and from where they can return as quickly as possible once the fighting stops.
Mr Ellwood: The question of airdrops has been debated with our allies, the Americans, and is raised at the International Syria Support Group, and I raised it this morning with Matthew Rycroft, our UN head of mission, who is discussing it as our representative in New York.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): My constituency predecessor, Stephen O’Brien, is head of the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs and has been working hard to call out these war crimes for what they are. Can the Minister reassure me that British air assets—in particular, eye-in-the-sky assets—are being used to gather evidence that can then be available for the international war crimes tribunal, to make sure that, when these people are held to account, we have the evidence to prove it?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend raises an important point. If she will allow me, I will not—especially with the Minister for the Armed Forces sitting next to me—go into the detail of how we are collecting that evidence, as that would probably be operationally unhelpful, but I will say that that is exactly what we are doing. But this may take some time; we are identifying those who are responsible, who are those in leadership positions who are giving the orders for these strikes to take place and for the siege of Aleppo to occur. We will hold these people to account.

I pay tribute to Stephen O’Brien, a former colleague in this House, who is doing a commendable job. We can all be very proud of the work he is doing to highlight the humanitarian plight in what is going on.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I was distressed by the implication in the Minister’s remarks that those of us who voted against airstrikes in Syria were somehow responsible for his decision not to put forward airdrops for aid. Frankly, at that point, we were not convinced that the balance of harms was being sorted in the right way. I think if he was today to call for a vote of this House, those who, like me, opposed military strikes on Syria would strongly support any action that can get humanitarian aid to those starving communities. I know that he is talking about this, but what is he actually going to do to get this aid to the people who are starving?

Mr Ellwood: All actions should be taken through the UN, as it is the conduit that can be deemed as neutral by the Syrian regime and, indeed, by Russia. I hope the right hon. Lady will understand how our turning up and starting to do these airdrops ourselves would change the dynamics of our involvement in the air in a difficult terrain. That is not to say we do not rule it out; I am just saying that it is a more complicated scenario. The UN does conduct its own airdrops—it has that capability; it has a facility to do so—but it only does that where it has the permission of the Syrian regime for those flights to take place. That is the important point.

On the right hon. Lady’s latter point, I am sorry that this Government did not do more to win people like her across. That was our failure as much as anybody else’s, and that, more than anything, is what we need to learn from what happened in August 2013.
Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): As one of the Members of Parliament who has visited RAF Akrotiri and looked into the eyes of the C-130 crews who would be asked to carry out these missions, I think we should be careful to avoid making a “something must be done” response to a situation that shames humanity and that is on a par with Rwanda, Srebrenica and other events that have shamed us collectively in the west. Learning from those events, could other actions be taken not only to hold Russia to account but to look at what really hurts that evil regime? London is full of people with connections to that regime who are doing business and educating their children in this country. They need to understand that they cannot behave with impunity and seek to enjoy the benefits that we all take for granted in this country.

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s military experience. The role of the C-130 in conducting these airdrops would be exceedingly difficult. As I have said, we do not rule this out, but it would be a huge challenge. He asks what more can be done. At the heart of this is the role of Russia, which is pivotal in being able to exercise influence over Assad, to introduce a ceasefire and to allow access to humanitarian aid. Unfortunately, Russia has vetoed five United Nations Security Council resolutions, thereby preventing even the most basic humanitarian aid from getting through. The Canadians are now seeking to pursue a General Assembly vote, which, if not in an emergency session, would require half the votes. This would be tricky, however, because Russia would use its influence to prevent it from succeeding.

We are collectively looking to see what could happen in this dire situation that is reminiscent of Rwanda and Srebrenica. If the UN machine is not working, we have to find ways of circumnavigating it.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Minister confirm that the action taken in Kosovo did not have a UN Security Council resolution? Many of us called on William Hague, when he was Foreign Secretary in 2011 and 2012, to support no-fly zones similar to the ones John Major had established to protect the Kurds in Iraq. Is it not time for us all to recognise that we have allowed Russia to get into this position because we failed to act, not in 2013, but in 2011 and 2012, when Assad started murdering peaceful protestors? Is it not time to recognise that the UN Security Council is hamstrung and that we need to act, even without a Security Council resolution, to save hundreds of thousands of lives?

Mr Ellwood: Following Rwanda, a new international initiative establishing a duty of care was agreed, under which the international community would not stand by when a leader chose to kill his own people. That agreement was introduced so that comments about acts of genocide and other phrases that came out at the time could no longer be used to justify the hesitancy of the international community to step forward. The hon. Gentleman is suggesting that we bypass certain legal processes to move forward. In Kosovo, we had troops on the ground and we had collective international, regional and local support. In Kurdistan, a UN resolution backed the action taken there. He has raised a profound question. Should we go into a situation to do the right thing, even though we do not have international legal cover because such cover has been vetoed by a P5 member at every opportunity?

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am sure that the Minister is right—for the reasons given by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart)—to rule out unilateral action, but what did he mean by his attacks on the Labour Front Bench and on people like me who refused to support military action in Syria? What could possibly be achieved by more bombs falling on that benighted country? Surely, our priority should be peace. We should condemn violence wherever it comes from, including the terrible violence inflicted by the Assad regime and the attack on a school in western Aleppo, which has not been widely reported. I hope that the Minister will condemn that attack. If our priority is to strive for peace and end violence, we have to accept—whether we like it or not—that the appalling Assad and his Russian backers are going to stay. We must therefore drop our demand for them to go. We have to engage with everyone—Assad, the Russians, the Sunni rebels—to try to get peace, because that is what the people want.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is familiar with the complex make-up of Syria today given all its history. Once we move forward from this situation, it is likely that there will be a federal model that recognises the country’s differences and groupings. We face a situation today in which Russia is backing and placing all its money on the existing regime. It has a connection and relationship that goes back to 1946, which needs to be honoured and reflected. I say to the Russians—to Bogdanov, to Lavrov and to Putin—that they should have that relationship with the people of Syria, not the Syrian regime. They should have a conversation with Dr Riyad Hijab, the co-ordinator of the free Syrian opposition, and then move forward from there, so that Russia can continue to have a sphere of influence without attaching itself to the tyrant that is President Assad.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): Next week, Monzer Aqbiq of the Syria’s Tomorrow Movement should be in London. If the Minister has not already done so, will he undertake to meet him to discuss Syria’s future?

Mr Ellwood: I would be more than happy to look at that if there is an opportunity to meet. I do make an effort to meet any representatives who come through Syria, including when I am in the region—for example, in Istanbul in Turkey, where the free Syrian opposition is based—to try to engage. I would be delighted to speak to the hon. Lady afterwards to discuss things further.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I, too, signed the letter in support of airdrops. As a former RAF serviceman, I fully appreciate the concern for our aircrews from not only the Minister, but my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). Will the Minister tell us whether the Prime Minister had the opportunity to raise airdrops with Jens Stoltenberg, the Secretary-General of NATO, when he was at 10 Downing Street last week?
Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who I think was involved in the air campaign in Kurdistan. He brings a huge amount of expertise to the Chamber. I am unaware of the details, but I know that Syria came up. I will write to him with more details of the conversation.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): In the letter of the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), whom I congratulate on her work on this issue, she points out that the Government said back in May:

“preparations for airdrops will now take place and go forward rapidly because there isn’t a moment to lose”

The situation has worsened significantly since May, so I do not understand what has happened to that enthusiasm. More importantly, my constituents, and those of other Members, are appalled by what they see on the news and do not understand why there is not the same enthusiasm for airdrops as there was for bombing this time last year.

Mr Ellwood: I do not want to get drawn into discussing the hon. Lady’s latter point, which is an unhelpful comparison. The will of the House has been made clear and the Executive are looking seriously at what we can do to support the concept of airdrops, but they involve all the dangers and caveats that have been discussed. We take the lead from the United Nations personnel who are on the ground. If we are to do this in a neutral manner, it must be done through the UN. If we step in and start doing things ourselves, our involvement in the Syria campaign will take on a very different perspective, for which we would need the permission and support of this House.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I share the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) and point out that the airdrops that are being pushed by many in this House come with huge risks. Does the Minister, who is in a difficult situation, agree that if they are to be done unilaterally we would inevitably need aircraft to deliver, fighter cover above, and helicopters and special forces to pick crews up if they get downed and wounded? We risk the awful prospect of seeing our service personnel being dragged through the streets or killed in some horrific manner by people down there who are behaving like barbarians. Does the Minister agree that there is a lot of concern?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend and Dorset neighbour spills out some of the intricacies involved in airdrops. It is not simply about the Hercules transport or C-17 aircraft that would provide that; it is about the air cover required, the emergency operations in case the pilots have to bail out and the rescue missions that may have to take place. We are also left facing the stark challenge of hostages being taken. All those factors need to be taken into consideration, from an operational perspective, in deciding on the best method of getting our aid to where we want it to go. As I say, the UN conducts airdrops, but only when it has clear permission from the Syrian regime.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Putin’s standard modus operandi is the excessive use of force, as we saw in the Beslan massacre, in the siege of the Moscow theatre, in Chechnya, in Georgia and in Crimea, and as we now see in the complete obliteration of Aleppo. Is not the really worrying thing for the future, even beyond the situation in Syria, that the robust facing up to Putin, in so far as it has existed at all, is now fracturing? How are the Government going to make sure we maintain a steady, robust course?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman, who has huge experience and knowledge of Russia, spells out the challenge we face in getting the Russians to come to the table, recognising not only the leverage they can provide, but that there is not a threat in respect of Russia’s continued involvement and influence. He touches on some of the previous events that have taken place, but we could also look at what has happened in the Balkans and the Baltics, and prior to the iron curtain. The sphere of influence that Russia had was enormous. Every time one of these countries then moved forward and swung to the west, Russia lost that sphere of influence, and I believe at the heart of this issue is the fact that the Russians do not want to lose a maritime Mediterranean influence which is so critical to them.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure the Minister will agree that the scenes in Aleppo of civilians being targeted and the use of starvation as a weapon of war bring echoes of some dark periods, particularly in the 1930s, which international law was supposed to try to stop. What lessons for the system of enforcement of international law can be taken from this dreadful situation?

Mr Ellwood: We are looking very carefully at where international law is left after this experience in Aleppo and indeed across Syria. The UN in New York, the international body that builds alliances and that is designed to bring together states—192 of them—to solve the world’s problems, is now kyboshed because a single permanent member is able to veto absolutely everything. How we can circumnavigate that is a huge question for us to answer.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): All of Aleppo’s hospitals are out of action, meaning that medics are having to amputate children’s limbs without anaesthetic and to deal with the victims of chemical attacks with just water and oxygen. The Minister asks whether there is a safer way to deliver aid, yet he knows that the Syrian regime has bombed the latest humanitarian convoy which went to the city in September. He knows that there will be no political solution while Assad and Putin think they can win the upper hand through military activity. The residents of Aleppo do not want to die and it is in our power to help them—if not now, when?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady, who has shadowed the Department for International Development portfolio and knows these issues well, mentions the 19 September convoy, and I have taken some notes on that. The convoy was approved by the Syrian Foreign Ministry and comprised trucks loaded by the Red Crescent, with enough equipment for 78,000 people. However, it came to a checkpoint, and the UN was told to leave the vehicles and Aleppo residents were told to jump in them. Russian drones were overhead following the convoy all the way until it got into Aleppo territory and then the aeroplanes came in and bombed every single truck. That happened with Syrian permission—it was with
[Mr Ellwood]

approval and they knew exactly what they were doing. I am afraid that this is the regime we are working on, which is why the challenge of looking after those people who are in harm’s way is so difficult indeed.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): On a way forward in Syria and Aleppo, our key ally is the United States and its President-elect has said that Syria represents influence for Russia. If that view remains, and in line with our consistent view in challenging the Russian aggression, will we chart our own foreign policy position on Syria and the region?

Mr Ellwood: As we come to the end of the current Administration, may I pay tribute to the work of John Kerry in trying to bring the various stakeholders and parties together? He has worked tirelessly to make that happen, and I am sorry that there has not been greater progress with the international Syria support group. We wait to see the strategy and approach of the new Administration. I simply say that we need to work closely with our international partners, not least America, to make sure that we can exert greater pressure and influence on Russia.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) alluded to the words of seven-year-old Bana al-Abid, who said on Twitter last Sunday that her home in Aleppo had been bombed. She went on to say:

“Under heavy bombardments now—in between life and death. Please keep praying for us.”

The Minister will know that there are no fully functioning hospitals left in Aleppo and that food ran out in early November. What recent discussions has the Foreign Office had with the United Nations, the EU and other nations of good will about urgent humanitarian relief? Does the RAF not have a crucial and immediate role to play in easing this humanitarian disaster, albeit with the risks that that entails? Our prayers are not enough: it is time to act, and if the Minister did so, a large swathe of the House would be behind him.

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I do not know whether he is speaking on behalf of all Scottish National party Members in his final phrase, but that would be very welcome indeed. The Prime Minister raised the issue of Syria at the last European Council, and our ambassador in New York is also engaged. Britain wants to make sure that it can keep up its pressure in trying to effect an avenue for the aid to get in. If that is not forthcoming, yes, we will have to look at other options.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): People in Kettering, horrified by the news that 250,000 people in Aleppo effectively have no access to hospital care and face imminent famine, are conscious that that population is equivalent to two and half times the number of people in the borough of Kettering. To get a sense of the scale of humanitarian effort required, would the Minister tell the House how many Hercules aircraft, or how many trucks on the ground, would be required to supply the requisite needs of a population of 250,000?

Mr Ellwood: That question is probably more for my counterpart in the Department for International Development, who can supply the details. It is an interesting comparison that needs to be made, but we anticipate that dozens of trucks need to go through daily to keep the people of Aleppo alive and supported.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I have a great deal of respect for the Minister, but I am disappointed that there was no statement from the Government today. Does he not believe that it would strengthen the Government’s hand on the world stage in negotiating on airdrops to have the will of Parliament, which should express its view on a Government motion?

Mr Ellwood: If we are to move forward, we need to work together. We need to take the British nation with us, and we need to work as a Parliament. I hear what the hon. Lady says. We need to make sure that we debate these matters more regularly so that people are prepared to recognise the danger in which we may be putting our service personnel, as well as the options available for us to lean further forward and get the result that we want.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The Minister has been candid in his reflections on the vote in the House in August 2013. What direct impact has that parliamentary vote had on policy thinking? If one of our planes is shot out of the sky, we have to be prepared to retaliate.

Mr Ellwood: Without revisiting the question too much, I believe that collectively, our inability to secure that vote before Russia moved into this sphere, before we even knew what the word “Daesh” meant, was a missed opportunity to hold Assad to account. For different reasons, we blinked, and Government need to learn what more we can do collectively to work together to make sure that we do not repeat that mistake.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): In his initial answer to the urgent question, the Minister rightly labelled the bombing of hospitals and other acts as war crimes by the Syrian Government forces and Russia. With that in mind, what specific measures can the UK Government take with international partners to hold those responsible to account?

Mr Ellwood: A motion was put forward with British support, if not with Britain leading on it, at the United Nations Security Council to slide the matter across to the International Criminal Court, and guess what? It was vetoed by Russia. We are collecting the necessary evidence to make it possible in due course—it may take some time, as I mentioned earlier—to hold to account in the longer term those who are perpetrating the damage and causing the atrocities.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): The Minister set out in some detail the difficulties that he and his colleagues face in dealing with this very difficult situation, and I appreciate that. He said, however, that the Government were considering a number of options. Given that 100,000 children are on the point of starving and 250,000 people in total are enduring the conditions in Aleppo, will he undertake to come back to the House with a statement next week about the options that the
Government are considering and set out what the Government propose to do? The situation is incredibly urgent.

Mr Ellwood: I agree with what the hon. Lady says. It is important that we keep the House updated. I, the Foreign Secretary or the Secretary of State for International Development will endeavour to do that on a regular basis.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I thank the Minister for his statement. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, at least 225 civilians have been killed, including 27 children, since the latest assault started on 15 November. The Government must do all they can to assist those in Syria now. However, they must also do more to help those who have managed to flee the conflict. Will the Minister please commit to pushing his Cabinet colleagues to accept more refugees from that war-torn country?

Mr Ellwood: I touched on that earlier. There is a choice: whether we look after refugees in this country—as we have done for the thousands that are coming this way—or we provide support in the region. The price of looking after one refugee in the UK equates to looking after around 20 refugees in the region. Different standards, absolutely, but I hope the hon. Lady recognises that with £2.3 billion-worth of support, we are playing our part in the region.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Like many colleagues, I pay tribute to all our armed forces in service around the world, and I know that no one in this House would ever put them in harm’s way unless there was no alternative. What alternatives is the Minister considering, such as drones or unmanned aircraft, to carry out airdrops? I can think of few other clear-cut humanitarian crises in my lifetime that deserve intervention by the British armed forces in order to save the lives of innocent children at risk from barrel bombs, chemical warfare and starvation.

Mr Ellwood: We want to use our influence with our allies and others to work across not just the military aspect, if our military were used, to provide the necessary humanitarian relief, but in the diplomatic corridors to get a political solution. We are not looking at one particular area, but trying to work across the piece.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): If my postbag and those of colleagues are anything to go by, there is huge public support for scaled-up humanitarian intervention, so what contingency plans are in place so that when or if permission for aid drops comes, they can begin immediately?

Mr Ellwood: I hope the hon. Gentleman recognises that I will not be able to answer that. It is an operational decision as to how any form of airdrops might be conducted and it must be part of a wider package of humanitarian support for those people requiring aid. It is extremely complicated, so I hope the hon. Gentleman will understand that I am not able to give a direct answer to his question.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I voted against airstrikes in 2013, and I agree with the Minister about the need to deliver aid on the ground, not least because some of the aid that is needed is medical care—physical and mental—which can be delivered only in person. However, I signed the letter that was published this morning, because the people of Aleppo are suffering in the most acute circumstances, and it is no longer acceptable to me or my constituents to stand by. I echo the calls of my right hon. and hon. Friends for the Minister and his colleagues to bring a fully worked plan to the House at the earliest possible opportunity, explaining fully the risks so that hon. Members can take a fully informed decision about the issues we face. I am confident that that decision, reflecting the wishes of our constituents, will be to find a way to alleviate the terrible suffering in Aleppo at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mr Ellwood: When we had a meeting, co-hosted by John Kerry and the Foreign Secretary, only a couple of weeks ago, John Kerry gave a press statement saying that he felt there was no appetite to do more, in a general capacity, in dealing with the situation in Aleppo. That was his observation, having not just visited the country but spoken with leaders across Europe. It is important that the debate that we are having here is also held in other capital cities, because that collective effort is what we need to effect change in what is going on in the country of Syria.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Everyone is rightly concentrating on the worst foreign aggressor, which is Russia, but the Minister’s opening remarks also mentioned Iranian influence. Given that the Iranian nuclear deal was all about bringing Iran back into the international fold, what are the UK Government doing to stop Iran’s influence in this humanitarian disaster?

Mr Ellwood: There was a coincidence in the sense that the opening of our embassy—for different reasons, our embassy was closed—tied in with the signing of the joint comprehensive plan of action. There is much greater dialogue with Iran, so we are able to discuss these issues. Indeed, I spoke to the Iranian ambassador on Friday, covering a wide variety of issues. It is important that Iran is aware that, if it wants to take on a more responsible role in the international community—it has proxy relationships or interests in the region itself—it must advance the way it does business. This situation provides a great example: Iran could show the leadership which, at the moment, we are missing from Russia.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What conversations have the UK Government had with the US President-elect, who has a desired policy of rapprochement with Russia and the Assad regime? What consequences will it have for British policy if we have to act more unilaterally given the US President-elect’s current policy?

Mr Ellwood: We are looking forward to the confirmation of the President-elect’s nomination for Secretary of State. When that appointment is made, I am sure we will be engaging to encourage America to be as involved in, and committed to, not just this issue in Syria but other challenges we face in the middle east.
Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Minister has mentioned some of the difficulties in dealing with Russia and has pleaded with it from the Dispatch Box about the actions he would like it to take, but he has not answered the question my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) posed earlier, so will he tell us what discussions have taken place with Russia to demand that it sign up to the agreement brokered by the UN to provide aid? What more can be done to get the talks back on track?

Mr Ellwood: This is raised on a regular basis. It was raised by the Foreign Secretary with Foreign Minister Lavrov only last week. Russia has a pivotal role in turning the situation round and allowing access for humanitarian aid, allowing a cessation of hostilities—at least a 10-day ceasefire—and allowing political discussions to recommence.

Point of Order

4.44 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You may be aware that over the weekend it was revealed that thousands of families with disabled children, including some in my constituency, have lost out by up to £4,400 a year in tax credits after an administrative error by the Department for Work and Pensions as a result of the Department failing to inform Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs about families’ eligibility for the award over a three-year period. That has resulted in an estimated 28,000 families in which children qualified for disability living allowance during 2011 to 2014 missing out on an additional tax credit premium of between £60 and £84 a week. At last week’s autumn statement, the Government set aside £360 million over six years to ensure that families who were eligible for child disability tax credits could be awarded this money. However, the payments will be backdated only to April 2016, meaning that individual families may have lost out on an entitlement totalling up to £25,000 over the past five years.

Have you, Mr Speaker, had any indication from the Work and Pensions Secretary, or any other Minister, that they will come to this House and make a statement so that we can clarify the impact on our constituents? If not, could you give us any other guidance about how we might raise this issue in this House and scrutinise Ministers on it at the earliest opportunity?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order and for her courtesy in offering me some advance notice of it. The short answer to the inquiry towards the end of her point of order as to whether I have received any indication of a likely ministerial statement on the matter is no. However, she has sought my advice more widely, and I am very happy to try to oblige. There is, I believe, a range of options open to her. Tomorrow we have oral Treasury questions when hon. Members may, if they wish, raise this matter with the Minister responsible for HMRC. I anticipate that a plentiful supply of colleagues will be in their places looking to do precisely that, doubtless including no less august a figure than the hon. Lady herself.

It is a little while until the next Work and Pensions questions—that is regrettable but it is a fact. However, there will be opportunities to seek debates in Westminster Hall on the matter, or alternatively end-of-day Adjournment debates in the Chamber—a matter in which, as the hon. Lady knows, I take a keen and ongoing interest—in December. Alternatively, she may wish to gather support for a bid to the Backbench Business Committee, with whose Chair she will be well familiar. I have no doubt that the hon. Lady will pursue one, or perhaps more than one, of those options with her usual persistence and vigour. I hope that this reply is helpful not only to her but to other Members in various parts of the House who feel very strongly about this matter.

DIGITAL ECONOMY BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

Ordered.

That the Order of 13 September (Digital Economy Bill (Programme)) be varied as follows.

1. Paragraphs 4 and 5 of the Order shall be omitted.
2. Proceedings on Consideration shall be taken in the order shown in the first column of the following Table and (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the times specified in the second column of the Table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proceedings</th>
<th>Time for conclusion of proceedings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Clauses and new Schedules relating to Part 3 and safety responsibilities of internet websites; amendments to Part 3; new Clauses and new Schedules relating to Part 2; new Clauses and new Schedules relating to Part 1; amendments to Part 1.</td>
<td>Two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Clauses and new Schedules relating to Part 6; amendments to Part 6; new Clauses and new Schedules relating to Part 4; amendments to Part 4; new Clauses and new Schedules relating to Part 5; amendments to Part 5; new Clauses and new Schedules relating to Part 7; amendments to Part 7; remaining proceedings on Consideration.</td>
<td>One hour before the moment of interruption.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Any proceedings in Legislative Grand Committee and Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption.—(Matt Hancock.)

Digital Economy Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee.

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Culture, Media and Sport Committee on 15 November, on Ticket Abuse, HC 823; and Independent Review of Consumer Protection Measures concerning Online Secondary Ticketing Facilities, presented to Parliament pursuant to section 94(3) of the Consumer Rights Act 2015, May 2016.]

New Clause 28

AGE-VERIFICATION REGULATOR’S POWER TO DIRECT INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDERS TO BLOCK ACCESS TO MATERIAL

“(1) Where the age-verification regulator considers that a person (‘the non-complying person’) is—

(a) contravening section15(1), or
(b) making prohibited material available on the internet to persons in the United Kingdom,

it may give a notice under this subsection to any internet service provider.

(2) The notice must—

(a) identify the non-complying person in such manner as the age-verification regulator considers appropriate;
(b) state which of paragraphs (a) and (b) of subsection (1) applies;
(c) require the internet service provider—

(i) to take steps specified in the notice, or
(ii) (if no such steps are specified) to put in place arrangements that appear to the provider to be appropriate,

so as to prevent persons in the United Kingdom from being able to access the offending material using the service it provides;
(d) provide such information as the regulator considers may assist the internet service provider in complying with any requirement imposed by the notice;
(e) provide information about the arrangements for appeals mentioned in section17(4)(d);
(f) provide such further particulars as the regulator considers appropriate.

(3) The steps that may be specified or arrangements that may be put in place under subsection (2)(c) include steps or arrangements that will or may also have the effect of preventing persons in the United Kingdom from being able to access material other than the offending material using the service provided by the internet service provider.

(4) The notice may require the internet service provider to provide information specified in the notice, in a manner specified in the notice, to persons in the United Kingdom who—

(a) attempt to access the offending material using the service provided by the provider, and
(b) are prevented from doing so as a result of steps taken, or arrangements put in place, by the provider pursuant to the notice.

(5) The notice may specify the time by which the internet service provider must have complied with any requirement imposed by the notice.

(6) The notice may be varied or revoked by a further notice under subsection (1).

(7) The age-verification regulator may publish, in whatever way it considers appropriate, a notice given under subsection (1).

(8) It is the duty of an internet service provider to comply with any requirement imposed on it by a notice under subsection (1).

(9) That duty is enforceable in civil proceedings by the age-verification regulator—
(a) for an injunction;
(b) for specific performance of a statutory duty under section 45 of the Court of Session Act 1988; or
(c) for any other appropriate relief or remedy.

(10) Before giving a notice to an internet service provider under subsection (1), the age-verification regulator must—

(a) inform the Secretary of State of its decision to do so, and
(b) give notice of that decision to the non-complying person under this subsection.

(11) A notice under subsection (10) (other than notice of a decision to revoke a notice under subsection (1)) must—

(a) where subsection (1)(a) applies—
(i) say why the regulator considers that the non-complying person is contravening section 15(1), and
(ii) indicate what steps the regulator considers might be taken by the non-complying person to comply with that section;
(b) where subsection (1)(b) applies, say why the regulator considers that the offending material is prohibited material;
(c) indicate the circumstances in which the regulator may consider revoking the notice it has decided to give under subsection (1) and the manner in which the non-complying person may notify the regulator of steps taken to satisfy the regulator that the notice ought to be revoked;
(d) provide information about the arrangements for appeals mentioned in section 17(4)(e).

(12) In this section—
“the offending material”, in relation to a non-complying person, means the material which the age-verification regulator considers is—
(a) being made available in contravention of section 15(1) by the non-complying person; or
(b) prohibited material which the non-complying person is making available on the internet to persons in the United Kingdom;
“prohibited material” has the meaning given in section 19.

This new clause enables the age-verification regulator to require internet service providers to prevent persons in the United Kingdom from being able to access material on the internet which is being made available in contravention of clause 15(1) or is “prohibited material” as defined in clause 22.

Brought up, and read the First time.

4.48 pm

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government new clause 29—On-demand programme services: specially restricted material.

New clause 1—Power to require the blocking of access to pornographic material by internet service providers—

“(1) Where the age-verification regulator determines that a person has made pornographic material available on a commercial basis on the internet to persons in the United Kingdom—

(a) in contravention of section 15(1), and
(b) the person has been the subject of a financial penalty or enforcement notice under section 20 and the contravention has not ceased,

the age-verification regulator may issue a notice to internet service providers requiring them to prevent access to the pornographic material that is provided by the non-complying person.

(2) A notice under subsection (1) must—

(a) identify the non-complying person in such manner as the age verification regulator considers appropriate;
(b) provide such further particulars as the age-verification regulator considers appropriate.

(3) When the age-verification regulator gives notice under this section, it must inform the non-complying person, by notice, that it has done so.

(4) An internet service provider who fails to comply with a requirement imposed by subsection (1) commits an offence, subject to subsection (5).

(5) No offence is committed under subsection (4) if the internet service provider took all reasonable steps and exercised all due diligence to ensure that the requirement would be complied with.

(6) An internet service provider guilty of an offence under subsection (4) is liable, on summary conviction, to a fine.

(7) In this section “internet service provider” has the same meaning as in section 124N of the Communications Act 2003 (interpretation).”

This new clause gives a power to the age-verification regulator to require internet service providers to block pornography websites that do not offer age-verification.

New clause 3—Safety responsibilities of social media sites—

“(1) This section applies to a person who operates an internet site for commercial purposes which requires a user to create a personal account to fully access the internet site.

(2) A person under subsection (1) must—

(a) undertake and publish an online safety impact assessment in respect of their account holders,
(b) inform the police if they become aware of any threat on their internet site to physically harm an individual,
(c) remove any posts made on its internet site that are deemed to be violent or that could incite violence.”

New clause 10—Internet pornography: requirement to teach age requirement and risks as part of sex education—

“After section 403(1A)(b) of the Education Act 1996, add—

“(c) they learn about the risks and dangers of internet pornography, and the legal age requirement to access internet pornography under Part 3 of the Digital Economy Act 2017.”

This new clause would mean that the Secretary of State would have to include in guidance to maintained schools that pupils learn as part of sex education the risks and dangers of internet pornography and the legal age requirement to access it, as provided for under Part 3.

New clause 13—Code of practice for commercial social media platform providers on online abuse—

“(1) The relevant Minister must issue a code of practice about the responsibilities of commercial social media platform providers in dealing with online abuse.

(2) The code of practice must include guidance on—

(a) how a commercial social media platform providers shall respond to cases of a person being victim of online abuse on its internet site;
(b) quality service standards expected of the commercial social media platform providers in determining, assessing, and responding to cases of online abuse; and
(c) the setting and enforcement of privacy settings of persons aged 17 or under, where deemed appropriate.

(3) A commercial social media platform providers must comply with the code of practice.

(4) The relevant Minister may from time to time revise and re-issue the code of practice.

(5) As soon as is reasonably practicable after issuing or reissuing the code of practice the relevant Minister must lay, or arrange for the laying of, a copy of it before—

(a) Parliament,
(b) the Scottish Parliament,
The amendment requires the making of regulations to ensure that there is a parity of protection for children using different online media. The regulations would amend the definition of specially restricted material for UK based video on demand programming and extend it to 18 material as well as R18 material.

Amendment 31, in clause 16, page 19, line 17, at end insert—

“16 (1A) In this Part “adult material” means any of the following—

(a) a video work in respect of which the video works authority has issued an 18 certificate;
(b) any other material if it is reasonable to assume from its nature that any classification certificate issued for a video work including it would be an 18 certificate; and
(c) any other material if it is reasonable to assume that the video works authority would determine that a video work including it was not suitable for a classification certificate to be issued in respect of it.”

See explanatory statement for amendment 27.

Government amendments 35 and 36.

Amendment 32, in clause 19, page 21, line 9, after “material” insert “or adult material”.

See explanatory statement for amendment 27.

Amendment 1, in clause 20, page 22, line 26, at end insert—

“(13) Where a person is—

(a) based in a country outside the United Kingdom, and
(b) refusing to comply with the requirements of the age-verification regulator, the age-verification regulator shall notify Ofcom that the relevant person is refusing to comply with its requirements.

(14) Following a notification made under subsection (13), Ofcom shall direct internet service providers in the United Kingdom to block public access to the material made available by the person on the internet.

(15) An internet service provider that fails to comply with subsection (14) within a reasonable period would be subject to financial penalties imposed by the age-verification regulator under section 21.”

Amendment 33, in clause 22, page 24, line 33, after first “material” insert “, adult material.”

See explanatory statement for amendment 27.

Government amendment 37.

Amendment 34, in clause 23, page 25, line 5, after first “material” insert “, adult material.”

See explanatory statement for amendment 27.

Government amendments 38 to 42.

New clause 7—Bill limits for all mobile phone contracts—

“(1) A telecommunications service provider supplying a contract relating to a hand-held mobile telephone must, at the time of entering into such a contract, allow the end-user the opportunity to place a financial cap on the monthly bill under that contract.

(2) A telecommunications service provider under subsection (1) must not begin to supply a contracted service to an end-user unless the end-user has either—

(a) requested the monthly cap be put in place and agreed the amount of that cap, or
(b) decided, on a durable medium, not to put a monthly cap in place.

(3) The end-user should bear no cost for the supply of any service above the cap if the provider has—

(a) failed to impose a cap agreed under subsection (2)(a); or
(b) introduce, or amend, a cap following the end-user’s instructions under subsection (2)(b); or
removed the cap without the end-user’s instructions or has removed it without obtaining the consumer’s express consent on a durable medium under subsection (2).”

New clause 14—Impact assessment of macro not-spot roaming—

“(1) Within three months of this Act coming into force, the Secretary of State must commission an impact assessment of enabling a system of macro not-spot roaming in the UK, and shall lay the report of the impact assessment before each House of Parliament.

(2) In this section “macro not-spot roaming” means the ability for hand-held mobile telephone users based in relatively large areas of non or partial broadband coverage to access coverage from networks other than their own.”

This new clause calls for an impact assessment of macro not-spot roaming in the UK, in line with the recommendations of the British Infrastructure Group report on mobile coverage.

New clause 20—Ability of end-user to cancel telephone contract in event of lack of signal at residence—

“A telecommunications service provider must allow an end-user to cancel a contract relating to a hand-held mobile telephone if, at any point during the contract term, the mobile telephone is consistently unable to obtain a signal when located at the end-user’s main residence.”

New clause 21—Use of emergency serve network wireless telegraphy infrastructure by multiple network providers—

“After section 8(4) of the Wireless Telegraphy Act 2006, insert—

“(4A) A licence issued in respect of a wireless telegraphy station or apparatus that is used for the purposes of emergency service network shall stipulate that more than one network provider can use the station or apparatus.”

New clause 22—OFCOM power to enforce structural separation of BT Openreach—

“After section 49C of the Communications Act 2003 insert—

“(4D) OFCOM has the power to enforce the structural separation of BT Openreach, should OFCOM consider this necessary.”

New clause 25—Ability of end-user to cancel mobile telephone contract in event of lack of signal at residence and place of employment—

“A telecommunications service provider must allow an end-user to cancel a contract relating to a hand-held mobile device if, at any point during the contract term, the mobile device is consistently unable to obtain a signal when located at the end-user’s main residence or main place of employment.”

New clause 26—Wireless telegraphy licences and medical or hearing technology—

“After section 14(4) of the Wireless Telegraphy Act 2006, insert—

“(4A) Before granting a wireless telegraphy licence, Ofcom shall carry out tests to identify the risk of any interference with any medical or hearing technology and publish its findings.

(4B) Ofcom shall not grant a licence if tests carried out under section 14(4A) have found there is a risk of interference with medical or hearing technology unless—

(a) action is taken to eliminate the risk; or

(b) a fund is set up to meet the costs of replacing all medical or hearing technology affected by the interference.

(4C) Where a fund is set up under section 14(4B), Ofcom shall require any person who is granted a licence takes action to inform its customers of the risk that its devices may lead to interference with medical or hearing technology.”

This new clause would place a duty on Ofcom to carry out tests in advance of the sale of radio frequencies to ensure that any interference identified with medical or hearing devices is made public. Where a risk of interference is identified, Ofcom shall not grant a wireless telegraphy licence unless action is taken to remove the risk of interference or a fund established to cover the cost of replacing medical or hearing technology affected. This new clause is supported by the National Deaf Children’s Society.

New clause 27—Introduction of broadband connection voucher scheme as alternative to universal service order provision—

“The Secretary of State shall introduce a broadband connection voucher scheme to allow an end-user to access broadband other than that supplied by the provider of the universal service order, under Part 2 of the Communications Act 2003.”

Although most individuals are likely to choose the standard universal service order offering, this new clause would provide individuals with the option of a voucher scheme that empowers them to take up an alternative solution.

Government amendments 23 and 24.

Matt Hancock: The Digital Economy Bill will help to connect modern Britain, support the digital economy and keep people safe online. The measures in this group are about strengthening the enforcement of protections for children, improving access to online media, and addressing consumer protection in telecoms. I will take in turn those three sub-groups of your excellent grouping, Mr Speaker.

Turning first to child protection, I am delighted by the cross-party support for delivering the Conservative manifesto commitment to require age verification to access online pornography. During the Bill’s passage through the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), who is in the Chamber, ably supported by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), has led debate about this by powerfully expressing the view that the enforcement proposed in the Bill is not strong enough—she is right. We have listened to the case that she and others have made. They have advanced the argument that some companies, especially those based overseas, simply will not abide by the law that is enacted by this House, so it is clear that there is a case to direct a UK internet service provider to prevent access.

We all want the internet to be free, but freedom operates within a framework of social responsibility, norms and the law. The approach set out in Government new clause 28 will protect the freedom of adults to watch pornography online, but provide adequate protections by giving children the same sorts of safeguards online as they have offline. We have worked closely with the industry and I am confident that it will take a responsible position. I therefore envisage the regulator needing to use this power only sparingly, because the vast majority of companies will want to obey the law. We will work through the technical detail with the regulator—it is expected to be the British Board of Film Classification—and others to understand the broader implications and make the new system work as we take the proposals through the other place.

We have been persuaded of another argument that was made powerfully on Second Reading. The provisions we have discussed today will see children protected by one of the most robust and sophisticated regimes globally but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce)—I see her in her place—has said, supported by my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) and the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson), the protections have resulted in a disparity between UK-based on-demand services on the one hand,
and overseas-based on-demand services and online commercial providers of pornography on the other. We have carefully considered that and concluded that we do not want disparate regimes. Government new clause 29 will ensure that children are protected from pornographic content from wherever it is derived. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton for making her case; I believe that we will have a stronger system as a result.

New clause 3 proposes a legal requirement to undertake an online safety impact assessment. I understand the intent behind the new clause, but I think that the measure is unnecessary, because leading social media companies already report on their online safety practices voluntarily as part of the safety framework of the ICT Coalition. We work closely with social media companies to ensure that they take down content that is violent or that incites violence, and to flag terrorist-related content. The system is important and is working well. Since 2010, we have secured the voluntary removal of more than 220,000 pieces of content. A requirement for a safety assessment is likely to be difficult to apply in practice because of the extraterritorial organisations that are involved in this space, and it would be almost impossible to target individuals who run small online websites for commercial purposes.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for agreeing to amend the Bill in this important area. As he is addressing the responsibility of social media sites, what action is he thinking of taking to prevent what happened recently, when Facebook refused to give the police information that it had relating to prevent what happened recently, when Facebook refused to give the police information that it had relating to a missing child?

Matt Hancock: It is incredibly important to get the framework that operates in that sort of space right, as is the case for terrorist material and child protection online. The system that we have in place—it is essentially non-statutory, although it is underpinned by online and offline offences—is working well. Social media organisations’ collaboration with the police and others is incredibly important, and I urge them to collaborate with the police whenever they are asked to do so. I have taken the view that the effective and rigorous enforcement of rules relating to age verification is an important step to get that system up and running. The system is working well, with 220,000 take-downs since 2010, so we want to leave it in place. In all such instances, there might be difficult individual cases, but overall the system is, on the whole, working effectively. That is why we have taken different approaches for the two different areas.

New clause 10 would introduce some very specific requirements around online education. I maintain that the measure is not necessary, because e-safety is already covered at all stages in the new computing curriculum that was introduced in September 2014. From primary school, children are taught how to use technology safely, respectfully and responsibly, how to keep personal information private, how to recognise acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and how to report a range of concerns. As hon. Members will see, we care deeply about protecting children online both through direct rules for the internet and through education. The new clause is not necessary, and I worry that putting in place a more static system would risk making the task at hand harder.

When it comes to broader protection, we expect social media and interactive services to have in place robust processes that can quickly address inappropriate content and abusive behaviour on their sites. It would be difficult to make the sort of statutory code of practice proposed in new clause 13 work, as there is not a one-size-fits-all solution. The way in which to deal properly with inappropriate content and abuse will vary by service and by incident. Technological considerations might differ by platform as innovation changes the way in which the internet operates. Legislating in this area is difficult because of the pace of change, and users will benefit most if companies develop a bespoke approach for reporting tools and in-house processes. Existing arrangements and the action taken by social media companies provide the best approach to tackling this problem.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Will the Minister tell us which companies and sectors already have a code of practice in place? How he is monitoring whether such codes of practice are being brought up to date?

Matt Hancock: We are working on codes of practice in a series of different areas. About 10 days ago, as my right hon. Friend will have seen, Twitter—one of the main players in this space—brought forward work towards a code of practice on online abuse. There is more to do in this area, but it is better that we have codes of practice that the organisations themselves can buy into and that can change with the times as the usage of social media changes. My goodness, we all know how social media changes over time—not always in a good way—so we need to make sure that we keep pace with that. I worry that putting something static into legislation would get into the way of such efforts. However, I agree with my right hon. Friend that it is incumbent on social media companies to play their part in establishing and rigorously enforcing norms and social responsibility in this area if we decide not to go down, or not yet to go down, the legislative route.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I quite understand that the Minister wants buy-in from the commercial social media platform providers. In response to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), he sketched out a position that appears to be that there is no actual code of practice, but that codes are being developed. Perhaps I misunderstood the Minister because I thought he had said before the right hon. Lady’s intervention that codes of practice are in place and working well.

I will quickly mention the changing circumstances. The Minister is quite right that this is a fast-changing world. Subsection (4) of new clause 13 states:

“The relevant Minister may from time to time revise and re-issue the code of practice”,

so the very flexibility that he is praying in aid would be delivered by the new clause.

Matt Hancock: Let me be clear: when I said that there are codes of practice, I was talking about taking down online terrorist and child abuse material, on which there have been clear codes of practice for a number of years. Regarding social abuse online, we are working with the companies involved to make further progress.
Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The Minister is being very generous in giving way. He mentioned the computing curriculum, which I assume relates only to England. What discussions has he had with the devolved nations about these issues?

Matt Hancock: The Government have had significant discussions with the devolved nations on these questions. They, of course, treat these questions differently—there is a different system in Scotland and Wales, and in Northern Ireland in fact—and it is a matter for them. The hon. Gentleman is quite right that the response I gave about the computing curriculum is a matter for England, although most of the Bill involves UK matters. I am very happy to clear up that point.

The Public Bill Committee considered the subject matter of new clause 32, which calls for the regulator to approve age-verification providers and to publish a code of practice with which the providers must comply. As I said in Committee, such a measure is not necessary because clause 15 requires the regulator to publish guidance about the types of arrangements it will treat as being in compliance. That may include the characteristics of age-verification controls that would be considered acceptable. I have been made aware of a number of proposed technical solutions for age-verification controls during the passage of the Bill. Clause 15 already takes into account the need for guidance in that area.

5 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Minister will be aware that such age verification will inevitably require the companies concerned to hold a lot of data. What assurances can he give the House that those data will not be liable to being hacked, as happened in the Ashley Madison case?

Matt Hancock: That is incredibly important. We will come on to the data protection provisions later, but this whole area operates within the scope of the Data Protection Act 1998, which provides for very strong safeguards that are set to get stronger. The Government have said that we will opt in to the forthcoming general data protection regulation, which includes stronger enforcement measures than the current Data Protection Act. All the data measures in the Bill, and all the consequences of the age-verification process, will be covered by the Data Protection Act, which has a very broad consensus of support behind it and has operated effectively over a number of years. That means that companies are responsible for the security of their data, including their cyber-security.

Mr Carmichael: Will the data therefore be held in an anonymised form that will not allow the people who have provided them to be identified, should the data be stolen? The best security in the world can still be breached.

Matt Hancock: It will be a requirement that the data are held in such a way that they are secure and not made available. It is a common principle across swathes of life that data must be held safely. The Data Protection Act is in place to make sure that that happens.

Returning to new clause 32, it is likely that a requirement on the regulator to approve providers would be unnecessarily restrictive. However, I understand of course the need to ensure that the age-verification process is of high quality.

As I have stressed, these measures are part of a broader effort to protect children online. For instance, parental control filters are an important tool to protect children from harmful online material. They were introduced by industry after the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes in the previous Parliament. In Committee, we discussed the concern that EU net neutrality regulations will render such controls, which have worked well, illegal. I am clear that our interpretation of the EU regulations is that filters are allowed when they can be turned off, as they are therefore a matter of user choice. I know that there is still uncertainty about this matter, as well as concerns that filters could be challenged. I am happy to confirm to the House that, to put this issue beyond doubt, we will table an amendment in the other place to the effect that providers may offer such filters.

Amendments 27 to 34 have been tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), the former Secretary of State. The introduction of a new law requiring appropriate age-verification measures for online pornography is a bold step involving many challenges. It represents the first stage in ensuring that commercial providers of pornographic material are rightly held responsible for what they provide and profit from. While the internet brings incredible and unlimited opportunities, it has the potential to change the way in which younger generations grow up to understand and experience healthy relationships.

Delivering on our manifesto commitment to stop children and young people from accessing online pornographic sites remains our priority, and we want to get that right. I believe that the provisions in the Bill will enable us to do that. Our measures will protect children from exposure to material that is clearly inappropriate for them and that would be harmful to their development. Of course, pornography is not the only online content that may be harmful to children, but AV controls are part, not all, of the approach to protect children from possibly harmful content online.

The inclusion of other adult material within the scope of the Bill, as proposed in amendment 27, might not be the most effective way to address these issues. Most importantly, we must be careful to take a proportionate approach to ensure the success of our proposals. I assure my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke that we will continue to work to make sure that we take all action necessary on all fronts where children are at risk of harm. I look forward to continuing discussions with her and others. I believe our approach is a targeted and effective way of protecting children from accessing or stumbling across the pornographic material that is most readily available and potentially harmful, and that the Bill fulfils our manifesto commitment.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that one means by which young people are, more and more, accessing pornography is social media and sites such as Twitter. How will his age verification requirements apply to Twitter?

Matt Hancock: The age verification requirements apply to the commercial provision of pornography. That is not only the paid-for but that which is provided for a commercial return. There is a difference between websites that provide commercial pornography and platforms on which others can upload images. Getting this right with
regard to that second group is much harder than it is with regard to the first. We are therefore proposing to put forward the measures in the Bill to deal with the larger swathe or mainstay of the problem, get them working properly and then see how they are working.

I appreciate that there is a big challenge in stopping those who really want to access porn online, but all the evidence suggests that children's first interaction is often by accident. We are legislating to prevent as much as possible of that inadvertent viewing by those who are not desperately actively seeking to do so. I appreciate that the Bill is not a utopia, but it is a very important step forward. I hope my right hon. Friend will accept that.

Mrs Miller: The Minister is being very generous with his time. Is it not fair to say that four years ago providers such as Twitter told us it was impossible to take down visual images of children being sexually abused, but now, as he says, there is quite rightly a code of practice in place? Surely where there is a will there is a way. He now, as he says, there is quite rightly a code of practice among children to some of the images that, despite the Department for Education to try to build greater resilience and behaviour and are the kind of violence that should not be part of relationships, because research by the NSPCC and others tells us that children, and boys in particular, think it is normal. What discussions has he had with the Department for Education to try to build greater resilience among children to some of the images that, despite the efforts in the Bill, they will see?

Matt Hancock: Yes is the short answer. The Bill does so, and we will best achieve that pressure by delivering on its proposals and then working with the platforms on the issue of platform-based pornography, because that is a much more difficult technical nut to crack.

Fiona MacTaggart (Slough) (Lab): The Minister has spent more time in the past few weeks thinking about children and pornography than I am sure he wanted to. The Bill deals with the publication of pornography, but we also need to help children to be more resilient and understand that those images are not normal sexual behaviour and are the kind of violence that should not be part of relationships, because research by the NSPCC and others tells us that children, and boys in particular, think it is normal. What discussions has he had with the Department for Education to try to build greater resilience among children to some of the images that, despite the efforts in the Bill, they will see?

Matt Hancock: I agree with every word of the right hon. Lady's intervention—both the first part and the second. Yes, working with the DFE is incredibly important in building resilience and actively ensuring that people's health through relationships is taught effectively. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and I have both been in discussions with the DFE on that point. That said, the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona MacTaggart) makes an important point about the broader circumstances that should be taken into consideration, as well as the clarity in the amendment, which I hope she welcomes.

Turning to mobile phone contracts—a bit of a shift—new clause 7 seeks to place a mandatory obligation on mobile phone service providers to agree with the customer at the time of their entering into a contract a financial cap on their monthly bill. Since the new clause was first tabled in Committee, we have had further contact with mobile network operators, and providers already offer customers ways to manage their usage—apps that allow customers to turn financial caps on and off, warning text messages when customers are approaching their allowance limits, dedicated phone numbers that tell the customer their usage, and online tools that explain how much data is needed to carry out different online activities. I expect providers to continue to take steps to minimise bill shock and ensure that their customers are sufficiently equipped to manage their usage, but I am sure that the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) will agree that legislation is not currently necessary, although the movement in this direction is.

On new clause 14, I understand the frustrations of people whose mobile experience does not live up to their expectations, but while roaming appears to offer a quick fix, it risks doing more harm than good, because it could undermine the incentive for operators to invest in new infrastructure. This is particularly damaging in areas with no coverage from any provider at all. There is no incentive to invest capital in a new mast if operators can by law simply piggyback off others' investment. The Government considered roaming in 2014, but for the above reasons it was rejected in favour of licence conditions to drive increased coverage by all mobile operators.

That agreement locked in £5 billion of investment to deliver improved coverage across the UK, and we now have 4G coverage to 97.8% of UK premises. I can confirm that this is happening: a mast was turned on just last weekend in my own constituency, and coverage on the road to Newmarket from my house is now better than it ever has been—and I have seen it for myself. The House will also have seen the recent announcements from mobile providers that they are expanding coverage to meet their 90% landmass requirements, which they must now meet under the contracts in their licence agreements. The Bill strengthens the fines they face if they miss those agreements. Of course, however, we want further improvements. Last week, new planning laws came into force to allow taller masts, and we are reforming the electronic communications code in the Bill to help operators to extend their networks, making mast-sharing easier and infrastructure deployment cheaper. These reforms have been widely welcomed by industry, and Ofcom will hold providers to account for the delivery of wider geographic coverage.

New clauses 20 and 25 seek to place mandatory obligations on mobile phone service providers to allow an end user to terminate their contract upon their being unable to obtain a mobile signal at their main residence or main place of employment. Existing consumer protections are already in place, while the automatic compensation measures in clause 3 strengthen Ofcom's powers to require automatic compensation when there is a complete failure to provide a contracted service. I think that the ability to break a contract when one's signal is not good enough at home is already dealt with, as contracts purchased at distance can be cancelled under the statutory 14-day cooling-off period, while for "in shop" purchases there is often a "check your coverage" cooling-off period for the first two weeks after signing up. Some providers also offer extended periods to ensure that the service meets needs, with the option of cancellation without penalty.

Grant Shapps (Welwyn Hatfield) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend accept that this must be the only product that someone can buy and end up not being able to use? People do not just move house during the first 14 days of a contract; it can happen at any time during the two years of a contract. Will he look again at this?
Matt Hancock: I want to tackle this problem primarily by achieving universal mobile phone coverage for UK properties, and we are on track to hit 98%. By comparison, the universal broadcasting service requires 98.5%. We are getting to the point where we have near-universal service, but that is not necessarily good enough. With the forthcoming Green Paper on consumers and markets in mind, I propose to work with my right hon. Friend to make sure that it addresses the issues of concern, so that we ensure that consumers get a good deal from their mobile phone contracts and that those contracts will work.

5.15 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I hear all these statistics about the level of coverage there is meant to be here, there and everywhere, but they never seem to match the reality on the ground or in the living room or in the shop. I live in the town of Porth in the Rhondda, and through the main street almost right through the town there is absolutely no mobile coverage from any of the companies, so it does not matter whether one of them is providing a good enough service—none of them are.

Matt Hancock: No doubt the hon. Gentleman will share my deep frustration over the fact that when mobile phone 3G licences were auctioned in the early 2000s, in order to get a big return to the Treasury they were auctioned without geographic coverage requirements. I think that was a serious mistake for this country. We have since engineered into the licence agreements mobile phone geographical coverage of 90%. The geography that is being covered is rising rapidly at the moment. For instance, one provider had 50% coverage last year; it is 75% now, and it has to get up to 90%. That shows how it is increasing. It is pity that from the period of the 3G licence in the early 2000s up to 2014, there were no requirements for geographic coverage, which meant that we fell behind. Thankfully, we are now catching up. As the head of Ofcom has confirmed to the Select Committee, we are in discussions with the mobile operators about getting to a universal 100% geographical coverage in the next licence period.

Chris Bryant: I am not trying to make a partisan point, but I think the Minister was trying to there. All I am saying is that it addresses the issues of concern, so that we ensure that consumers get a good deal from their mobile phone contracts and that those contracts will work.

Matt Hancock: I want to make clear this problem primarily by achieving universal mobile phone coverage for UK properties, and we are on track to hit 98%. By comparison, the universal broadcasting service requires 98.5%. We are getting to the point where we have near-universal service, but that is not necessarily good enough. With the forthcoming Green Paper on consumers and markets in mind, I propose to work with my right hon. Friend to make sure that it addresses the issues of concern, so that we ensure that consumers get a good deal from their mobile phone contracts and that those contracts will work.

Matt Hancock: Yes, thank you!

Damian Collins: I, too, was pleased to hear Ofcom say in front of the Select Committee that it and the Government were looking at a universal service obligation for 3G and 4G phone signals. Does the Minister agree that there is sometimes a real frustration in communities where the statistics suggest that they have been covered, but local topography means that the mast signal does not reach homes? If the Minister visited Elham Valley in my constituency, he would meet people who suffer in that way.

Matt Hancock: Well, I have news for my hon. Friend. Next month, Ofcom will publish data for both fixed-line broadband and mobile phone coverage at the premise level for each individual premise. If the supposed coverage is different from what Ofcom says, there will be a mechanism to feed that back so that we get a proper map of coverage in both those respects. I look forward enormously to that happening, and I am sure that the Select Committee will investigate that data with great aplomb.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I ask the Minister to ensure that proper discussion takes place with the Department for Communities and Local Government so that the most sensible, but liberal, planning regime for new mobile telephone masts is in place in order to provide what amounts to a basic technological requirement.

Matt Hancock: Yes, and the new rules came into place last week. Nobody prayed against the statutory instruments in either House, so there was unanimous support for a more liberal planning regime. If my hon. Friend would like to work with me on what steps might be needed to improve the planning regime further, I am all his.

Rob Marris: The Minister is being very generous, but may I caution him and press him a little on the methodology of the “premises by premises” survey? I live in a dense urban area. The coverage is nominally 4G, but I check my phone periodically, and I see that sometimes I get 3G and sometimes I get 4G. What will the premises survey say about properties like mine? I am paying for 4G, and it is the future, but I am not getting it all the time.

Matt Hancock: I would say that 5G is the future. As for the hon. Gentleman’s substantive point, I do not want the debate to turn into a seminar on mobile connectivity, but those in the industry have a wonderful phrase for the phenomenon that occurs as more people use data over a particular mast: they say that the coverage “breathes”. In other words, it comes in and goes out as other people use the data. Of course, at any one point in time the coverage may be different. The very best people to conduct the analysis are those at Ofcom, and they are conducting it, so I think it best for us to engage in this particular debate once they have published the “premises by premises” data.

Grant Shapps: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his offer to incorporate some of the issues raised by the new clauses in the Green Paper. He says that those at Ofcom are the best people to make the decisions. No one in the House, indeed no one in the country, will believe Ofcom’s claim that nearly 98% of UK premises
are covered. It does not stack up with reality, and it does not stack up with what the British Infrastructure Group of Members of Parliament found either. I appeal to the Minister to ensure that he does not himself start to believe this nonsense.

Matt Hancock: I am looking forward to seeing the data for exactly that reason. In my rural constituency, I can drive for 10 minutes without getting a signal at all—that includes driving past houses—and the same probably applies to many other people. The lived experience is critical to judging whether the figures are broadly correct. I am entirely with my right hon. Friend on that. My job, and our job in the House, is to hold the mobile network operators to account and ensure that they deliver high-quality geographic coverage, whether it is in Rhondda, Welwyn, in Suffolk or, indeed, in Buckinghamshire, Mr Speaker.

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Matt Hancock: I will take one more intervention on this subject.

Calum Kerr: May I make what I hope is a quick, constructive point? May I urge all Members to encourage their constituents to download the Ofcom android app, which is specifically designed to gather data so that we can be better informed, and to publicise it in their constituencies?

Matt Hancock: Quite so. As you may say yourself, Mr Speaker, I am not sure that that is entirely a matter for the Bill, but the hon. Gentleman has made his point.

New clauses 21, 22 and 27, tabled by Plaid Cymru and Scottish National party Members, are not necessary, because they call for what is already the position. New clause 21 is not necessary because it is already a requirement that when emergency services network sites are used to provide coverage for the public, they must be made available to all mobile network operators. New clause 22 is not necessary because Ofcom already has the power to impose structural separation on BT Openreach if it considers that that is required. New clause 27 is not necessary because there is already a universal service obligation in the Bill to take high-speed broadband to all premises. I hope that we can use that as the means to deliver the goals that we no doubt share.

As for new clause 26, the Government take the issue of interference with assistive listening devices very seriously, and we will work with Ofcom to take appropriate action when harmful interference with such devices has been identified. I have met representatives of the National Deaf Children’s Society, and I can tell the House that further testing will begin next month and Ofcom will publish its findings by April 2017. I hope that we are making some progress on that important matter.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): I am very encouraged by what the Minister has said about gathering further information. There is a particular issue for deaf children because of the way in which they learn. Interference from the spectrum can have a deleterious effect on their education. Will the Minister pay particular attention to the impact on children in schools?

Matt Hancock: Of course I will. I have discussed that precise issue with the National Deaf Children’s Society, and I will continue to work on it.

Government amendments 23 and 24 are detailed technical amendments concerning the installation of electronic communications apparatus on tidal land owned by the Crown.

I hope that, following my explanations and the commitments I have given, Members will withdraw their amendments and new clauses.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I rise to speak to new clauses 10, 32 and 7, which stand in my name and those of my hon. Friends. Friends, the Government new clauses, which the Minister has outlined, and new clause 1, tabled by the hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), whom the Minister mentioned, I will also refer to some of the other amendments in the group.

In Committee, Labour Members, and indeed the hon. Lady, made it clear that we could not see how age verification could operate without a backstop power to block sites that failed to comply. In Committee, the Minister resisted that strongly. He said:

“The powers are not a silver bullet; sites that were actively trying to avoid the Bill’s other enforcement measures would also be able to actively avoid these measures. It is questionable how much additional enforcement power they would bring, given those downsides.”

He went on to say:

“I think the Bill has ended up with the correct balance.”

—[Official Report, Digital Economy Public Bill Committee, 20 October 2016; c. 209.]

Clearly, the Secretary of State disagreed with him on that. She has now overruled her junior Minister by tabling new clauses 28 and 29 in her name, as we can see on the amendment paper. The new clauses tabled by the Secretary of State, who unfortunately is no longer in her place, represent significant changes at quite a late stage in the passage of the Bill in the Commons, confirming our contention that the Bill as published was not ready to leave home when it was allowed to do so.

Claire Perry (Devizes) (Con): As the hon. Gentleman knows from his ministerial experience, it is the job of junior, middle-ranking Ministers to do all the work and Secretaries of State to take all the credit. In this case, I assure him that the ears of all the Government Front Benchers were open to the changes that he and I wanted to make.

Kevin Brennan: I am grateful for that intervention. All I can say is that I have just given the Secretary of State credit for the change, as the hon. Lady suggests I should.

The new clauses introduce significant changes at this late stage in the consideration of the Bill. We support blocking, but concerns have been raised in the press that the new clauses go beyond a backstop power to block sites to under-18s and could be used in practice to extend internet censorship to adults. The Government need to be clear whether that is the intention of the new clauses.

Matt Hancock: I have also seen those reports. I think that they misread the Bill. That is neither our intention, nor our understanding of the working of the new clauses.
Kevin Brennan: It is helpful to have that on the record. No doubt, the new clauses will be pored over in a lot more detail after they arrive in the other place. Given our time constraints today, I want to put on the record our concern that we did not have an opportunity in Committee to pore over such proposals; had the Bill been ready, perhaps we would have had. Notwithstanding our support for blocking, we think a lot more scrutiny will be required when there is more time available in the other place to discuss these Government new clauses, on the assumption that the House passes them tonight.

We have argued repeatedly that the Bill should have prepared the UK for the challenges faced by the digital economy and, crucially, should have featured digital resilience as a key part of the provisions. The opportunities of the digital economy cannot be exploited unless we feel safe and secure online, and that is nowhere more important and clear than with our children.

Children are growing up in the midst of an information revolution that, even a decade ago, was unimaginable, with instant access to an astonishing range of content and information. Today's children are taking in an astonishing five times more information than the generation that grew up in the not so distant 1990s. So, far from tabloid stories about a distracted generation, those growing up today are in some ways on course to be the most informed generation in history. But of course knowledge is not understanding, and wisdom comes in part from experience.

5.30 pm

The challenges of this digital revolution for protecting our children cannot be ignored, and they are challenges parents across the country worry about every single day. They are worried they may not know what their children are being subjected to online, whether bullying or coming across inappropriate images, and as their children come to know much more about the online world than they do, parents feel they may not be best placed to stop it.

Our new clause 10 would help us all face up to that challenge. It would amend the Education Act 1996, so that secondary school pupils would be taught in an age-appropriate way and with the usual safeguards which apply to that Act about the dangers of the online world and how to keep safe. With digital devices more widespread among children than ever before and with five to 15-year-olds spending an average of 20 hours and six minutes online every week, having no clear education to sit alongside the blunt instrument of age verification is an important missing part of the Bill.

Age verification for online pornography to stop children seeing harmful content is of course welcome in the Bill, but, as the Minister hinted, it is not the whole answer. We can build a swimming pool, fill it with water, build a fence around it and put up a sign saying swimming is dangerous, but the most important thing is to teach our children to swim. Relying on age verification as the main way to tackle this problem is going to be inadequate. Age verification cannot teach children consent or about healthy relationships, or help them to navigate the expectations placed on them and reinforced online; that can only be done only through well-devised and taught sex and relationships education, which incorporates discussions about online pornography, so that children can question what they see online in a safe environment.

A recent NSPCC report into the effect of online pornography on under-18s was revealing and troubling. It found that most of them felt that it was a poor model for consent and practising safe sex and that it could distort their image of a healthy relationship. But the Government have so far refused to even consider statutory online sexual education, and their recent “Keeping children safe” strategy dedicated only three paragraphs to the online world. Taking that in tandem with the Bill, which does not make a single mention of online abuse or online education, it seems that Ministers are ducking the challenge—or perhaps they are not able to comprehend it.

We have always known that education in this area matters. It is why when we were in government we expanded and updated sex education and commissioned the Tanya Byron review, whose lessons were largely abandoned after 2010. That is also why in the Bill we want to take steps towards developing statutory online education for this smartphone generation. We want it to extend beyond simple sex education to the entire online world, so that children, who, as many people say, are digital natives, can make safe and informed decisions.

With an 800% increase in the number of children contacting the NSPCC about online abuse, it is clear this is becoming a real problem for today's schoolchildren. They clearly need more support and more advice, and someone to turn to. Statutory online education would work in tandem with a code of conduct for social media providers to prevent online abuse.

Mrs Miller: I am attracted to the shadow Minister's proposal because I, too, feel more needs to be done to educate children in this area, but I am concerned that it is talking about internet pornography in isolation and potentially will not address the problems he is trying to address in his remarks, which go far broader than simply internet pornography.

Kevin Brennan: I would certainly welcome the right hon. Lady's support for a wider amendment and for a wider change in Government policy in this area, because a problem does exist. Our proposals have had to be drawn up to be within the scope of the Digital Economy Bill. In Committee, we were unable to take an amendment that was in scope, so I am incredibly grateful that we have been able to get one in scope and within the confines of the Bill today.

Rob Marris: I entirely support my hon. Friend. I suspect that his experience of going round schools—particularly secondary schools—will be similar to mine. Among the things that bedevil teachers are mobile phones, online bullying and sexting, but the teachers—God bless 'em—often do not have the training to deal with those issues. Although they have the best intentions, they sometimes fumble in their attempts to help. Having these measures structured into the curriculum would help just about every secondary schoolteacher, even if they did not have to teach these things.

Kevin Brennan: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. I am a former teacher—from the analogue age, I hasten to add—and I have no doubt that many teachers who started their careers around the same time as I did would fall into that category.

Statutory online education could work in tandem, as I have said, but protecting our children is a major challenge and it cannot happen without education.
That is why I was disappointed that the Minister chose not to support our proposal. I believe that it represents the other side of the coin to what the Government are trying to achieve through age verification. We contend that our measures are necessary, and we will therefore divide the House on this matter if we have to.

Our new clause 32 would oblige the age verification regulator to ensure that all age verification providers—the companies that put the tools on websites to ensure compliance—were approved by the regulator. It would also oblige those providers to perform a data protection impact assessment and to make it publicly available, as well as to perform an array of other duties. The new clause is designed to address concerns about the practicality of age verification checks. It would ensure that only minimal data were required, that those data were kept secure and that individuals’ liberty and privacy were protected.

We have not been reassured by the Minister’s comments, either in Committee or today, that the fact that age verification software is improving is enough. We should be able to guarantee the privacy of an individual before the verification tool comes into force. We are not asking anything unreasonable of the regulator or of the age verification providers. The principles of privacy, anonymity and proportionality should underpin the age verification tool, but as far as I am aware, they have not as yet featured in any draft guidance, codes of practice or documents accompanying the Bill.

If anyone thinks I am being partisan, I can tell them that the Information Commissioner agrees with me on this. In its response to the Department’s consultation on age verification for pornography, the Information Commissioner’s Office stated:

“The Commissioner’s concern is that any solution implemented must be compliant with the requirements of the DPA and PECR.”


Matt Hancock: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I just want to clear up this point. When this question was asked while I was on my feet, I responded by saying that the Data Protection Act, as cited by the ICO, is the legal framework for delivering this, the further quotes that the hon. Gentleman read out outline how the Act would operate in this case. In a sense, therefore, those quotes prove the point that the required legislation for ensuring protection of data already exists in the Data Protection Act and other measures.

Kevin Brennan: We will see whether the Information Commissioner agrees. She made it clear that she would have

“significant concerns about any method of age verification that requires the collection and retention of documents such as a copy of passports, driving licences or other documents (of those above the age threshold) which are vulnerable to misuse and/or attractive to disreputable third parties.”

The Minister gave no real reason in his intervention about why he does not support new clause 32, which would provide that reassurance.

The risks of creating databases that potentially contain people’s names, locations, credit card details—you name it—alongside their pornographic preferences are clear. Our priority here is the protection of children and that is agreed across the House, but one consequence of the recent hack that was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) was the number of suicides. We should take things seriously and proceed with caution before creating anything that would result in the storing of data that could be leaked, hacked or commercialised that would otherwise be completely private and legitimate. That is the reasoning behind our reasonable, straightforward new clause, which the Minister rejects. It would place a series of duties on the age verification regulator to ensure that adequate privacy standards were applied, that any data obtained or stored were not for commercial use and that security was given due and proper consideration.

New clause 7 would mean that mobile phone service providers give all consumers the opportunity to place a financial cap on their monthly bill and that a mobile phone service cannot be provided until the service provider has put in place a cap of the agreed amount if the consumer has made an express request. Again, the Minister’s arguments, both in Committee and today, were nowhere near sufficient. The new clause would be welcomed by the many who have found that when they receive an email or check their bank balance at the end of the month, their mobile phone bill has come in much higher than expected. Mobile tariffs are complex, particularly on data, and few of us actually understand how much data we need for an average month. Consumers of all kinds can find that they use much more data than they expected.

Citizens Advice provided an example that reveals the problems. One of its clients changed his shift pattern and started using his mobile phone to watch films. He then received a text message saying that he had gone over his monthly allowance. He did not think too much about it until he received a bill for more than £2,000 at the end of the month. Unsurprisingly, his service was subsequently cut off. Research suggests that as many as one in five consumers find it difficult to keep track of how much they spend on data. The average unexpectedly high bill is often double the cost of the original monthly fee.

Helen Goodman: Another problem with the unpredictability is that people under some contracts pay for what they receive—what other people send in texts, emails and so on—but that is not under their control.
Kevin Brennan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why new clause 7 is so helpful. Consumers could prevent that from happening by voluntarily asking for a cap. Citizens Advice received more than 60,000 inquiries about telephone and broadband debt, with its in-debt specialists dealing with nearly 27,000 individual mobile phone debt cases. Consumers support the measure, with more than 77% of them welcoming the idea.

This is not the first time such a proposal has been considered: in 2012, Ofcom considered introducing regulations but could not overcome the objections of providers, who argued it would be too costly. In fact, the lack of regulation is what has proved too costly—too costly for struggling consumers. Two providers now do what is suggested in our new clause. The Government say they want to help the JAMs—those who are just about managing—so if they fail to support the new clause, it will show they are not serious when they say that.

5.45 pm

Ian C. Lucas: I strongly support this proposal and the new clause. Constituents have contacted me specifically about this point, because the complexity of the tariffs and the lack of knowledge about what makes up the information and the cost is huge for consumers, and this proposal would be a major step forward for them.

Kevin Brennan: I welcome my hon. Friend’s intervention in support of our proposal for caps on mobile phone bills, and so that I do not exceed mine at this point, I will hang up, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Mrs Miller: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), and I share his regret that it is not possible to address online abuse in this Bill. I hope that the Minister will show the Government’s determination on this issue, as Ministers have done regularly in response to questions on a number of other measures. I particularly noted his response to my intervention about codes of practice. He is right to say that the industry has been able to move swiftly and effectively to deal with issues relating to terrorism and child abuse, but I think issues relating to online abuse more broadly are just as worthy of their attention. I hope that he is clear about the Government’s priorities in this area, to make sure that the industry really does act.

It is an art form to draw the scope of a Bill, and the Minister should get a grade-A medal for drafting the scope of this Bill extremely tightly to make sure that a number of issues that many of us would have liked to have drawn to the attention of the House are not covered by this Bill. That does not, however, mean that they are any the less important.

I really welcome Government new clauses 28 and 29 on the powers to block access to material where age verification is not sufficiently robust. That shows the Government’s intention. They have done well to reflect the intentions of my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry) in her new clause 1 and of my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). It shows action and energy from Government to try to clean up the internet so that it is safer for children to use. My amendments 27 to 34 raise the question of whether the Government could have gone further in that, although I acknowledge that they are very much adhering to the manifesto commitments we made at the general election.

We have heard from the Minister at length, and I listened carefully, particularly to his response to my amendments. With his usual elegance and wit, he attempted to explain how this Bill can support the Government’s policy but people can be very happy with it—I may being a little unkind. He often tells us at the Dispatch Box that what is illegal offline is illegal online too, but it is illegal for children under the age of 18 to view adult material—I refer not just to pornography; as he knows, “adult material” is drawn more broadly than pornography alone. It therefore seems a little arbitrary for us to introduce a new law that makes such a distinction. I do not understand why one needs to be made.

Mr Whittingdale: My right hon. Friend says it is illegal for children to view adult material, but she will be aware that vast amounts of adult material are broadcast by our national broadcasters after the watershed at 10 o’clock, and it is not illegal for children to watch that, although it may be undesirable. How does she propose to deal with BBC iPlayer, ITV Play and 4oD, which broadcast 18 material?

Mrs Miller: My right hon. Friend, the former Secretary of State, makes an extremely important point. I suppose that the advantage broadcasters have over the online world is that they can use a notional watershed, although, as he rightly says, that is clearly not the case when it comes to iPlayer. I shall come on to technology that is on our side. Technology has moved on and given us opportunities, which my right hon. Friend would welcome, to make sure that children do not view things that we have said in Parliament are inappropriate.

I gently urge the Minister to consider how he might embrace my amendments in future. The law makes it clear that adult material does not just mean pornography. In response to my right hon. Friend the former Secretary of State, that is the point that I am making. Whether it is extreme violence, beheadings, sadomasochism or other such behaviour or material, it is deemed as adult-related. However, for reasons that are unclear, that is excluded from the Bill. Perhaps the Minister can give me a little more information about why he decided to do that, and assure me that in future that will be dealt with.

I took the time to talk to some primary schoolchildren in my constituency about the sort of things that they came across on the internet. A group of them talked about viewing age-appropriate material—I think it was pictures of small kittens—but at the end material popped up that frightened them to their core. They were young children, and they were not out and out looking for such material—it just popped up. Restrictions and parental controls could be put in place to catch that, but the Minister has an opportunity to make sure that organisations such as YouTube are more careful about advertisements linked to child-related material. That is an important point for him to consider further in relation to my amendments.

Ofcom has done a great deal of work in this area, and the Minister will be well and truly aware of that. It says that this is a significant problem, and that this year, one in 10 under-11s has seen something online that is “worrying, nasty or offensive”. Two thirds of young people think that sites should do more to protect them from that type of adult content. One of the guiding principles of the new regulator, the British Board of Film Classification,
is to protect children from harmful media content. We protect them on television, albeit with the problems that my right hon. Friend the former Secretary of State has mentioned, and we protect them in the cinema. In one of the most uncontrolled environments online—we allow them freely to view things that are far more difficult for us as parents to control. My amendments would help to draw those restrictions and website blocking more broadly if proper age verification procedures are not put in place, and it is worth the Government considering that further.

Ofcom was charged with looking at common media standards four or five years ago, so perhaps the Minister can update the House on the progress that has been made in that area. Can he explain how the new regulator will balance its narrow responsibilities to look solely at pornography with the organisation’s broader remit offline with regard to adult-related material? Organisations such as Childline have to deal daily with the aftermath when young people look at more broadly defined adult material online, as I have said before, in videos of extreme torture, violence, and—this is particularly upsetting—beheadings. My amendments, which have the full support of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children seek to put safeguards that we take for granted offline into the online world. Content that would require an 18 certificate in a film or video game would be subject to an age-verification system.

The technology exists to do that. We have an incredible IT sector in this country, and it has invented ways to verify age in an anonymised way online, particularly with the use of passport data and biometrics. Companies such as Yoti have developed facial recognition apps linked to passports so that they can make sure, using anonymous data, that individuals are the age that they say they are. These things exist; Parliament does not need to invent them.

Accepting that adult over-18 material should not be viewed by children does not undermine freedom of speech, because we insist on it offline. It does add to costs for businesses, but we accept that cost for offline businesses, and I believe we should accept it for online businesses too. Fundamental rights and freedoms have always been subject to limits within the law, and the amendments simply call for the law relating to adult material in general to apply online, and for children to be protected. People who choose to flout the law should be subject to the same action by the regulator as people who distribute pornography.

I should like briefly to touch on a couple of other amendments in this group. New clause 3, which was tabled by the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), talks about the creation of personal accounts and removing anonymity on the internet. I sympathise with the measures that it proposes, but it is as important for non-commercial sites as commercial sites to adopt such a measure, and I do not think that the Bill is the appropriate vehicle for such a change.

New clause 10 was discussed at length by the hon. Member for Cardiff West. As I said in an intervention, I sympathise with the point that he made, because the guidance on sex and relationships education is 16 years out of date. It does not quite pre-date the internet, but it is close to doing so, and it does not address issues such as pornography and the way in which it drives young people’s understanding of relationships—something that no one in the Chamber feels very comfortable with. I do not believe, however, that the Bill is the proper vehicle for him to achieve the objectives that he has set out, as he may well end up distorting the issue, because people might think that we have addressed it with his provision. However, we would not have done so, because the measure deals only with online pornography. He will agree, especially if he has read my Select Committee report on sexual harassment in schools, that any measure to address SRE and its improvement in schools should be drawn much more widely than the internet alone. I hope he will forgive me for not supporting that narrowly drawn provision, although I accept that he probably did not have any choice, given the scope of the Bill—he is absolutely right about that.

I urge the Minister to consider stronger undertakings than those he gave me in his opening statement, given the importance of protecting children from viewing adult material in the broader sense, rather than the narrow sense on which the Government have chosen to focus. He has a personal responsibility to children who use the internet day in, day out. We need to make sure that it is a safe place. He has done more than any other Minister today in making the internet a safer place for children such as mine and his, but he needs to do more, so will he give me that undertaking today?

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): A large number of hon. and right hon. Members want to catch my eye. This debate finishes at 6.47 pm, so I urge speakers to keep their remarks brief so that everyone can speak. I call George Howarth.

6 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I shall try to comply with your instructions. It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who made a powerful case for her amendments. She certainly has my support.

I shall try to be brief as I talk to a narrow and esoteric part of the Bill. Virgin Media has a workplace in my constituency that employs 250 people. The company has a particular concern which I shall take the liberty of connecting to new clause 27, because it is about the position before that measure could take effect. I am not arguing against new clause 27, which would provide individuals with the option of a voucher scheme that would empower them to take up an alternative solution. It has been tabled on the presumption that most individuals would be likely to choose the standard universal service order offering.

My argument is that in order for that proposal to be successful, there needs to be coverage in the first place to enable people to choose one option or the other. There are a number of obstacles in the way of that happening, and the Bill does not resolve the problem. Virgin Media argues that communications providers should, in effect, be treated the same as utility companies when it comes to being granted access rights or wayleaves from landowners to deploy their infrastructure on their land. The Government talk of broadband as a fourth utility, which generally is the case, but the code reform in the Bill is, in the words of Virgin Media, “a halfway house”.


[Mr George Howarth]

Under the reforms as currently envisaged, broadband companies would face three drawbacks that water companies do not face and, as a result, higher deployment costs, which I shall say more about in a moment. The first drawback is that communications operators have to pay a rent for accessing land, whereas water companies do not. Instead, they have only to compensate landowners for any loss of value. Secondly, water companies have a right to net off any compensation that they pay with any increase in the value of the land resulting from the fact that sewerage is in place. Communications operators do not have that right, although in some cases they might seem to be carrying sewage of a different kind. Thirdly, water companies notify landowners of their intention to deploy by giving 42 days’ notice, whereas communications operators have to negotiate access with landowners who often have no particular incentive to grant it, which can cause huge delays.

Rob Marris: I have great sympathy with what my right hon. Friend is saying. We talk glibly about access to telephony being almost a human right in our country. Obviously we need water to live, and having telephony is not a physiological necessity, but in modern life telephony is a necessity. Some 40% of the Bill is contained in schedule 1, which runs to 60 pages and deals with issues relating to that raised by my right hon. Friend. Does he agree that there is a missed opportunity in schedule 1 of dealing with the particular issue that he raises?

Mr Howarth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing that out. Earlier today I waded through schedule 1, after which I was no wiser about its relevance to my argument. He, as a Member with a reputation for having an eye for the fine detail of legislation, will have spotted that in rather less time than it took me.

According to Virgin Media, it costs a communications service provider—Virgin Media or any other—150% more to put in infrastructure than it costs a water company, and 66% more than it costs an electricity company. I do not want to steal the thunder of the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr), although I condemn him roundly for not using new clause 27 as an opportunity to resolve the problem—that is not a criticism, really—but I ask the Minister to consider this problem before the Bill gets to the House of Lords. I have a handy amendment available if he wants one, but if he does not, I shall try to persuade somebody in another place to table it so that the issue can be more thoroughly debated there.

Claire Perry: The House knows, I welcomed part 3 of the Bill on Second Reading, but I did raise, as did many other right hon. and hon. Members, the question of enforcement. We considered the possibility of internet service providers being asked to block sites that disregarded the Government’s requirement for age verification, and I tabled a series of amendments on that point in Committee. I disagree with the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) because I think that Ministers absolutely were in listening mode about a manifesto commitment that they were clearly keen to deliver. Against that backdrop, I am delighted to speak on Report by welcoming new clause 28 and Government amendments 35 to 42, which address this critical concern.

The Government had argued for rather a long time that it was disproportionate to make provision for statutory IP blocking because that had been dealt with on a voluntary basis for child pornography—we are all aware of the wonderful work done by the Internet Watch Foundation—and with reference to terrorist material. There was perhaps a hope that internet service providers would voluntarily get involved in blocking sites in the absence of age verification. Many right hon. and hon. Members campaigned for years for the voluntary introduction of family-friendly filters by internet service providers. We have led the world by working across industry and across the Government to produce a sensible set of provisions. We now have online filters that are introduced—in some cases automatically—by ISPs and others on a voluntary basis, and they seem to be working well.

There were, however, significant problems in assuming that ISPs would operate voluntarily. It was not just me and other colleagues in the House who were concerned. Bodies such as Christian Action Research and Education, the Children’s Charities Coalition for Internet Safety, the NSPCC, the British Board of Film Classification, which is now the regulator, and the Digital Policy Alliance were concerned that this sensible provision for age verification would not stick unless there was a more robust enforcement regime.

I am delighted that new clause 1, which I tabled, has been co-signed by 34 colleagues from seven political parties. That demonstrates that although we might like to stand up and shout at each other, our best work is done when we work together on such vital issues. It is a testament to the power of this place that we can work together so effectively to get this done. I know that this is a difficult argument; we have only to look at some of our Twitter feeds to see that. I am no longer on Twitter, but we know from other parts of the internet how difficult these conversations are because they go right to the heart of issues surrounding the regulation of the internet, which grew up, very properly, in a regulation-free environment, and in many respects that environment contributed to its growth and its glory.

Are we asking Governments and companies to restrict legal material for adults? I would argue strongly that the new clause is not about censorship or the restriction of legal access for adults; it is about proving that those who are consuming the material are indeed over 18. The new clause simply puts in place the sort of Government regulation and advice, and corporate socially responsible behaviour, that has been seen in many other industries. Example of that include the watershed in broadcasting, the fact that adult content often sits behind PINs on online media, and restrictions on what children can buy on the high street.

There is also a sense that the argument in relation to child sex abuse images and terrorist material is really not relevant. There is a strong global consensus that images or movie materials relating to neither of those things should be tolerated, so there is no need for statutory compulsion. However, the sites we are talking about, which offer material defined as pornographic, are quite different, because they provide a product that it is generally entirely legal for adults to access, and in many cases entirely reasonable, as there is no sense in which this is a kind of anti-pornography crusade. In that context, it is completely unsurprising that the ISPs
made it clear they would not block pornographic sites without statutorily defined age-verification checks. Indeed, evidence given on 25 October to the Communications Committee in the other place, the director of policy at Sky said of IP blocking under part 3 of the Bill: “If there is a desire for ISPs to be blocking access to those sites, then legislation is required...If you want ISPs to block, I think they will struggle to do so, unless they are compelled to, and not because they do not want to but because they would probably be breaking the law.”

Indeed, Ofcom gave the Committee a similar message a week later, saying: “If ISPs were to take any action blocking non-compliant sites, they would do so on a voluntary basis...I think you...have heard from ISPs about the legal difficulties they...would face if they were to undertake voluntary blocking...it would raise issues in relation to net neutrality.”

The second point, which has been widely raised among colleagues, is that there is overwhelming support among the majority of the British public for introducing these age-verification measures robustly. Eight out of 10 people absolutely support this very good manifesto commitment and want it to work. Indeed, the BBFC, which the Minister has chosen to be the regulator—I think all of us absolutely support it as a trusted brand in the space; it is not me or anyone else deciding what is over-18 material, because that will be based on the BBFC’s tried and tested guidelines—said itself that it felt that the regulator needed this power if it was effectively to carry out its work.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend says that this power is consistent with the guidelines that the regulator uses already, but my point was that it is not. Its powers are far more broadly drawn with regards to adult material over and above simply pornography.

Claire Perry: I do have great sympathy with the provisions my right hon. Friend has tabled; she is absolutely right to keep pushing on the issue. We defined the manifesto commitment and the Bill very tightly in terms of the online pornography space, and I wanted to achieve that first before we moved to broader definitions which, as she will be aware, quickly throw up many more questions about the scope of regulation. As she and I both know, there is a great desire in this space to make the perfect the enemy of the good, and with almost every advance we have made, we have been told, “Back off,” because something is not absolutely perfect. She, I and many other Members think that this is a process of iterative steps forward, and the Government are doing a great job in that respect.

The final argument for putting such blocking on a statutory basis is the precedent for IP blocking in the case of copyright infringement under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. It would seem perverse for the House to argue that it was legal to instruct people to block sites that infringe copyright, but not those that infringe a legal requirement for age verification. It would be quite wrong for us to suggest that child protection is less important than protecting the interests of often very large commercial businesses.

I have two other quick points to make about why the case for change is so compelling. The first is that the BBFC has said that it will focus primarily on offshore sites, which are the main source of much of this material. Of course, as we know, it will be very difficult to enforce fines outside the UK jurisdiction. Secondly, we know that many sites are not reliant purely on financial transactions coming through the sorts of sites discussed in the Bill, given that there are systems such as Bitcoin and other forms of revenue generation.

I am absolutely delighted that the Government have tabled new proposals. I will not press my new clause and I will support their measures wholeheartedly. However, I want to probe the Minister—perhaps he will answer this question in a moment—about who will actually enforce the Bill. My understanding is that the BBFC does not currently have the enforcement powers required by new clause 28, which was why many of us assumed that Ofcom would be the enforcer of choice, as was set out very explicitly by my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse). We would therefore be keen to hear who will actually enforce the Bill, because we know that, without robust enforcement, there will be little incentive for websites to implement age verification, despite these new powers, and I think almost the whole House will support me in saying that we want this to be a great success.

6.15 pm

I finish by sincerely thanking those who have campaigned so tirelessly on this issue in this House and, indeed, in the other place. They include my hon. Friend the Members for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), who was so instrumental when we first had the review, the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), who is no longer in the Chamber, as well as several new Members, including the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr)—I should call him the hon. Gentleman who represents the borders, because his constituency is far too long to spell out—and my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire.

Calum Kerr: I stand to speak to new clauses 22 and 27, neither of which I think the Minister referred to—unless I slept through that bit. I hang on his every word normally, so I am sure that was not the case.

Before I do that, I would like to touch on a couple of other new clauses. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry). She and her many colleagues in the House have campaigned hard on this issue, and the Government’s move in new clause 28 is welcome. However, I would just quickly recount a story. When I was on the Bill Committee, I phoned home one night. Of course my wife said, “What have you been up to today?” I explained about access to under-age pornography, and she said, “Well, funny enough, I came home today from work and found Robert”—he is seven years old—“looking at inappropriate content.” My heart sank. She said, “He was watching the third presidential debate,” and I can see where she was coming from. She said to him, “Robert, do you know what you are watching here?” He said, “Yes, I do.” She said, “Well, why are you watching that?” He said, “Because it’s important, and I have a friend at school called Donald.”

That brings me on to the concerns raised by the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), which we share. As we proceed down this route, it is important that these powers are a last resort, that they do not stop access to sites they were not intended to affect and that, as a result, we proceed with care. We should take sufficient time to look at the implications, and we
 Calibration: How we learned!

Calum Kerr: I absolutely do agree. I will come on to that point later.
I would contrast the USO measure with last week’s announcements. We have heard the Government say that fibre is the future, but our record in this country on fibre-to-the-home, or fibre-to-the-premises, is pretty woeful. The broadband investment fund announced in a previous Budget had some money put into it, and hundreds of millions of pounds were committed to 5G trials and fibre backbone. All that is welcome, if slightly unambitious, but we have not seen anything specifically for rural areas. We are talking about a fibre and gigabit future in urban areas while telling rural areas that they should settle for 10 megs and a USO. That is not closing the digital divide—it is turning it into a gaping chasm of inequality. A badly implemented USO will not fix the issue but might, through legislation, cement this digital divide.

My new clause aims to address this issue. From the start, as I have looked at potential solutions, the one that I kept coming back to was a voucher alternative. At the Broadband World Forum, a representative from the Independent Networks Cooperative Association said that if we introduce a voucher scheme, we turn a universal service obligation into a universal service opportunity. In our constituencies we have highly motivated groups of people who will, yes, okay, maybe on day one, be happy with 10 megs because if they have been living with 1 meg it will be transformational, but quickly see that they are being left behind and be very unhappy about it. Although the Bill includes provision to revisit this, it does not specify when, and these people will be left further and further behind. The idea of a voucher scheme was endorsed by INCA chairman David Cullen, who said:

"The principle of a Universal Service Obligation is an outdated concept in a sector focused on significant growth and could well translate into a ‘ceiling’—a voucher scheme for premises could be far more effective."

The Minister did not deal with this new clause in his opening remarks. I urge the Government to embrace the option of a voucher alternative to empower our rural communities, who, as I know from my own community, want to go further. They understand technology. They will put in fibre-to-the-home, providing a much faster solution. This is not a one-size-fits-all—

Matt Hancock: I did address this point. I said that the USO contained in the Bill will get high-speed broadband everywhere. Furthermore, a broadband voucher scheme does not require legislation. In fact, we have had one in the past without legislation. This new clause is therefore unnecessary.

Calum Kerr: I thank the Minister for that intervention. He makes a point that I forgot to make, which is that there is previous history in this area. Broadband Delivery UK managed a voucher scheme that was phenomenally successful. Perhaps I have become a cynic far too quickly in this place, but if the Government do not put this in the Bill, I do not believe it will happen. I will therefore press the new clause to a vote. We should ensure that as the Government say that fibre—

Matt Hancock: As an example of the fact that we can do this through non-legislative means, not only did we have such a scheme in the past, but at the autumn statement last week we announced that we are to consult on a new one. I think that that takes care of the concerns behind the new clause.

Calum Kerr: I thank the Minister for that positive news, but it does not take care of those concerns. I am seeking a specific alternative to the USO, so that my communities who want fibre to their home can have this foundational voucher that sets them on a path to something far more ambitious than what the Government propose. The Government say that fibre is the future. Guess what? My constituents want to be part of that future, too.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. We have about 15 minutes and quite a few Members wish to speak, so brevity would be fantastic.

Mr Whittingdale: I start by making it clear that I fully support the provisions in the Bill to require age verification to access pornographic sites. As I observed on Second Reading, it is just as well, since my name is on the front of the Bill.

I would like to introduce an element of caution. Unlike a lot of other material online that has been discussed—child pornography, racist material, hate speech, extremist encouragement and copyright breaches—we are talking here about legal content. Like it or not, the sites we are discussing are visited by millions and millions of people every day. They are some of the most popular sites on the entire internet.

As I have said, I support the idea of age verification to ensure that only those who can appropriately view this material do so, although there are concerns. I have yet to see exactly how age verification is going to work. We have seen examples of existing content access control systems through things such as credit cards, or mobile phones that have been verified as belonging to an adult. It is, in my view, asking a lot to ask people who want to access legal content to hand over their credit card numbers to pornographic website operators. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) was absolutely right to flag up the data protection concerns about that. I hope that Ofcom will look very carefully at how the CAC systems work.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the main ways in which young people are now exposed to pornography is through social media such as Twitter, and I do not really see that the Bill will do anything to stop that happening. That is not to say that we should not take action against pornographic sites. The original Bill contained a number of quite significant enforcement measures, such as requiring payment providers, website hosting companies and advertisers to stop dealing with websites that had been identified as not complying with the law under the Bill. There are already signs that a number of the big providers are going to comply. MindGeek, which is probably the biggest operator, has said that it will introduce age verification systems, although it wanted others to do so as well. I hope that it will happen.

Claire Perry: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Whittingdale: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I am very conscious of the Deputy Speaker’s strictures.
I was not persuaded of the necessity of introducing ISP blocking. It represents a considerable infringement of the civil liberties of individuals who want to access material that, as everybody has recognised in this debate, they are perfectly entitled to access. At a time when we are very concerned about the growth of censorship online, and when certain countries would like to take this as a precedent for saying, “It is fine to block content that we do not particularly like,” I think that it is a dangerous road to go down. I hope that the measures originally in the Bill will prove sufficient, that operators will introduce age verification and that we will pause before taking the next step and introducing ISP blocking. To that extent, I rather hope that this Digital Economy Bill is like the Digital Economy Bill that we debated in 2010. That Bill provided for the Government to intervene and require ISP blocking, but the measure was never introduced.

Helen Goodman: I am pleased to take part in this debate, and I was pleased to put my name to new clause 1. I am extremely pleased to follow the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), and I am glad to see the new regime on the Government Front Bench, who have basically accepted new clause 1. The right hon. Gentleman’s argument that because something is legal and enjoyed by grown-ups, we should not have restrictions for children, is patently absurd.

Mr Whittingdale: I support age verification completely. I have said that I support age verification.

Helen Goodman: The right hon. Gentleman said that, but he also said that he thought that this was a difficult area, and one of the reasons why he thought so was that people enjoyed doing it. Grown-ups enjoy having sex and grown-ups enjoy drinking alcohol, but that does not mean that those things are okay for children.

My real purpose this evening is to speak to new clause 26, which I had considerable help from the National Deaf Children’s Society in preparing. The new clause is designed to protect from frequency interference those with hearing loss who have hearing aids, radio aids, cochlear implants and other hearing technologies. Ofcom is about to sell spectrum, and there is a concern that the part of the spectrum that it is going to sell is so close to the wavelength used by such technologies that interference will be caused.

The new clause would place a duty on Ofcom to carry out tests in advance of the sale of the radio frequencies to ensure that any interference is identified and made public and to take appropriate action. That action could take two forms: either Ofcom should not grant a wireless telegraphy licence unless action is taken to remove the risk of interference; or a fund should be established to cover the cost of replacing medical and hearing technology affected by interference. That is important for the 10 million people who suffer from hearing loss and the 45,000 deaf children in this country, and it will enable Ofcom to fulfil its duties under the Equality Act 2010.

The Minister has said that tests have been done and more tests will be done and that we will know what those tests come up with in April 2017, so everything is fine. That is not the view of the National Deaf Children’s Society, which is not confident about the way in which the tests will be carried out. It has undertaken considerable correspondence with the regulator, and there is still dispute about how the tests should be done and how the results should be interpreted. Even if the tests are done and the results published on this occasion, as the Minister suggested, what happens then? What if there is interference? Will the spectrum then not be auctioned off as the Government intend? Will there be some funding for people who have to have new hearing aids as a result? The Minister’s response, I am sorry to say, is not adequate.

Interference will be a problem for children who use radio aids in the classroom to help them to hear what their teachers are saying. Unlike grown-ups, they cannot easily guess what a person is saying, because they are hearing things for the first time. The tests done in 2014 found that someone with a mobile phone using the relevant frequency could interfere with a hearing aid 4 metres away. I know quite a lot about hearing aids, because my husband has terrible hearing and he has two hearing aids. If he goes to a party, he can hardly hear what other people are saying anyway, and if his hearing aids were interfered with by other people standing in the room, it would be a nightmare. I urge the Minister to be flexible and to look at the matter again.

Grant Shapps: I rise to support my new clause 25, on the ability of end-users to cancel mobile contracts. It is very similar to new clauses tabled by other hon. Members—indeed, on the last count, by hon. Members from four different parties. I am grateful to the Minister for saying that this will now be considered in the Green Paper that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will bring out next year. However, I want to point out that the idea that a 14-day cooling-off period after purchasing a phone that is somehow sufficient for a contract lasting for two years is, frankly, completely inadequate. Some 60% of people now have contracts for two years, and there has been a 19% increase in the number of people with lengthy contracts during the past five or six years.

It in no way negates the problem to say that, if someone realises during the first 14 days they cannot get a signal, they can exchange their contract. What happens if they move or if their place of work moves and they are stuck with such a contract? This problem can actually be solved quite easily. All we need to do is to split out the cost of the device—on average, about £800—from the cost of the mobile contract for the phone and data elements. If we did that, the person could stay within the contract to buy the device, while being able to move to another operator that can provide a contract with the ability to access a signal for phone and data use.

My point is very simple. I think that the briefing on this is extremely misleading. I do not believe that Ofcom is likely to do anything about this in the next year or two. I thank the Minister for his advice that this will be considered in the Green Paper next year, because unless we get a bit more radical, people will be forced to pay hundreds of pounds for a service they quite simply never receive.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I would have liked to speak to new clauses 3, 14 and 21, but I will restrict myself to new clause 13. New clause 13 would introduce a statutory code of practice to improve the performance
of social media platforms when dealing with incidents of online abuse that cross the criminal threshold. It would place an obligation on the Minister to issue a code of practice, which would cover the processes and quality of the services provided. Such matters are commonplace in complaints procedures that already exist throughout the public utilities sector.

The code of practice would also cover an industry-specific requirement to set and enforce appropriate privacy settings for minors. This would be drafted after consultation with the industry, the criminal justice system, charities and other key stakeholders. An extensive consultation with a number of significant bodies would guarantee a comprehensive set of guidelines.

Technology is ever adapting, which is why subsection (4) of new clause 13 states:

“The relevant Minister may from time to time revise and re-issue the code of practice.”

As technology is ever adapting, it is right and proper that legislation protecting vulnerable people from predatory and unacceptable behaviour online should be updated to reflect the dynamic nature of the online world. The new clause would have allowed that. I would have talked about this matter extensively had there been the new clause. I would have to reflect the dynamic nature of the online world. The new clause would have allowed that. I would have talked about this matter extensively had there been the time, but I hope that the points I would have made will be taken up in another place.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I am pleased to say that I will not press my amendment 2, but that I will support new clause 29. The new clause addresses the loophole that my amendment sought to address, and about which I spoke on Second Reading. I thank the Minister for listening and for acting by tabling the new clause.

The loophole is that, as established under the Communications Act 2003, the current law covering pornographic content online in the form of video on-demand only requires age verification for R18, not 18-rated, material when streamed from sites based within the UK. Without the new clause, the Bill would only deal with the provision of age verification for 18 and R18 video on-demand pornography streamed into this country from abroad.

New clause 29 will deal with the issue. The House has determined that it is not appropriate for under-18s to purchase videos that are 18-rated from a shop, and rightly so, so where the technology is available to apply similar protections online, it would be quite wrong not to use it. I am grateful to the Minister for tabling the new clause. Public opinion is very much with us on this issue. ComRes polling of 2,000 adults in Great Britain in July last year showed that 73% of people support age verification of any 18-rated DVDs shown online and that just 13% disagreed.

Mr Alistair Carmichael: I rise to echo some of the concerns that have already been expressed by the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) about new clause 28. I should say at the outset that, as the parent of two teenagers, I completely understand the motivation of those who have raised these concerns with the Government. I commend the Government for responding in the way they have so far, and, indeed, I commend the Minister for listening and for acting by tabling the new clause.

My real concerns centre on the holding of the data. As I put it to the Minister when he was at the Dispatch Box, there are no provisions in the Bill to secure the privacy and anonymity of those using these sites. He said that the data will be held in accordance with the Data Protection Act, but as we saw in the Ashley Madison leaks, that was of no great assistance. Let us not forget just exactly what is at stake: as a consequence of that hack and of the information being put into the public domain, a number of people committed suicide. We seem to be treating the symptom rather than the disease, and what would really make the significant changes we all want is better sex and relationships education.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman will not get his one minute of speaking time.

6.45 pm

Two hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the programme motion, the debate was interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83E).

That the clause be read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

New clause 28 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

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

New Clause 29

ON-DEMAND PROGRAMME SERVICES: SPONTANEOUSLY RESTRICTED MATERIAL

“(1) Section 368E of the Communications Act 2003 (restrictions on harmful material contained in on-demand programme services) is amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (5), after paragraph (b) omit “or”.

(3) In that subsection, after paragraph (c) insert—

“(d) a video work—

(i) in respect of which the video works authority has issued an 18 certificate, and

(ii) whose nature is such that it is reasonable to assume that its principal purpose is to cause sexual arousal, or
Section 368E of the Communications Act 2003 prohibits an “on-demand programme service” (defined in section 368A) from containing “specially restricted material” except in a manner which secures that persons under the age of 18 will not normally see or hear it. This new clause adds further kinds of “specially restricted material”.

Brought up, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 10

INTERNET PORNOGRAPHY: REQUIREMENT TO TEACH AGE REQUIREMENT AND RISKS AS PART OF SEX EDUCATION

“Aafter section 403(1A)(b) of the Education Act 1996, add—

“(c) they learn about the risks and dangers of internet pornography, and the legal age requirement to access internet pornography under Part 3 of the Digital Economy Act 2017.”—[Kevin Brennan.]”

This new clause would mean that the Secretary of State would have to include in guidance to maintained schools that pupils learn as part of sex education the risks and dangers of internet pornography and the legal age requirement to access it, as provided for under Part 3.

Brought up.

Question put, That the clause be added to the Bill.

The House divided: Ayes 181, Noes 278.

Division No. 96  [6.47 pm]

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie  
Alexander, Heidi  
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
Ashworth, Jonathan  
Austin, Ian  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Barron, r Sir Kevin  
Beckett, r Margaret  
Benn, r Hilary  
Berger, Luciana  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  
Blenkinsop, Tom  
Blenfield, Paul  
Brabin, Tracy  
Bradshaw, r Mr Ben  
Coyle, Neil  
Crausby, Mr David  
Creasy, Stella  
Cruddas, Jon  
Cryer, John  
Cunningham, Alex  
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Davies, Geraint  
Debonnaire, Thangam  
Doughty, Stephen  
Dowd, Jim  
Dowd, Peter  
Dugher, Michael  
Eagle, Ms Angela  
Eagle, Maria  
Edwards, Jonathan  
Efford, Clive  
Elliott, Julie  
Ellman, Mrs Louise  
Elmore, Chris  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Field, r Frank  
Fitzpatrick, Jim  
Fiello, Robert  
Flint, rh Caroline  
Fougargue, Yvonne  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Furniss, Gill  
Gapes, Mike  
Gardiner, Barry  
Glass, Pat  
Glindon, Mary  
Godsiff, Mr Roger  
Goodman, Helen  
Green, Kate  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Greenwood, Margaret  
Gwynne, Andrew  
Hanson, r Mr David  
Harris, Carolyn  
Hayes, Helen  
Hayman, Sue  
Healey, rh John  
Hendrick, Mr Mark  
Hepburn, Mr Stephen  
Hiller, Meg  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hollem, Kate  
Hopkins, Kelvin  
Howarth, rh Mr George  
Hunt, Tristram  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hussain, Imran  
Jarvis, Dan  
Johnson, r Alan  
Jones, Gerald  
Jones, Graham  
Jones, Mr Kevan  
Jones, Susan Elan  
Kane, Mike  
Keeley, Barbara  
Kendall, Liz  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Lammy, r Mr David  
Lavery, Ian  
Leslie, Chris  
Lewis, Clive  
Lewis, Mr Ivan  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
Lucas, Caroline  
Lucas, Ian C.

NANDY, John  
Saville Roberts, Liz  
Shah, Naz  
Sheerman, Mr Barry  
Sherriff, Paula  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  
Slaughter, Andy  
Smeth, Ruth  
Smith, r Mr Andrew  
Smith, Angela  
Smith, Cat  
Smith, Nick  
Spellar, r Mr John  
Starmer, Keir  
Stevens, Jo  
Streeting, Wes  
Tami, Mark  
Thomas, Mr Gareth  
Thornberry, Emily  
Timms, rh Stephen  
Trickett, Jon  
Turley, Anna  
Turner, Karl  
Twigg, Derek  
Vaz, rh Keith  
Vaz, Valerie  
Watson, Mr Tom  
Whitehead, Dr Alan  

NOES

Lynch, Holly  
Mactaggart, rh Fiona  
Madders, Justin  
Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
Mahmood, Shabana  
Malhotra, Seema  
Mann, John  
Marris, Rob  
Marsden, Gordon  
Maskell, Rachael  
McCabe, Steve  
McCarthy, Kerry  
McDonagh, Siobhain  
McDonald, Andy  
McDonnell, rh John  
McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
McGovern, Alison  
McInnes, Liz  
Meale, Sir Alan  
Mearns, Ian  
Miliband, rh Edward  
Moon, Mrs Madeleine  
Morden, Jessica  
Murray, Ian  
Nandy, Lisa  
O’Mara, Melanie  
Osamor, Kate  
Pearce, Teresa  
Perkins, Toby  
Phillips, Jess  
Phillipson, Bridget  
Powell, Lucy  
Qureshi, Yasmin  
Rayner, Angela  
Reed, Mr Steve  
Rees, Christina  
Reeves, Rachel  
Reynolds, Emma  
Reynolds, Jonathan  
Rimmer, Marie  
Ritchie, Ms Margaret  
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey  
Rotheram, Steve  
Ryan, rh Joan  
Saville Roberts, Liz  
Shah, Naz  
Sheerman, Mr Barry  
Sherriff, Paula  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  
Slaughter, Andy  
Smeth, Ruth  
Smith, r Mr Andrew  
Smith, Angela  
Smith, Cat  
Smith, Nick  
Spellar, r Mr John  
Starmer, Keir  
Stevens, Jo  
Streeting, Wes  
Tami, Mark  
Thomas, Mr Gareth  
Thornberry, Emily  
Timms, rh Stephen  
Trickett, Jon  
Turley, Anna  
Turner, Karl  
Twigg, Derek  
Vaz, rh Keith  
Vaz, Valerie  
Watson, Mr Tom  
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie

Zeichner, Daniel
Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeff Smith and Nic Dakin

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afrinye, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barlow, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Donelan, Michelle
Douglas-Scott
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie

Holloway, Mr Adam
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lanercost, Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Udington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCabe, John
McCabe, Simon
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sherryl
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Prith
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philip, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh Sir Andrew
Robinson, Mary
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shebbecca, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Rhyston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Souby, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Symes, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Timpson, Edward
Tothurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrer, rh Mr Andrew
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warmann, Matt
Wharton, James
Whatley, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggins, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Amendment made: 35, page 20, line 15, at end insert—
“(d) by an internet service provider to whom a notice has been given under section (Age-verification regulator’s power to direct internet service providers to block access to material) (1), against the giving of that notice; and
(e) by a person identified as the non-complying person in a notice given to an internet service provider under section (Age-verification regulator’s power to direct internet service providers to block access to material) (1), against the giving of that notice.”—(Matt Hancock.)

This amendment requires the Secretary of State to be satisfied, before designating a person as the age-verification regulator under clause 17, that the regulator will maintain arrangements for appeals against the giving of notices under NC28.

Amendment made: 36, page 21, line 8, after “is” insert—
“(a) an internet service provider, or
(b) ”.—(Matt Hancock.)

This amendment enables the age-verification regulator to require internet service providers to provide it with information to enable it to exercise, or decide whether to exercise, its functions under Part 3 (online pornography).

Amendment made: 37, page 25, line 3, leave out “and 22” and insert
“22 and (Age-verification regulator’s power to direct internet service providers to block access to material)”.—(Matt Hancock.)

Clause 23

Exercise of functions by the age-verification regulator

Amendment made: 38, page 25, line 19, leave out “or 22” and insert
“22 or (Age-verification regulator’s power to direct internet service providers to block access to material).”

This amendment provides for the manner in which notices are to be given under NC28.

Amendment 39, page 25, line 22, leave out “or 22(1)” and insert
“22(1) or (Age-verification regulator’s power to direct internet service providers to block access to material)”.

This amendment deals with the manner in which notices are to be given to internet service providers under NC28.

Amendment 40, page 25, line 30, leave out “or 22(3)” and insert
“22(3) or (Age-verification regulator’s power to direct internet service providers to block access to material)”.

This amendment deals with the manner in which notices are to be given to non-complying persons under NC28.

Amendment made: 42, page 26, line 16, at end insert—
“(d) by an internet service provider, or
(e) by a person identified as the non-complying person in a notice given to an internet service provider under section (Age-verification regulator’s power to direct internet service providers to block access to material) (1), against the giving of that notice.”—(Matt Hancock.)

This amendment defines “internet service provider” for the purposes of amendments 35 and 36 and NC28.

New Clause 27

Introduction of broadband connection voucher scheme as alternative to universal service order provision


Although most individuals are likely to choose the standard universal service order offering, this new clause would provide individuals with the option of a voucher scheme that empowers them to take up an alternative solution.

Brought up.

Question put. That the clause be added to the Bill.

The House divided: Ayes 221, Noes 277.
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<th>Ayes</th>
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<td><strong>Tellers for the Ayes:</strong></td>
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<td>Owen Thompson and Marion Fellows</td>
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(3) An application under sub-paragraph (2) must be made in writing and must include—

(a) the proposed terms of the agreement, and

(b) the reasoned evidence of the operator and of the appropriate authority as to the market value of the right.

(4) As soon as reasonably practicable after receiving such an application, the appointed valuer must—

(a) determine the market value of the tidal water right; and

(b) notify the operator and the appropriate authority in writing of its determination and the reasons for it.

(5) If the agreement mentioned in sub-paragraph (2) or an agreement in substantially the same terms is concluded following a determination under sub-paragraph (4), the consideration payable by the operator must not be more than the market value notified under sub-paragraph (4)(b).

(6) For this purpose the market value of a tidal water right is the amount that, at the date the market value is assessed, a willing buyer would pay a willing seller for the right—

(a) in a transaction at arm’s length,

(b) on the basis that the buyer and seller were acting prudently and with full knowledge of the transaction, and

(c) on the basis that the transaction was subject to the proposed terms set out in the application.

Question accordingly negatived.

Schedule 1

THE ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS CODE

Amendments made: 23, page 124, leave out lines 11 to 37 and insert—

64 (1) An operator may not exercise a tidal water right in relation to land in which a Crown interest subsists unless agreement to the exercise of the right in relation to the land has been given in respect of that interest by the appropriate authority in accordance with paragraph 104.

(2) Where, in connection with an agreement between the operator and the appropriate authority for the exercise of such a right, the operator and the appropriate authority cannot agree the consideration to be paid by the operator, the operator or the appropriate authority may apply to the appointed valuer for a determination of the market value of the right.

(3) An application under sub-paragraph (2) must be made in writing and must include—

(a) the proposed terms of the agreement, and

(b) the reasoned evidence of the operator and of the appropriate authority as to the market value of the right.

(4) As soon as reasonably practicable after receiving such an application, the appointed valuer must—

(a) determine the market value of the tidal water right; and

(b) notify the operator and the appropriate authority in writing of its determination and the reasons for it.

(5) If the agreement mentioned in sub-paragraph (2) or an agreement in substantially the same terms is concluded following a determination under sub-paragraph (4), the consideration payable by the operator must not be more than the market value notified under sub-paragraph (4)(b).

(6) For this purpose the market value of a tidal water right is the amount that, at the date the market value is assessed, a willing buyer would pay a willing seller for the right—

(a) in a transaction at arm’s length,

(b) on the basis that the buyer and seller were acting prudently and with full knowledge of the transaction, and

(c) on the basis that the transaction was subject to the proposed terms set out in the application.
(7) The market value—
(a) must be assessed on the basis of the value of the tidal water right to the holder of the Crown interest, and
(b) must not be assessed on the basis of the value to the operator of the tidal water right or having regard to the use which the operator intends to make of the tidal waters or land in exercising that right.

(8) The market value must be assessed on the assumption that there is more than one site which the operator could use for the purpose for which the operator intends to use the tidal waters or land in question (whether or not that is actually the case).

(9) The appointed valuer may charge a fee in respect of the consideration of an application under sub-paragraph (4) and may apportion the fee between the operator and the appropriate authority as the appointed valuer considers appropriate.

(10) In this paragraph “the appointed valuer” means—
(a) such person as the operator and the appropriate authority may agree;
(b) if no person is agreed, such person as may be nominated, on the application of the operator or the appropriate authority, by the President of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.”

Paragraph 64 limits the level of consideration that can be enforced for the grant of tidal water rights where there is a Crown interest in the land. The amendment replaces this with provision for the grant of tidal water rights where there is a Crown interest in the land.

Amendment 24, page 142, line 14, leave out “paragraph 64(2) to (5),”—(Matt Hancock.)

This is consequential on amendment 23.

New Clause 6

CODE OF PRACTICE: ACCESSIBILITY TO ON-DEMAND AUDIOVISUAL SERVICES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AFFECTING HEARING AND/OR SIGHT

(1) It shall be the duty of Ofcom to draw up, and from time to time to review and revise, a code giving guidance as to—
(a) the extent to which on-demand audiovisual services should promote the understanding and enjoyment by—
(i) persons who are deaf or hard of hearing,
(ii) persons who are blind or partially-sighted, and
(iii) persons with a dual sensory impairment, of the programmes to be included in such services; and
(b) the means by which such understanding and enjoyment should be promoted.

(2) The code must include provision for securing that every provider of a service to which this section applies ensures that adequate information about the assistance for disabled people that is provided in relation to that service is made available to those who are likely to want to make use of it.

(3) In complying with subsection (1) Ofcom must conduct a public consultation to inform Ofcom’s determination of the elements of the code.

(4) In complying with subsection (1), Ofcom must have regard, in particular, to—
(a) the extent of the benefit which would be conferred by the provision of assistance for disabled people in relation to the programmes;
(b) the size of the intended audience for the programmes;
(c) the number of persons who would be likely to benefit from the assistance and the extent of the likely benefit in each case;
(d) the extent to which members of the intended audience for the programmes are resident in places outside the United Kingdom;
(e) the technical difficulty of providing the assistance; and
(f) the cost, in the context of the matters mentioned in paragraphs (a) to (e), of providing the assistance.

(5) The code must set out the descriptions of programmes that Ofcom considers should be excluded programmes for the purposes of the requirement contained in that subsection or paragraph.

(6) The code shall make provisions about the meeting of obligations established, including by allocating relevant responsibilities between—
(a) broadcasters;
(b) platform operators; and
(c) any other provider or purveyor of programmes or programme services.

(7) For the purpose of subsection (1) a service is an on-demand audiovisual programme if it falls within the definition given in section 368A (Meaning of “on-demand programme service”) of the Communications Act 2003 (as inserted by the Audiovisual Media Service Regulations 2009).”—(Kevin Brennan.)

Brought up, and read the First time.

7.14 pm

Kevin Brennan: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 8—Responsibility for policy and funding of TV licence fee concessions—

“A new clause seeks to enshrine in statute that it should be the responsibility of the Government to set the entitlement and cost of over-75s TV licences remain with the Government. It would need to be agreed with clause 76 not standing part of the Bill.

New clause 17—PSB prominence—

“(1) The Communications Act 2003 is amended as follows.
(2) At the end of section 310(1) add “that satisfy the qualification criteria to be set by OFCOM in the code.”
(3) In section 310(2) leave out “OFCOM consider appropriate” and insert “required by OFCOM”.
(4) In section 310(4)(a) after “programmes” insert “, including on-demand programme services.”.
(5) In section 310(5)(a) after “service” insert “, including on-demand programme service.”.
(6) In section 310(8)(a) after “services” insert “, including on-demand programme services.”.
(7) In section 310(9) after “services” insert “, including on-demand programme services.”.

This new clause would modernise the PSB prominence regime, as recommended by Ofcom in its 2015 PSB Review. This proposal would extend the provisions in the Communications Act 2003 which currently only apply to traditional public service television channels and menus to on-demand services.

New clause 18—Listed events qualifying criteria—

“(1) The Broadcasting Act 1996 is amended as follows.
(2) Omit section 98(2)(b) and insert—
“(b) that the service has been watched by at least 90 per cent. of citizens in the United Kingdom in the course of the preceding calendar year.”

(3) After section 98(2) insert—

“(2A) The Secretary of State may by Order amend section (2)(b) by substituting a different percentage for any percentage for the time being specified there.

(2B) No Order under subsection (2A) shall be made unless a draft of the Order has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament.”

This new clause seeks to future-proof the listed events regime. This replaces the criterion on the capability of ‘receive’ a channel with an alternative based on its actual usage over the period of a year, lowers the threshold from 95% to 90%, and proposes delegating powers to the SoS to amend the 90% threshold.

New clause 24—Review of sale of counterfeit electrical appliances on the internet—

‘(1) Within six months of this Act coming into force, the Secretary of State shall commission a review of the sale on the internet of counterfeit electrical appliances and shall lay the report of the review before each House of Parliament.

(2) The review under subsection (1) shall consider whether operators of trading websites that allow individual sellers to use those websites to sell electrical items should be obliged to report to the police and trading standards any instances of the selling of counterfeit electrical appliances during the course of their business of trading.”

New clause 33—Report of cost to UK economy of counterfeit electrical goods on the internet—

‘(1) Within six months of this Act coming into force, the Secretary of State shall prepare and publish a report on the cost to the UK economy of counterfeit electrical goods on the internet and shall lay a copy of the report before Parliament.

(2) The report under subsection (1) shall include an assessment of—

(a) the amount of counterfeit electrical goods being imported into the United Kingdom,

(b) the efficacy of the 1994 Plugs and Sockets regulations, and

(c) the amounts of counterfeit electrical good being sold on trading websites on the internet.”

New clause 34—Review of impact of digital platforms on media advertising—

‘(1) Within 12 months of this Act coming into force, Ofcom shall conduct a review of the impact of digital platforms on media advertising and the sustainability of the UK media.

(2) Ofcom shall conduct another review on the matters under subsection (1) within five years of the publication of the first review, and within every five years thereafter.

(3) The Secretary of State must lay a copy of the report of any review in this section before Parliament.”

Government amendments 20 to 22.

New clause 15—Power to provide for a code of practice related to copyright infringement—

“(1) The Secretary of State may by regulations make provision for a search engine to be required to adopt a code of practice concerning copyright infringement that complies with criteria specified in the regulations.

(2) The regulations may provide that if a search engine fails to adopt such a code of practice, any code of practice that is approved for the purposes of that search engine by the Secretary of State, or by a person designated by the Secretary of State, has effect as a code of practice adopted by the search engine.

(3) The Secretary of State may by regulations make provision—

(a) for the investigation and determination of disputes about a search engine’s compliance with its code of practice,

(b) for the appointment of a regulator to review and report to the Secretary of State on—

(i) the codes of practice adopted by search engines, and

(ii) compliance with the codes of practice;

(c) for the consequences of a failure by a specified search engine to adopt or comply with a code of practice including financial penalties or other sanctions.

(4) Regulations made under this section—

(a) may make provision that applies only in respect of search engines of a particular description, or only in respect of activities of a particular description;

(b) may make incidental, supplementary or consequential provision;

(c) shall be made by statutory instrument which shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.”

This new clause would amend the Bill to present an opportunity for the Government to fulfil its manifesto commitment to reduce copyright infringement and ensure search engines do not link to the worst-offending sites. There is an absence of a specific provision in the Bill to achieve this.

New clause 16—E-book lending—

“In section 43(2) of the Digital Economy Act 2010, leave out from “limited time” to “and loan.”

This new clause aims to extend public lending rights to remote offsite e-book lending.

New clause 30—Devices or services that infringe copyright—

“(1) The Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 107(1)(d)(ii) after “offers” insert “, advertises”.

(3) After section 107(1)(d)(iv) insert—

(v) installs, maintains or replaces, or

(ii) otherwise promotes by means of commercial communications, or”

(4) In section 107(1)(e) after “article” insert “, device, product or component”.

(5) In section 107(1)(e) after “work” insert “or which is, and which he knows or has reason to believe is, primarily designed, produced, adapted or otherwise used in a manner described in this section whether alone or in conjunction with another article, device, product, component, or service supplied by or with the knowledge of the same person for the purpose of enabling or facilitating the infringement of copyright”.”

This new clause allows the Government to fulfil its commitment in the IPO’s Enforcement Strategy to ensure that UK business and rights holders have the necessary legal means to protect their IP. It brings in language to cover the supply of IPTV boxes clearly being marketed or sold for the purpose of enabling or facilitating copyright infringement, recognising that many devices may not, themselves, infringe copyright, but are supplied in conjunction with information which enables users to infringe copyright.

New clause 31—Offence to use digital ticket purchasing software to purchase excessive number of tickets—

“(1) A person commits an offence if he or she utilises digital ticket purchasing software to purchase tickets over and above the number permitted in the condition of sale.

(2) A person commits an offence if he or she knowingly resells or offers to resell, or allows to be resold or offered for resale on a secondary ticketing facility, a ticket that the person knows, or could reasonably suspect, was obtained using digital ticket purchasing software and was acting in the course of a business.

(3) For the purposes of subsection (2) a person shall be treated as acting in the course of a business if he or she does anything as a result of which he makes a profit or aims to make a profit.

(4) A person guilty of an offence under this section shall be liable on summary conviction to—
(a) imprisonment for a period not exceeding 51 weeks,
(b) a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale, or
(c) both.

(5) In this section—
(a) “digital ticket purchasing software” means any machine,
device, computer programme or computer software
that, on its own or with human assistance, bypasses
security measures or access control systems on a retail
ticket purchasing platform that assist in implementing
a limit on the number of tickets that can be purchased,
to purchase tickets.
(b) “retail ticket purchasing platform” shall mean a retail
ticket purchasing website, application, phone system,
or other technology platform used to sell tickets.

(6) Subsections (1) and (2) shall apply in respect of anything
done whether in the United Kingdom or elsewhere.”

This new clause creates an offence to use digital ticket purchasing
software to purchase tickets for an event over and above the
number permitted in the condition of sale. It also creates an offence
to knowingly resell tickets using such software.

New clause 5—Personal data breaches—

“(1) The Data Protection Act 1998 is amended as follows.
(2) After section 24 insert—

“24A Personal data breaches: notification to the
Commissioner

(1) In this section, section 24B and section 24C “personal data
breach” means unauthorised or unlawful processing of personal
data or accidental loss or destruction of, or damage to, personal
data.
(2) Subject to subsections (3), (4)(c) and (4)(d), if a personal
data breach occurs, the data controller in respect of the personal
data concerned in that breach shall, without undue delay, notify
the breach to the Commissioner.
(3) The notification referred to in subsection (2) is not required
to the extent that the personal data concerned in the personal data
breach are exempt from the seventh data protection principle.
(4) The Secretary of State may by regulations—
(a) prescribe matters which a notification under subsection (2)
must contain;
(b) prescribe the period within which, following detection
of a personal data breach, a notification under subsection (2) must be given;
(c) provide that subsection (2) shall not apply to certain
data controllers;
(d) provide that subsection (2) shall not apply to personal
data breaches of a particular description or descriptions.

24B Personal data breaches: notification to the data subject

(1) Subject to subsections (2), (3), (4), (6)(b) and (6)(c), if a
personal data breach is likely to adversely affect the personal
data or privacy of a data subject, the data controller in respect of
the personal data concerned in that breach shall, also, without
undue delay, notify the breach to the data subject concerned,
insofar as it is reasonably practicable to do so.
(2) The notification referred to in subsection (1) is not required
to the extent that the personal data concerned in the personal
data breach are exempt from the seventh data protection principle.
(3) The notification referred to in subsection (1) is not required
to the extent that the personal data concerned in the personal
data breach are exempt from section 7(1).
(4) The notification referred to in subsection (1) is not required
if the data controller has demonstrated, to the satisfaction of the
Commissioner—
(a) that the data controller has implemented appropriate
measures which render the data unintelligible to any
person who is not authorised to access it; and
(b) that those measures were applied to the data concerned
in that personal data breach.
(5) If the data controller has not notified the data subject in
compliance with subsection (1), the Commissioner may, having
considered the likely adverse effects of the personal data breach,
require the data controller to do so.
(6) The Secretary of State may by regulations—
(a) prescribe matters which a notification under subsection (1)
must contain;
(b) provide that subsection (1) shall not apply to certain
data controllers;
(c) provide that subsection (1) shall not apply to personal
data breaches of a particular description or descriptions.

24C Personal data breaches: audit

(1) Data controllers shall maintain an inventory of personal data
breaches comprising—
(a) the facts surrounding the breach;
(b) the effects of that breach; and
(c) remedial action taken
which shall be sufficient to enable the Commissioner to verify
compliance with the provisions of sections 24A and 24B. The
inventory shall only include information necessary for this purpose.
(2) The Commissioner may audit the compliance of data
controllers with the provisions of sections 24A, 24B and 24C(1).
(3) In section 40 (Enforcement notices)—
(a) in subsection (1)—
(i) after “data protection principles,” insert “or section
24A, 24B or 24C”;
(ii) after “principles” insert “or the
section or sections”;
(b) in subsection 6(a) after “principles” insert “or the
section or sections”.
(4) In section 41 (Cancellation of enforcement notice)—
(a) in subsection (1) after “principles” insert “or the section or
sections”;
(b) in subsection (2) after “principles” insert “or the
section or sections”.
(5) In section 41A (Assessment notices)—
(a) in subsection (1) after “data protection principles”
insert “or section 24A, 24B or 24C”;
(b) in subsection (10)(b) after “data protection principles”
insert “or section 24A, 24B or 24C”.
(6) In section 41C (Code of practice about assessment notices)—
(a) in subsection (4)(a) after “principles” insert “and
sections 24A, 24B and 24C”;
(b) in subsection (4)(b) after “principles” insert “or
sections”.
(7) In section 43 (Information notices)—
(a) in subsection 43(1)—
(i) after “data protection principles” insert “or section
24A, 24B or 24C”;
(ii) after “the principles” insert “or those sections”;
(b) in subsection 43(2)(b) after “principles” insert “or
section 24A, 24B or 24C”.
(8) In section 55A (Power of Commissioner to impose
monetary penalty)—
(a) after subsection (1) insert—
(1A) The Commissioner may also serve a data
controller with a monetary penalty notice if the
Commissioner is satisfied that there has been a
serious contravention of section 24A, 24B or 24C
by the data controller;
(b) in subsection (3A) after “subsection (1)” insert “or
(1A)”;
(c) in subsection (4) omit “determined by the
Commissioner and”;
(d) in subsection 5—
(i) after “The amount” insert “specified in a monetary
penalty notice served under subsection (1) shall be”;
(ii) after “Commissioner” insert “and”;
(iii) delete “or”.

This new clause seeks to create a general obligation on data controllers to notify the Information Commissioner and data subjects in the event of a breach of personal data security. The proposed obligation is similar to that imposed on electronic communication service providers by the Privacy and Electronic Communications (EC Directive) Regulations 2003.

New clause 11—Public register of information disclosures—

“(1) No disclosure of information by a public authority under Part 5 shall be lawful unless detailed by an entry in a public register.

(2) Any entry made in a public register under subsection (1) shall be disclosed to another person only for the purposes set out in this Part.

(3) Each entry in the register must contain, or include information on—

(a) the uniform resource locator of the entry,
(b) the purpose of the disclosure,
(c) the specific information to be disclosed,
(d) the data controllers and data processors involved in the sharing of the information,
(e) any exchange of letters between the data controllers on the disclosure,
(f) any other information deemed relevant.

(4) In this section, “uniform resource locator” means a standardised naming convention for entries made in a public register.”

New clause 12—Review of the collection and use of data by government and commercial bodies—

“(1) Within six months of this Act coming into force, the Secretary of State shall commission an independent review of the collection and use of data by government and commercial bodies and shall lay the report of the review before each House of Parliament.

(2) The review under subsection (1) shall consider—

(a) the increasing use of big data analytics and the privacy risks associated with big data;
(b) the adequacy of current rules and regulations on data ownership;
(c) the collection and use of administrative data; and
(d) any other matters the Secretary of State considers appropriate.

(3) In conducting the review, the designated independent reviewer must consult—

(a) specialists in big data, data ownership and administrative data,
(b) those who campaign for citizens’ rights in relation to privacy, personal information and data protection,
(c) any other persons and organisations the reviewer considers appropriate.

(4) In this section “big data analytics” means the process of examining large datasets to uncover hidden patterns, unknown correlations, market trends, customer preferences and other useful business information.”

New clause 19—Disclosure of information by local authorities in relation to free school meals—

“(1) A “specified objective” under section 29(6) also refers to the disclosure of information held by a local authority to a relevant school to enable them to carry out the duty in Section 512 of the Education Act 1996 to provide free school meals to eligible children.

(2) For the purposes of this section, “information” refers to the disclosure of information to a relevant school on the names of—

(a) pupils who live within a household that claims council tax benefit;
(b) pupils who live within a household that claims housing benefit;
(c) pupils who live within a household that claims any other benefits administered by the local authority.

(3) The objective under section (1) may be specified by regulations only if it complies with the conditions under subsection (4).

(4) That condition is that the disclosure is for the purposes of assisting children eligible for free school meals to have access to the entitlement under section 512 of the Education Act 1996.

(5) Under subsection (1) local education authority must provide a relevant school with sufficient information collected to enable them to carry out the duty in subsection 3.

(6) For the purposes of this Act, a school is “relevant” to a local education authority if that school has on its pupil roll a qualifying child resident within that local education authority’s area.

(7) For the purposes of this Act, a “school” is any local authority maintained school, free school or academy, or voluntary-sector alternative provision working with the local authority.

(8) Local education authorities must provide the means for a parent or guardian of a qualifying child to—

(a) opt out of the arrangements envisaged in sections 1 to 4,

(b) consider opting in to free school meals at the beginning of each academic year, having previously chosen to opt out.

(9) Local education authorities and schools must take all reasonable steps to preserve the confidentiality and right to privacy of qualifying children and their parents or guardians in respect of the information, information-sharing and administrative arrangements provided.

New clause 23—Provision of information on Government website in Welsh language—

“(1) Subject to subsection (2), services provided on the internet by the Government must be provided in the Welsh language in addition to English.

(2) Subsection (2) only applies to services provided on the internet by the Government relating to subjects not listed under Part 1 of Schedule 7 to the Government of Wales Act 2006.

(3) In this section “services provided on the internet by the Government” means—

(a) information on the www.gov.uk website, or

(b) interactive services on the www.gov.uk website.”

Amendment 3, in clause 32, page 31, line 30, at end insert—

“(8A) In its application to a public authority with functions relating to the provision of health services, section 29 does not authorise the disclosure of identifiable health information held by the authority in connection with such functions.”

This amendment is to ensure that there are adequate protections for the confidential health information of patients and to prevent the disclosure of identifiable health information.

Government amendments 4 to 11.

Amendment 25, in clause 49, page 48, line 6, at end insert—

“(g) for the purposes of journalistic publication or broadcast transmission in the public interest.”

Amendment 26, in clause 50, page 49, at end insert—

“(j) for the purposes of journalistic publication or broadcast transmission in the public interest.”

Government amendments 12 to 19.

Kevin Brennan: We have 12 new clauses and amendments—and one that we withdrew so that the Select Committee could table it—in this group. New clause 6 stands in my name and those of my hon. Friends the Members for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) and for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh). As the Minister has done many times, I pay tribute to the latter, who unfortunately is not here because she is part of a pre-planned parliamentary delegation. She did a tremendous job in Committee and has been praised universally on both sides of the House for her efforts.

On new clause 6, although subtitling is at or near 100% across public service broadcasters, three quarters of the UK’s 90 on-demand providers still offer no subtitling at all, despite the fact that according to Ofcom nearly one in five of the UK population use them. The principle behind the Communications Act 2003 recognised that those with sensory loss should not be denied access to the information services that many of us take for granted, but those with sensory loss cannot keep up with changing technology. In July 2013, the then Minister for the Digital Economy, the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), acknowledged this, arguing in the Department’s 2013 document, “Connectivity, Content and Consumers”, that if “progress isn’t being made in three years’ time...we will consider legislation.”

Well, here we are, three years later, with an appropriate legislative vehicle right here in front of us, and the Government are failing to act.

We wonder why. There were strong rumblings that the Government were planning to act, and we were checking the amendment paper every day, anticipating that they would, so it is a bit odd that we, the Opposition, have to bring forward this new clause, which takes on the Government’s concerns, when it is supposed to be the other way around—the Government taking on the concerns of others in the House during consideration of a Bill. The new clause would update the existing regulatory regime and apply it to on-demand providers. It is clearly time the Government acted to reflect the digital world in which we live and allow those with sensory loss to play a full and active part in it. The Government should accept the new clause, and I look forward to the Minister telling us that he will.

Rob Marris: Does my hon. Friend find it shocking that just one of the 21 on-demand services offered through Virgin TiVo—we discussed Virgin’s telephony and telecommunications services under new clause 27—is subtitled? That is less than 5%. Is that not a prime example of why we need new clause 6?

Kevin Brennan: It is a prime example. I might even have had it in my notes, before I truncated them considerably in order to make some progress. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point it out.

New clause 8 opposes the way the Government are dealing with the free television licences for over-75s. The continuation of free licences for over-75s was a promise made in the Conservative party’s manifesto, which many over-75s voted for in good faith, but now, just 16 months later, the Government are legislating to do away with that pledge in all but name, on the pretence that it should now be for the BBC to decide who gets a free television licence. I am afraid that the promise in the manifesto was unequivocal. It said:

“We will maintain all the current pensioner benefits including Winter Fuel Payments, free bus passes, free prescriptions and TV licences”.

Notice the list of Labour achievements in that quote, Madam Deputy Speaker! It said “maintain” not “play pass the policy parcel”, which is what the Government are doing. They are legislating to hand over responsibility to a body that cannot afford to maintain the entitlement.
It is a point of principle for us. We cannot accept a policy that takes responsibility for even a small part of our social security system and gives it to an organisation with no direct accountability to the electorate. If the new clause fails, Labour will do everything in its power to make it clear to those millions of over-75s exactly what is going on. It is not the BBC that will be reducing or taking away their entitlement to TV licences; it is the Government who have knowingly engineered the change. If we look at the Red Book for Budget 2016, we see that it is absolutely clear how much money the Government intend to save from this measure: in 2018-19, £185 million; in 2019-20, £425 million; and in 2020-21, £725 million.

Our new clause 17 aims to modernise the public service broadcaster regime, as recommended by Ofcom. Existing law would be extended to include on-demand channels and menus. The broadcasting landscape has changed significantly due to the emergence of new technologies such as the BBC iPlayer, the iPAd and digital TV switchover, so although the Communications Act 2003 ensured PSB prominence on broadcast TV, it does not apply to connected TV sets or to catch-up services.

Connected TVs, such as Sky Q box, move the TV guide, where PSBs occupy the most prominent positions, so that it is increasingly hard to find. Seven out of 10 of the public say that they want the BBC channels at the top of the channel listings and that they want BBC iPlayer and the on-demand service there too. Among connected TV users, people are 10 times more likely to prefer to see the TV guide than the platform operators’ recommendations first. This holds true in focus groups, where consumers gave feedback on the obscuring of the TV guide. One said: “I absolutely love Sky Q, but if there were one thing I would change, it would be where the TV guide is…it’s almost tucked away somewhere on my screen. You expect technological advances to make life easier, but this is making it harder…it’s an extra step.”

Essentially, the public are paying towards PSB content that is becoming increasingly hard to find.

The Minister argued in Committee that Ofcom should adapt the code in line with technological developments, but Ofcom itself has called for a legislative change. The point was made that the TV guide was of declining importance due to the increasing integration of TV and internet services. However, nine out of those who watch live or on-demand use the electronic programme guide to access TV programmes. Our new clause builds on the current system, with a strong duty placed on Ofcom to provide clearer guidelines than at present. The industry should then apply these as appropriate to their platforms. If the Government really believe in public service broadcasting—and they say they do—they should support our new clause 17.

New clause 18 deals with the listed sporting events regime, which ensures that events such as the Olympics are freely and widely available. Unfortunately, that is at risk, so our new clause would help to safeguard listed events into the future. Some 45 million people in the UK watched the Rio 2016 Olympics, while millions watched the Euros—including Wales’s stunning run to the semi-finals this summer. Listed events are responsible for 5% of sports output but 60% of sports viewing in this country. The current law specifies that 95% of the population must be reached by a channel for it to
acquire listed events rights. Due to the proliferation of alternative media devices, PSBs believe that by the end of this Parliament no TV channel will, in fact, meet that 95% reach criterion.

New clause 18 offers a solution. There is a crucial legal difference between receiving a channel and watching it. Replacing the criterion on the capability to “receive” a channel with the alternative that it “has been watched”, based on its actual use over the past year, would capture factors such as continuous free-to-air availability, popularity and audience awareness. The new clause would lower the threshold from 95% to 90%, and give the Secretary of State powers to amend it so that the law is flexible enough to reflect consumption trends and change in new and unpredictable ways.

Let me deal now with new clause 15. Over the past few years, there has been a series of round-table discussions with search engines, including Google, Bing and Yahoo, and rights holders including the British Phonographic Industry, the Music Publishers Association and the Alliance for Intellectual Property. The various parties have been trying to negotiate a code of practice to tackle copyright infringement whereby search engines would do more to demote sites that carry pirate content. These discussions are dragging on and, years later, the search engines and rights holders are yet to come to an agreement. Our new clause would provide the Secretary of State with the powers to legislate for a code of practice to be agreed if the next rounds of talks fail to come to a conclusion.

Piracy continues to weaken the UK recorded music industry. For example, academic evidence based on average retail prices and Ofcom’s tracker survey indicate a loss of between £150 million and £300 million a year. Our new clause would give the Secretary of State a backstop power to legislate that a code of practice be agreed. I think the Government should accept that now is the time for action in this sphere.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that, given that this issue featured in the Conservative manifesto, it would be fantastical if the Government came forward to support the new clause, so that they could implement a promise they made at the last general election?

Kevin Brennan: My hon. Friend anticipates something that I was intending to say, but did not say. She is absolutely correct to point that out. The figures clearly show that this measure is not being implemented, even though the Minister claimed in Committee that it was.

New clause 16 is about public lending right. Hon. Members might be surprised to know that it does not extend to e-books where they are borrowed remotely, which by their very nature, of course, they are. It is ludicrous that 2.3 million remote loans were made in the last year, none of which were counted for public lending right. The method by which a book is borrowed should not determine whether authors and illustrators receive fair payment for their work. That predicament has been significantly worsened by the closure of public libraries that has occurred on the Government’s watch as a result of its failed—as we now know—austerity policies. The new clause would close the loophole, and it is supported by the Society of Authors, the Association of Illustrators, and the Authors’ Licensing and Collecting Society.

7.30 pm

In 2013, the Government seemed to be saying that they would do something about the problem. Following the independent review of e-lending in public libraries in England, they said that they intended to reflect technological changes. Had they done so, other inconsistencies involving e-books—such as the fact that they are subject to VAT, while physical books are not—could also have been resolved in the Bill, but they have not done so, and the problems therefore remain unresolved. Our new clause is very simple. The Government have already acknowledged the existence of the issue at hand, and it is in no one’s interest to leave it unresolved. The Government were disappointingly un-co-operative in Committee, but I hope that that will change today.

New clause 30 is intended to tackle a proliferation of devices that, either alone or in conjunction with other technology, give access to copyright-infringing material. The best-known example of such a device, although by no means the only one, is the internet protocol television box. According to a recent Government report, there was a 33% increase in the illegal downloading of television programmes between March and May 2015 compared with the same months two years earlier. When we discussed the issue in Committee, the Government claimed that that was covered by other laws such as the Fraud Act 2006 and the Serious Crime Act 2015 but, as the Minister knows, the broadcasting and creative industries do not think that that is enough. They argue that the legal routes are much more complex and can be pursued only by the police, whose resources—especially IT specialist resources—are already thinly spread. In other words, the laws are not purpose-built. Our new clause should command the Government’s support, particularly in the light of its enforcement strategy.

The intellectual property Minister has said that the Government will be “looking at new areas where we might need to create new legal tools to tackle new modes of infringement.”

She continued:

“we will look at the legislation around set-top boxes, and whether we have enough effective remedies to tackle their misuse.”

Well, we do not. New thinking is needed, and it is presented in our new clause. If the Government will not legislate in this Bill, when will they legislate? If they are serious about meeting their obligations in their own enforcement strategy, they should support the new clause and ensure that profits reach creators, not criminals.

New clause 31 has not been tabled by the Opposition. We tabled it originally, under a different number, but then we withdrew it, so that the Culture, Media and Sport Committee could table the measure on a cross-party basis, and added our names to it. I know that other Members will want to say more about the new clause, which is intended to deal with the buying of tickets by “bots”, and the extortionate prices for which those same tickets are sold on secondary sites, making live sport and music unaffordable, and preventing access to entertainment for the public. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for the tireless and energetic campaign that she has waged on the issue.
Nick Smith (Blanau Gwent) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that true fans do not stand a chance nowadays, because touts have evolved from blokes in sheepskin jackets lurking outside stadiums trying to sell spare tickets, to IT crooks who harvest thousands of tickets just seconds after they go on sale?

Kevin Brennan: I do agree with that. In Committee, the Minister told us a tear-jerking story about his efforts to buy tickets to a Paul Simon concert at the Royal Albert Hall. We look forward to a review when he rises to speak. At the moment he is chewing, so it is “The Sound of Silence”.

Luciana Berger: I look forward to hearing my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) expand on this point in more detail. Is it not time for us finally to do something about ticket-touting, on behalf of all the fans in the country who just want to enjoy music? I have not been a Member of Parliament for all that long, but we have been talking about this issue for the past six years. I see that tickets for tomorrow’s Justin Bieber concert are on sale for more than £1,000. Can we not do something about that, and ensure that everyone in the country can enjoy music?

Kevin Brennan: My hon. Friend makes her point passionately. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) expand on this point in more detail. Is it not time for us finally to do something about ticket-touting, on behalf of all the fans in the country who just want to enjoy music? I have not been a Member of Parliament for all that long, but we have been talking about this issue for the past six years. I see that tickets for tomorrow’s Justin Bieber concert are on sale for more than £1,000. Can we not do something about that, and ensure that everyone in the country can enjoy music?

Rob Marris: The Bill might not be the vehicle with which to do it, but another thing that needs to be tackled is the absolute scandal of administration fees, or booking fees. When one tries to buy a ticket, one pays 50 quid for the ticket and another 20 quid for the booking; the price should be £70 upfront.

Kevin Brennan: I entirely understand my hon. Friend’s point, but I shall stick strictly to the new clauses that we have tabled.

New clause 5 would establish a duty for companies to report any breach of cyber-security and to inform customers when possible. Just 28% of such attacks are reported to the police. We have welcomed the Minister’s announcement that he will implement the general data protection regulation in full, but even the GDPR provides extensive caveats, and it falls a long way short of the comprehensive regulatory system that the United Kingdom needs. Our new clause would impose a general obligation on data controllers to notify the Information Commissioner and data subjects in the event of a breach of personal data security.

New clause 11 provides for a public register of shared data. It would require all disclosures of data between data controllers to be logged in a public register giving, at the very least, a title, a description and a web page so that people can find out more. If there is transparency through a register, there can be an informed conversation about whether a particular data disclosure will solve the problem that it claims to solve. There has been data-sharing to “prevent fraud” for decades, and there has been a complete absence of audited and accurate results from that work. With additional powers come additional responsibilities. The argument that because current data-sharing has not prevented fraud there should be more data-sharing could be described as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. While part 5 of the Bill will remain a concern—I am sure that our colleagues in the other place will examine it—we believe that the Government should accept new clause 11 and demonstrate that they understand the importance of transparency in data-sharing.

Let me now deal with new clause 12, which concerns a review of data collection. Data are the currency of the digital economy but, in yet another missed opportunity, the Bill does absolutely nothing to address people’s rights over their data, which are increasingly a cause for concern. It is time that the Government acted, because consumer mistrust in the digital economy and in the use of our data is becoming corrosive. That is why we are calling for a royal commission to examine the use of our personal data in the commercial sector, to establish the extent of that practice, and to draw up a series of rights on which consumers and customers can rely in the digital age. The new clause would require the Government to commission an independent review of information and big data, and data administration, which would seek to establish the direction in which the stated policy intent of Government and big business—for individuals to have control over their own data—is heading.

Many providers are in the market for data, and there are many ways beyond our imagination in which our data can be modified. However, it will only take one expose on “Dispatches” or a Mail on Sunday scandal to force the Government to react, and it is likely to overreact, as all Governments do. The Bill provides an excellent opportunity for the issues to be viewed in the cold light of day rather than in the heat of reaction, and I strongly urge the Ministers to support new clause 12.

New clause 19 is about free school meals. Many families who are eligible currently do not claim them. The new clause would explicitly provide for councils to share benefit data with schools, thus allowing eligible children to be automatically enrolled to receive free school meals rather than having to apply.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The issue of free school meals was raised in Committee. Does my hon. Friend agree that two-tier authorities consisting of a shire and a district should be able to share data seamlessly and automatically, as unitary authorities do in metropolitan areas?

Kevin Brennan: I do agree. My hon. Friend made that point brilliantly in Committee, and I recommend that people read his lengthier remarks if they want to find out more about that issue.
Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I am grateful for the new clause because it follows a private Member’s Bill that I introduced. Following Liverpool’s example, Wirral carried out automatic registration for free school dinners and the school premium, and that resulted in £750,000 more coming into the area to target those poorest families.

Kevin Brennan: My right hon. Friend is correct. I was about to say that I wanted to praise him and, again, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West for their work on that matter. We hope that the Government will support this sensible new clause.

I turn to amendment 3—our final amendment, you will be glad to know, Madam Deputy Speaker, in the group. In the aftermath of the care.data scandal, it is vital that patients are able to have trust in the confidential nature of the health service and to feel confident in sharing sensitive information with health care professionals. Part 5 of the Bill—clause 29 in particular—appears to permit an unprecedented sharing of confidential information. We are extremely concerned that if the information-sharing powers cover information held by bodies providing healthcare services, patient confidentiality could be undermined.

Amendment 3 would ensure that identifiable information held by healthcare bodies in connection with their functions would be exempt from the information-sharing powers in clause 29, thereby upholding current protections for confidentiality. We believe that the Bill should be amended to ensure that patient confidentiality is protected by clarifying that the Bill does not give power to public authorities to disclose any identifiable healthcare information. That would bring clause 29 into line with clause 56, which addresses information sharing specifically for research purposes. That was amended by the Government in Committee to prevent any erosion of the status quo for sharing healthcare data for research purposes. We believe, as does the British Medical Association, that similar protections should be extended to cover part 5. I look forward to the Minister accepting that amendment, along with all the other measures in the group.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): This may have come up in Committee, and it might come up later on Report: the concern of the National Union of Journalists about journalists not being mentioned on the Front Bench, such as “MP3 free download”, the position is completely different and the overwhelming majority of results from that search are illegal. That remains a big problem.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman knows—he has probably seen the results from the Intellectual Property Office—that 78 million tracks were illegally accessed between March and May this year. It is still a huge problem. Twenty per cent. of all access to the internet for music is for illegal downloads. The Conservative party manifesto promised to deal with that. Does he believe that now is the time for action? We must act now.

Mr Whittingdale: I do think that more needs to be done. The counter to the statistic that the hon. Gentleman has just quoted is the number of pages being taken down. The BPI alone is notifying half a million infringing pages and they are promptly removed, but this is a Hydra—as soon as one comes down, another three go up.

The need to achieve greater agreement between the search companies and the rights owners remains as great as ever. Therefore, the idea that the Government should spur them on to get that agreement by saying that, unless it can be obtained, the Government may have to impose the code of practice, is now something that we need at least to consider. I do not necessarily say that I support the new clause of the hon. Member for Cardiff West that I support the new clause of the hon. Member for Cardiff West that I wanted to refer to, which I have even greater sympathy with, is new clause 30. My right hon. Friend the Minister is a champion of the creative industries because he knows, as I do, that our economy benefits enormously from the strength of the UK creative industries. Their success rests upon IP rights. They have to be confident that their investment, their creation and
their skills will receive proper reward from consumers who pay for that content. It is not just the film, television and music industries and the sports companies; it is also our broadcasters, who are spending billions of pounds in some cases to acquire rights. They are entitled to expect that the people who access them do so legitimately and pay for that, and do not do so through illegal streams from offshore.

The latest development in the technology, which the hon. Gentleman rightly identified, is IPTV set-top boxes. These are being marketed in vast numbers. They arrive fully loaded with the codes and the access to go straight to the sites that are providing illegal content. An empty set-top box may not in itself be illegal but, clearly, when it is being marketed on the basis that it is all too simple to fill it with the apps and the codes that will access illegal sites, that is a problem that we need to address.

I give the Minister just one example that was quoted to me today. It is an advertisement for the Amazon “Black Friday” sale, so we are talking about no more than a couple of days ago. It read:

“Come with the newest KODI 16.1. Cut your monthly TV subscription and enjoy FREE Movies, shows and live entertainment from all over the world including sports. No restrictions! Forget the limitations and necessary payments by using Apple TV or ROKU! Android on your TV. Install your favorite apps from the Google Play Store.”

This is being marketed on Amazon and those boxes are being shipped in their millions from China in the main, but from elsewhere, too. They are clearly being used to make it easy for consumers to access content for free and illegally. That is doing real damage to our creative industries. The hon. Gentleman’s new clause is not perhaps the right way to proceed. I am sure that it is deficient and that the Government will find failings in it, but the problem it identifies is a real one, so I hope that the Government will look to see what additional measures we can take to ensure that our IP law remains simple to fill it with the apps and the codes that will access illegal sites, that is a problem that we need to address.

Finally, I want to talk to new clause 31. When I had the privilege of chairing the Select Committee, we spent a lot of time discussing ticket touting, and at that stage we were unconvinced that it was right either to ban the secondary market, for which there is a legitimate role, or to impose a flat rate top-up limit as to how much extra could be charged on a ticket; those were two possible solutions advanced at that time. We felt to some extent that this was more an issue for the industry and the market to address, and indeed the industry has worked hard to introduce technological requirements designed to stop people selling on tickets.

However, I was interested to hear from the hon. Member for Cardiff West about my right hon. Friend the Minister’s Paul Simon experience. I have to say that I do not necessarily share his enthusiasm for Paul Simon, but when I sought to buy tickets for the V festival I was unable to get on the website for the first 10 minutes and then in the 12th minute was informed it was sold out, and in the 13th minute I discovered those same tickets on Seatwave for about four times their face value, so I have some sympathy.

Mr Whittingdale: I have a lot of sympathy with my hon. Friend on that. I was fortunate enough to attend one of the greatest concerts of all time—the Led Zeppelin reunion at the O2—where exactly that system was introduced. People had to produce the credit card used to purchase the ticket in order to get the ticket; they did not get the ticket until they arrived at the venue. There are ways around this problem, but that imposes quite a considerable additional burden on the ticket purchaser, either to supply a photograph or to take a credit card. Of course, it does not then assist when there is a legitimate reason why somebody might want to transfer their ticket to another person because for some reason they are not able to attend. We do not want to stop the secondary market working in a way that is wholly legitimate, which is the case in such circumstances.

Damian Collins: Does my right hon. Friend agree that since the Select Committee looked at this matter under his chairmanship one of the big changes is that it is less about the regulation of the secondary market than the fact that the technology has effectively destroyed the primary market, because most people have no chance of accessing the primary market to buy the tickets they want?

Mr Whittingdale: I agree, and that was my experience, and indeed my right hon. Friend the Minister’s, despite our different musical tastes, when we sought to purchase tickets. For that reason, I am interested in the suggestion in new clause 31 to target specifically the bot problem, or the electronic purchasing in a short period of almost the entire ticket allocation—hundreds of tickets in a matter of seconds bought up by these bots—which prevents ordinary fans from accessing the tickets. I cannot believe that that is what the promoters want, so looking specifically at this problem as the new clause does is an interesting approach, and certainly one worth exploring further.

Helen Goodman: I am pleased to follow the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale). I was a little unkind to him earlier this evening, so I would like to make amends by saying that he spoke a lot of good sense on illegal downloads. I would like to speak to amendments 25 and 26. I am chair of the all-party group on the National Union of Journalists, and the arrangements for the payment of the secretariat appear under my name in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. The NUJ was extremely helpful in drawing this problem to my attention and drafting the amendments.
Part 5 of the Bill appears to put freedom of expression and journalistic rights under serious threat by criminalising onward unauthorised disclosure of information. Specifically, clauses 49 and 50 completely fail to recognise the role of journalists in providing information that is in the public interest; I think that is the point the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) was trying to make.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I think that clause 32, which comes earlier, should be mentioned, too, and I hope the Government will respond on them all—not just the two amendments, but all the way through that part.

Helen Goodman: The hon. Gentleman is right.

Under the Bill, publications made in the media that are in the public interest are not on the list of exceptional circumstances in which information to combat fraud against the public sector and related personal information can be disclosed. For example, if a whistle blower were to leak the records of a private company to a journalist without authorisation and the journalist ran a story based on this, both parties could receive criminal sentences. This is particularly pertinent to clause 50, which states that a person who discloses personal information not in one of the stipulated excluded situations will be committing an offence.

This is quite technical and complex, so if the Minister cannot respond in this debate today, I would like him to write to me about the definition of the information covered and of the public sector here. Let me give an example to explain why. I was given information that Coutts—which is currently owned by the taxpayer; it is a subsidary of one of the banks we bought in 2008—was selling tax avoidance schemes in Switzerland. I spoke about that in the House, but if I had instead given the information to a journalist and it had been printed in a newspaper, it would appear that under these provisions the journalist or newspaper would be criminalised.

This cannot be the Government’s intention. I am sure the Government do not like leaks about Concentrix or about sustainability and transformation plans in the NHS, but I am equally sure the Government are not trying to clamp down on the effectiveness of the media in our country to such an extent that we cannot use these leaks about these sources.

Matt Hancock: I can confirm that it is neither the intent, nor our understanding of the Bill, to do those things, but it is our intent to protect personal information.

Helen Goodman: I am glad that is not the Minister’s intent—I did not think that it was—but the Media Lawyers Association highlighted in its written evidence that it thought there was a problem. So if the Minister wants to avoid his colleagues in another place having to have this debate again in two months’ time, perhaps he could write to me with a full explanation of what he thinks is going on, because I think that there might be a problem with the Bill in this respect.

Sir Peter Bottomley: In very simple terms, the question is: where is the public interest defence for a journalist?

Helen Goodman: The hon. Gentleman puts it very well.

I point out that we have the Official Secrets Act and the libel laws and lots of protections; we do not need any tighter legal criminalisation on the statute book.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We have one hour and one minute left in this debate and many Members want to speak—and I suspect they will also wish to have answers from the Minister and would not like to truncate his contribution to the debate. I cannot impose a time limit; I can only ask for courtesy from one Member to another and short speeches. I am not suggesting speeches so far have been too long, but I ask Members to speak as quickly as they possibly can.

Damian Collins: I will try to adhere to your guidelines, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I would like to speak to new clause 31, but first I want to congratulate the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on her campaigning over many years to deal with the abuses in the secondary ticketing market. I also want to congratulate my Select Committee colleague, my friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), who took up this issue strongly in the Bill Committee. In fact, the new clause that we are discussing tonight is exactly the same as the one he tabled for discussion in Committee. Such was the power of his argument that he persuaded the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) to pursue this matter on Report, and I am grateful to the shadow Minister for agreeing that the Select Committee could table this new clause for discussion on Report.

8 pm

Following the Bill’s Committee stage, the Select Committee was so concerned about the bot problem—as the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), described it—and the use of computer programmes to harvest tickets from the primary ticket market in large quantities, that we wanted to look at the matter further. So, between the Committee stage and today’s debate on Report, we called in a number of representatives of the music industry and of the primary and secondary ticketing markets, along with industry experts, to discuss the problem. That left us with the clear view that major abuses are taking place in the ticketing market and that the victims of those abuses are the consumers: the man and woman in the street who want to go to see their favourite performers and concerts but have no chance at all of accessing any tickets.

Computer programmes are harvesting thousands of tickets as soon as they go on sale and immediately transferring them to other websites where they can be bought only at inflated prices. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) cited an example in Committee of a Phil Collins concert at the Albert Hall next June for which no tickets were available on the Ticketmaster site. However, tickets were available on Ticketmaster’s secondary site at many times their face value, providing a huge margin and handling fee for the secondary site. The venue itself had stated that those tickets were not for resale. When this is happening on a day-to-day basis, there is clearly a problem.
We were also concerned to hear that people in the secondary market in particular felt that it was not their responsibility to police the sale of tickets. As a consequence of that, tickets are routinely sold without the information that is required under consumer protection legislation, which should identify the seller of the ticket as well as the row and seat number, so that they can be identified by the venue. These are routine abuses. The issue of bots harvesting tickets and putting them on immediate resale is an abuse of the system.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for giving way. I just want to place on record the fact that I was pleased to be able to attend and witness his Select Committee hearing. It showed the House and its Select Committee work at their best. I witnessed some of the excellent questioning of representatives of the secondary market on the policing of their sites, and the hon. Gentleman did sterling work. I want to commend him for that, here on the Floor of the House.

Damian Collins: On behalf of the Select Committee, I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her words. I was certainly shocked by some of the things I heard in that Committee hearing.

John Penrose: I want to ask the Chair of the Select Committee whether, in among the penetrating questioning that we have heard about, anyone on the Select Committee asked the people they were interviewing why they were not installing any of the safeguards that are already available. They are already being successfully used in sporting and entertainment events. If those safeguards already exist, why should we be expected to introduce a red tape-heavy legislative solution to a problem that the industry could solve for itself? Indeed, it could have solved it several years ago had it cared to do so.

Damian Collins: Those issues were covered in the Select Committee hearing; they are there in the transcript for all to see. Some venues have introduced direct selling technology, and it can work. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon said, it would be unacceptable to many consumers if our blanket response to this crisis in the ticketing industry was to say to the industry, “Solve it yourself.” That would place large costs and burdens on the venues, and it would be particularly unfair on the smaller ones. This problem affects not only the blockbuster events at the O2 or the Royal Albert Hall but events at small venues all around the country. I even saw tickets for a comedy event next year at the Winter Gardens in Margate being sold at three or four times their face value on the secondary market. This is affecting all sorts of venues.

More seriously, however, it is not in the interests of some of the primary ticketing sites to report the problem, because they own the secondary sites that are making the massive profits. The profit growth in the secondary market stands at between 30% and 40% a year. It is true that at the moment more tickets are sold through the primary market—through companies such as Ticketmaster—but very large profits are being made in the secondary market. The talent—the musicians, the actors and the sportsmen and women—are also losing out because they are getting less money from the initial ticket sale when the ticket is sold on at an inflated price. They and the punters could all win if more of that value could be captured for the talent and if the punters were able to pay less. Both sides therefore have a huge interest in cutting out the middle man, and I do not understand why they are not doing it.

Damian Collins: My hon. Friend is right to say that it is in the interests of many different stakeholders in the industry to do that, but at the moment it is not happening across the board. Some of the bigger artists and events have been able to introduce these measures, but it has been difficult to do it uniformly.

We must ask ourselves why the primary ticketing sites do not report the mass use of bots to the authorities. Why did they not report it as suspicious behaviour? It would be easy for them to do so. We heard in evidence to the Committee that it is so easy to do that the primary sites’ biggest customers often have favourable terms of trade. Their own secondary ticketing sites certainly have favourable terms of trade with people who are bulk selling vast numbers of tickets. It is easy to identify who they are, and it would be easy for a primary site to report them if it became suspicious because they were selling thousands of tickets only minutes after they had gone on sale on the primary ticketing site. If they are able to do that so quickly, they must be using bot technology to pervert the market. It does not get reported, however, and we must ask ourselves why that is. Is it because they are making too much money?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman mentions smaller venues, and I want to put on record something that happens in Northern Ireland. People often queue on phone lines or try to buy tickets online only to find that they have already all been sold. Does he agree that the industry needs to be regulated and that this is the place to do it? If it cannot regulate itself, let us do it here.

Damian Collins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments; he is right.

We are proposing a way to control the bots. The Government are in discussions with the industry, and they might find a better solution to achieve the same end, but I certainly think it is incumbent on us in this place to try to find a solution, not only because this affects the ticketing market but because it rips off the consumer. What kind of people seek to make money selling tickets in this way? We asked that question in the Select Committee and we were told that criminal gangs—some linked to paramilitary organisations in Ireland—were making money as industrial touts selling tickets on the secondary market. It is important that we regulate this industry, not only to protect the consumer but to clamp down on some serious criminal elements who are seeking to make money through this technology. If we can stop that, we will be doing this country a service.

Calum Kerr: I shall try to be brief because I am aware that a number of Members want to speak. I commend the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) for
his excellent run-through of some excellent ideas. If only the Government were more often in listening mode than in broadcast mode. I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Gentleman’s remarks about new clause 8. It was a political decision to introduce free television licences for the over-75s. We have an ageing population and a rising number of cases of loneliness among the elderly, and this is a welfare policy. Why would the Government outsource a welfare policy to an external body such as the BBC? Their answer was that the BBC wanted it as part of its financial settlement, but that does not make it right. The reality is that this is an abdication of responsibility and an outsourcing of bad news.

Kelvin Hopkins: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. The BBC did not really want the responsibility. Did the BBC not just say that it did so because it wanted a good deal on the charter?

Calum Kerr: I wholeheartedly agree. I think people at the BBC were saying, “They’ve got us so worried about what the settlement could be. Let’s just accept the offer that’s on the table for heaven help us what might happen.” There is cross-party support for this new clause.

Kelvin Hopkins: Six parties are in support.

Calum Kerr: Six-party support; I thank the hon. Gentleman for his clarification. He is well deserving of his TV licence—when he gets old enough. I truly support new clause 8 and also back the other measures relating to the BBC in new clauses 17 and 18. If we believe in public service broadcasting, the way to protect it is to cherish it, to look after it and to ensure its listings appear as technology evolves, not to give it a huge liability and line it up for a potentially deeply unpopular future decision.

Turning to new clause 15, it was interesting to hear and largely concur with the comments of the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale). I support the idea of pushing for something further on search engines, but I am conscious that there is a dialogue between parties that both have a stake in something. It is interesting that the right hon. Gentleman is now coming around to the idea of some legislative intervention, but we look to the new Front-Bench team for answers to what that might be and when. What movement do they expect to see before they would legislate? The Minister touched on that in Committee, but what would be the trigger for intervention if the industry was not going far enough?

Digital ticketing has been well discussed already. If someone behaves illegally by going into a shop and buying all the produce and then selling it in a way that was not intended, the answer is not necessarily better security; the answer is making it illegal. I get the point of the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), but let us make it illegal and drive out this morally unacceptable behaviour. If I may paraphrase the US moral philosopher Eric Holler, as I did in Committee, every great idea begins as a movement, becomes a business and eventually degenerates into a racket. That is what we have here. Fan-to-fan ticket exchanges have led to rampant touting.

Finally, I commend the Labour Front-Bench team for their valiant efforts to rescue part 5 of the Bill through measures such as new clause 5. We had two days of evidence in Committee, during which witnesses were fairly damning of the approach being taken on data sharing or data access. As we have gone along, the Government have tried to give us a little more information and to make it more and to come up with some meaty measures and have applied sticking plasters here and there, but nothing has convinced me that they have learned from things such as the Concentrix episode. Somebody tried to buy bulk data and apply it to people receiving tax credits, leading to some of the most vulnerable in our society having their money stopped, being forced into debt or other far more severe consequences.

I remain unconvinced that the Government are heading in the right direction. There is an inherent paternalism. They say, “Don’t you worry. We’ll be fine. Trust us,” and give us a pat on the head, but when it comes to protecting people’s data we should be looking at the Estonian model, which puts the citizen at the centre. We should be open. I should be notified every time my data are shared if it is for my benefit. We should not hide that. Right from the start of the evidence-taking, people were saying that data-sharing is a good thing, but we must earn and retain public trust. I see little evidence that the Government understand that and are willing to do anything other than learn the hard way by making mistakes. I look forward, but I am not sure that the Government are making it is not necessarily the right time for legislative intervention.

On copyright, new clause 15 proposes that the Government take a power to have a code of conduct on search engines to dictate how they should work to prevent copyright infringement. This new clause was also proposed in Committee, and I would like to update the House on the progress. Since then, the Intellectual Property Minister, Baroness Neville-Rolfe, has chaired a further round-table among search engine and creative industries representatives. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) said, that group is now making some progress towards agreeing an outline code of practice, but much more needs to be done. Following the round-table, a revised draft code will be prepared by the IPO for consideration by the group before its next meeting on 10 January. Our position on online platforms is that they must act responsibly and work with rights holders to help enforce IP rights. We are clear on the importance of getting things right and do not rule out legislation, but given the progress being made it is not necessarily the right time for legislative intervention.

We also discussed new clause 30 in Committee, where I set out the range of criminal provisions that apply to the sale and use of devices that infringe copyright. This matter relates to the IPTV devices that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon, the former Secretary for their valiant efforts to rescue part 5 of the Bill through measures such as new clause 5. We had two numbers of cases of loneliness among the elderly, and this is a welfare policy. Why would the Government outsource a welfare policy to an external body such as the BBC? Their answer was that the BBC wanted it as part of its financial settlement, but that does not make it right. The reality is that this is an abdication of responsibility and an outsourcing of bad news.
of State, spoke about so powerfully. Following a number of investigations across the country, there are pending prosecutions relying on a number of offences. I am sympathetic to the intent behind the new clause, but it does not in and of itself offer any greater legislative protection to rights owners than the existing offences that target this type of behaviour. If the existing legal provisions are shown to be deficient when the pending prosecutions have concluded, we will bring forward proposals for legislation.

New clause 16 is another of the helpful proposals from the shadow Front-Bench team to deliver on a Conservative party manifesto commitment—this time on e-book lending. I am grateful for the degree of support that our manifesto has received from all parts of the House during the Bill’s passage.

Kevin Brennan: Then why don’t you implement it?

Matt Hancock: Just you wait. We of course agree that authors should be recognised for e-lending by ensuring appropriate compensation for them in an enhanced public lending right. I need to correct an omission. I believe a potential interest which I should have mentioned in Committee—at least, I hope that I can declare an interest, as I have a book that is available for borrowing in this way, although I have no idea whether it has ever been borrowed. As I said in Committee, we have been carefully considering the options for delivering the manifesto commitment. We had to wait for the conclusion of a court case, which ended earlier this month, before setting out the proposals, but I can confirm today that we intend to legislate to extend the public lending right to include the remote lending of e-books. It is important that we get that right and ensure that any changes are compatible with the copyright directive. We will therefore bring forward legislation as soon as possible.

Turning to broadcasting and subtitling for video on demand, new clause 6 was also considered in Committee. As I said then, we are keen to address this shortcoming and want to ensure that the requirements that are placed on on-demand programme service providers are appropriate and proportionate. Since then, we have discussed how best to increase the use of subtitles in video on demand with charities, broadcasters, Ofcom and others and have worked further on the best way to address the concerns that the new clause intends to address. Through working collaboratively with all interested parties, I hope to reach a resolution in the other place that results in an increase in the provision of access services for video on-demand services.

Let me turn to new clause 8, on TV licence fee concessions, a subject we discussed at length in Committee. Government Members are clear that we support the free TV licence for the over-75s, which has been debated extensively in this House and is delivering on our manifesto commitment. The new clause attempts to unpick that settlement and, in so doing, undermine the stability of the BBC. This funding settlement, which the new clause would undermine, was described by the director general of the BBC as a “strong deal” for the BBC and one that “gives us financial stability”.

Kelvin Hopkins: I have already covered that point, but surely asking the other BBC licence fee payers, staff and programmers inside the BBC to pay for what is a welfare benefit is nonsense.

Matt Hancock: The point is that it is not a welfare benefit; it is about funding policy, and the BBC asked for this policy to be determined by the BBC. Indeed, the shadow Secretary of State said that “the charter provides the BBC with the funding and security it needs”—[Official Report, 18 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 699.]

As part of that “security it needs”, we kept, in this Parliament, the free TV licence. The BBC itself has asked for this and only this morning the BBC said that “the overall funding settlement reached with the government provides the financial stability for a strong creative BBC. The BBC is concerned that”—this amendment—could reopen the whole deal and make the BBC worse off.”

So we have here an 11-year charter renewal, a strong and stable financial settlement praised by the Labour party and a clause that has been requested by the BBC, whereas the new clause could, in the BBC’s words, make the BBC worse off: Supporting new clause 8 would undermine the BBC and undermine its finances. This measure is expressly against the wishes of the BBC, and I urge anyone still considering supporting it to ask themselves how they will explain this attempt to undermine the BBC—Government Members will not do that.

New clause 17 deals with the issue of public sector broadcaster prominence, an important matter on which we consulted in the spring. In Committee, the point we reached was that a detailed, over-prescriptive regulation of the detail of the PSB prominence rules would be a mistake, and having not seen compelling evidence of harm to PSBs to date, we have decided not to extend the electronic programme guide—EPG—prominence regime for PSBs to on-demand. When PSBs make excellent content, audiences generally follow.

Finally on broadcasting, new clause 18, on listed events, was also discussed in Committee, and I have seen no evidence to change our view that the current listed events regime is not under threat—we will not let it be under threat. The range of our most loved and important sporting events regime is not under threat—we will not let it be under threat. The range of our most loved and important sporting events will remain on free-to-air channels.

In this Bill, we have shown that we are open to being persuaded by good argument, and we have tabled amendments 20, 21 and 22 to ensure that Ofcom is able effectively to enforce requirements for information from third parties in relation to its new functions as regulator of the BBC. I hope that these provisions have broad support.

I now turn to the much discussed issue of ticketing. New clause 31 seeks to deal with bots that harvest tickets for resale in the secondary market. We have heard very powerful explanations of the scale of the problem and its breadth, and I can confirm that I had great difficulty in buying Paul Simon tickets. Initially, I failed to buy
them despite having my finger hovering on my mouse the moment they went on sale, and so I had to buy them at a much greater price in the secondary market. They were worth every penny, but that in a way makes the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) makes: the gap exploited is between the level at which the artists wants to sell their tickets and the amount that they represent in true value to the customer. I was still happy to pay hundreds of pounds for my Paul Simon tickets, but the point is that they were meant to be on sale for £75 so that everybody could get them. I am persuaded by the arguments and we shall be holding a roundtables meeting on Wednesday to discuss the best way to tackle the problem.

The Government will give full consideration to what is said at these roundtables, in Parliament and in the Waterson report on the issue of ticketing bots and the harvesting market. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), who has made a huge amount of the running on this issue. He has made the argument powerfully and, as has been said, the Olympics showed that this can be done.

John Penrose: I am not normally reassured by the advent of a roundtable, but I am enormously reassured in this case because the Minister is a very persuasive man and I am sure that he will have around that table representatives from the sportsmen’s agents groups, from Equity, the actors’ union, and from all sorts of UK music organisations and various others. I am talking about the people who represent the talent, who are currently being ripped off because they are getting only the face value when these things go on sale, when they are bought by the bots, and not the eventual secondary market value. They are the people with a huge interest in getting this done so that they get a larger proportion of the eventual value and customers are not getting ripped off, too.

Matt Hancock: Yes, we have representatives of all sides coming to the roundtable, including my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty—I am not sure that that will reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare. Although we would not want to close down the secondary market for tickets altogether, clearly the automatic harvesting of tickets sold below market price—so that fans can afford them—for resale at a higher value is wrong. I want to build a bridge over troubled waters, listen to the points made at the roundtable, and bring forward legislation in this Bill if this is found to be necessary.

On digital government, amendment 3 and new clause 19 concern data-sharing powers in education and health. They address the same issue from the opposite end, and it is a bit of a surprise to find that they have been submitted by the same people. Not only can people’s health and education data be incredibly powerful in improving lives, but they are very sensitive and need to be carefully handled. These two proposals from the Opposition represent amendments both to open up data sharing and to close it down. This is a slightly confused approach, but neither of the proposals is necessary, because the concerns expressed at the root of each are already addressed in the Bill. New clause 19 would open up more data sharing in education, and it is good to see this direction of travel supported by the Opposition Front-Bench team, because data sharing can improve people’s lives, for instance by making sure that we better identify eligibility for free school meals. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) has made this argument strongly. This is a laudable aim, but it is already provided for in the Department for Education’s electronic eligibility checking system. Indeed, the Bill sets out how aspects of data sharing can be expanded through secondary legislation in due course.

Frank Field: I am grateful to the Minister for his comments, but would he tell us what is in the Bill to make local authorities that seem to have no interest in sharing data obtain the numbers of children eligible for free school dinners, and thus increase the pupil premium to act in the interests of those children?

Matt Hancock: The proposals in the Bill are permissive, rather than requiring action. I would be concerned if we required the sharing of data, because of their sensitivity, especially when they are not anonymised, which they would not be if the aim was to find children who are eligible for free school meals. We want to make sure that the person receiving the data has the necessary assistance to handle them, and it is incredibly important that the law should make it clear that that data sharing is permitted, as that removes a reason not to share data.

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8.30 pm

Frank Field: May I ask the Minister to keep a close eye on this, because in Wirral the number of families who have the right to opt out could be counted on the fingers on one hand, so there is a willingness for data to be shared so that schools and children can benefit?

Matt Hancock: I am glad that there is a willingness for that data to be shared, because I share the right hon. Gentleman’s passion to improve the use of data to improve people’s lives in Wirral and elsewhere. Given that passion, I hope that the clarity that we will achieve, not least as a result of this debate, will ensure that the data are indeed shared.

Clarity is supported by the Data Protection Act 1998, because all the data shared under powers in the Bill will continue to be protected under the firm boundaries of that Act, which rightly enjoys a broad consensus of support. We are strengthening in the Bill the sanction on the purposeful reidentification of data to make that a criminal sanction. The hon. Member for Cardiff West expressed concerns about the details, but the protections are important and strike the right balance. New clause 19 seeks to strengthen data sharing, but amendment 3 seeks to weaken it and put barriers in place. The amendment is not needed, as health bodies in England are not within the scope of the public service delivery power. For the rest of the UK, health is devolved. The Labour Administration in Wales and the Scottish National party Government in Scotland have signalled that they will seek the consent of their legislatures on the grounds that the amendment is not in place. The Labour party in Wales and the SNP in Scotland support this sort of data sharing for the precise reasons set out by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead, so I hope to persuade hon. Members not to divide the House on these matters. They should be reassured that we value data sharing as
well as its protection and safekeeping. I therefore urge Members on both sides of the House to resist the amendments.

New clause 5 would impose obligations on organisations to report data breaches, as has been said. That is covered in the general data protection regulation, which will come into force in May 2018, so it is not necessary to legislate here. New clause 11 deals with data-sharing registers. Part 5 includes a number of commitments to transparency and proportionality in the disclosure of information by public authorities. We are committed to the transparency of information shared under part 5, and I think that the new clause is aimed at testing that. However, there are a number of problems with it, not least the fact that setting the requirement in primary legislation reduces the flexibility to learn from and adapt to the consequences of publishing a register.

New clause 12 requires that the Government commission an independent review of the collection and use of data by Government and commercial organisations. The Royal Society and the British Academy are currently undertaking such a review to consider the ethical and legal frameworks that are needed in the UK as data technologies advance. I agree with the hon. Member for Cardiff West that it is important that we develop those ethical and legal frameworks to make sure that they are ahead of the use of data and data science, not behind, so that we can take the public with us. We will consider the findings of the review when it is published.

New clause 23 was tabled by Plaid Cymru. We are firmly committed to ensuring that the needs of Welsh language speakers are recognised and met. For example, gov.uk now publishes its frequently used web content in Welsh. The Government Digital Service has helped to produce exemplar Welsh language versions of new digital services such as the register to vote service. The GDS and the Wales Office have discussed with the Welsh language commissioner how they can help Departments meet their requirements under their Welsh language schemes. Dwyn cnfngwyr brwd o 5AC—I support strongly the Welsh language is, I think, a rough translation.

Government amendments 4 to 19 apply the duty to review set out in clauses 45 to 53 of the fraud and debt chapters, which require the relevant Minister after three years to review the operation of the powers. The amendments are consistent with the devolution settlements and ensure that appropriate consent for any proposed changes is sought from the affected territories.

On the illicit online trade and internet sales of counterfeit electrical appliances, we take this very seriously. The Intellectual Property Office has recently published its IP enforcement strategy for the next four years, which I think takes into account the concerns raised.

Helen Goodman: Before the Minister sits down, will he commit to write to me about the amendments that I tabled?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. I will happily write to the hon. Lady about the detail of the concerns—I think they are unfounded, but we want to ensure that they are indeed unfounded—that journalists might be caught by increasing the criminal penalty for the intentional disclosure of information under the data-sharing powers, which are intended for the protection of data, especially in the bulk transfer of data around the system, rather than to mitigate against whistleblowing of the type that the hon. Lady described.

I appreciate the intention behind new clause 34, which was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman). Here and around the world, the media landscape is changing rapidly and the emergence of new digital platforms has impacted on a wide variety of sectors, including news. Ensuring that citizens have access to a full variety of news sources is essential, and it is vital that our media are vibrant and sustainable. There is a huge challenge in maintaining high-quality journalism when advertising revenues increasingly go to the platform, but the costs fall on the content provider or the newspaper. The Government are actively engaged in examining this, and I am meeting the News Media Association later this week to discuss this very issue.

Ofcom publishes an annual report on news consumption across the UK. It includes the sources and platforms used in news consumption and the role of intermediaries, such as Facebook and Google. Ofcom undertakes ad hoc reviews where appropriate and we will explore whether this is an area where such a review is needed. Although I acknowledge the importance of the issue, I urge my hon. Friend, who has a lot of experience in this area, to work with us under existing powers to seek a solution.

I ask that hon. Members do not press their amendments and new clauses to a Division, but support the Government amendments.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We have 22 minutes left in this debate and 10 Members who wish to speak—that is two minutes each.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I want to address briefly the Minister’s comments on new clause 6. I welcomed his saying that he hoped progress would be made when the Bill proceeds to the House of Lords. Will he encourage his colleagues in the other place to take a positive and inclusive approach to ensuring accessibility of on-demand services? The new clause drafted by my hon. Friend. Friends suggests in subsection (4) a number of considerations which might be taken into account. I hope these will be interpreted in the most generous and ambitious way if they inform the Government’s thinking.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend, I welcome the Minister’s commitment to return to the matter in the other place. Does she agree that it might be helpful if the Minister were willing to meet the all-party parliamentary group on deafness, which has made the subtitling campaign one of its top priorities for this year?

Kate Green: Indeed. My hon. Friend makes my second point. The Minister indicated that discussions had taken place with disability organisations. It is vital that the approach to developing on-demand accessible services is undertaken as a co-production, that disabled people and disability groups are right at the heart of the design of these services, and that the Government make progress on this matter.
Finally, I encourage the Minister and his colleagues to think big about whether this is an opportunity to take forward the use of British sign language in broadcast and online on-demand services. There is the opportunity to offer signed services on these channels too, and I hope the Minister might be willing to investigate how far that could be taken in this context.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): I would like to talk to new clause 31, which is incredibly important, and I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for the incredible amount of work she has done on the issue. I would also like to thank the hon. Members for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) for allowing the Select Committee to table the new clause.

I would also like to thank the Minister, whose words a few moments ago—that the Government are prepared to take action to outlaw bots, if necessary following the meeting later this week—are incredibly encouraging. I shall be at that meeting, and I am grateful for the invitation—hopefully, I will be allowed my two penn’orth. It is incredibly important that we get all the players involved.

We have heard countless examples of where this racket is going on. In the music business, there is Iron Maiden, The 1975 and Black Sabbath. We have heard about Phil Collins and KT Tunstall. My own example—of trying to buy tickets for Green Day—even made it to Prime Minister’s questions. I am not sure whether the Prime Minister is a fan of Green Day, but I am sure that, if she did go to a concert, she would have the time of her life.

However, the problem also affects all sorts of other marketplaces, including the theatre. Today, my colleagues and I met Sonia Friedman, the producer of “Harry Potter and the Cursed Child”, who told me that 60,000 and I met Sonia Friedman, the producer of “Harry Potter and the Cursed Child”, who told me that 60,000 tickets ended up on the secondary market at hugely inflated prices because of bots. That is clearly unacceptable.

To conclude, I hope we can get somewhere following the meeting on Wednesday. We are also keen to see the Government’s response to the Waterson report, and I am sure that their response will follow that meeting. It was interesting to note that, at our Select Committee inquiry, Professor Waterson agreed that action to outlaw ticket bots could be a solution, which is very encouraging.

I thank the Minister and the Secretary of State for arranging the meeting. [Interruption.] It seems that I am being wound up, so hopefully everybody else will get a chance to chip in.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I rise to speak on new clause 24, which stands in my name and those of my hon. Friends and other hon. Members.

The charity Electrical Safety First is calling on the Government to legally require online retailers to report to trading standards and/or the police people consistently selling fake electrical products. This is a growing problem, and it is estimated that 64% of fake electrical goods are now being sold online. Much of the current legislation around the sale of counterfeit goods is over 20 years old, and we need to be mindful of the fact that, in this digital age, parts of it simply may not be fit for purpose.

Sales of dodgy electrical goods are rising rather rapidly. Research found that around 2.5 million adults have purchased a counterfeit electrical product in the last 12 months—double the number who reported purchasing a fake in the previous year.

Not all counterfeit electricals may be substandard, but many carry a substantial risk. People may view these fakes as harmless—perhaps in the same way they might consider a counterfeit pair of sunglasses to be—but the fact is that they can prove deadly. These products have the potential to deliver a fatal electric shock.

As well as the safety implications, we need to be mindful of the revenue that sales of these goods generate, which is thought to be worth more than £1.3 billion per year in the UK. A large portion of this—an estimated £900 million—is thought to help to fund organised crime.

Many people who buy fake electrical goods do so without realising it. Unwittingly, they are placing their families, friends and neighbours at risk. Vendors often sell through reputable online marketplaces, so they enjoy an almost implied credibility, further giving customers confidence in their purchases.

I would like to finish by asking the Government to take those points into account so that we can begin addressing this problem and perhaps placing some of the responsibility on the websites that enable this black market trade.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I support the Minister’s response to new clause 6, which will be useful.

New clause 8 refers to clause 76 on page 76—one of the 18 times in the Bill where the clause number is the same as the page number. Perhaps that could be a Christmas quiz for the Clerks, if they are paying attention.

The point about this is that neither the BBC nor the Government consulted Back-Benchers. It was Parliament that, in 2001, agreed the concession for the over-75s. The cost of £750 million can be compared with the cost of local radio at £115 million, Radio 4 at £90 million, BBC 4 at £49 million, and CBBC and CBeebies at £97 million—a total of about £340 million. We could double that and still not have got to the cost of this so-called concession.

8.45 pm

A letter in _The Times_ today from Mr John Moss says that many people over 75 can afford either to pay tax or to have the concession gone. I am not arguing for that, but if we had a serious discussion we could ask in what other ways the BBC could have the concession money while allowing for the flexibility to change what the concession is. My view is that if Parliament and Government bring in the concession, Parliament and Government should be big enough to make a change afterwards, but that could go on being discussed. I know that the Government are not keen on my saying this, but it is my view and, I think, one that the Government ought to hold to as well. The fact that the BBC doesn’t want the whole thing unstitched is a matter for it. The people in Parliament set the rules, and that is what we should be doing.
Finally, I want to back up what was said on a separate point about the public interest defence for journalists. If I am the P who is mentioned several times in the various clauses on disclosure, and I am a journalist who discloses some knowledge that I have that should not have been disclosed to me, and it is in the public interest that it should be printed, then that, to my mind, should be a defence against any prosecution.

Matt Hancock: I can confirm that any public prosecution has to be in the public interest. The public interest is not covered in this Bill, but that is because the nature of a public prosecution is that it has to be in the public interest. I hope that deals with my hon. Friend’s concern.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. That may be the test of whether the prosecution is brought, but if it is brought because the prosecution is thought to be in the public interest, and the journalists want to say that the public interest defence is why it has been done, then the Government ought to think again. If I may, I ask them to do so.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I rise to speak to new clause 23, which would ensure that all services provided by the UK Government respect the right of the UK’s 700,000 Welsh speakers to receive those services in our language. “Digital by default” must translate as “digidol yn ddiofyn” — not something to request but something that is clearly available and welcoming to use. Digital language use increasingly touches every area of communications, from social media to digital government. If a language is not on the web, it can be said, in a sense, no longer to exist for 21st-century communications. The Welsh Language Commissioner has voiced criticism of the UK Government for weakening the Welsh language services on their gov.uk website since its 2012 launch, saying:

“Over the past year I have seen agencies of the Westminster government approaching us complaining about the Cabinet Office and gov.uk and saying that it is now hampering their work and they are concerned that the strong bilingual services that they have put in place have been hampered by gov.uk.”

Given the issues arising from legacy IT systems and designing bilingual platforms, I urge the Minister to consider our new clause and commit to ensuring interactive and user-friendly Government digital services for Welsh speakers on the same basis as that for English speakers.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I rise to speak to new clause 34. I should start by saying that it is not an attack on Facebook or Google, but it does ask Ofcom to examine whether the digital advertising world has made our media impossible to sustain. By that, I mean, “Today our local papers, tomorrow our national papers, and perhaps in due course our TV networks.” I do not ask for a review because I think there is a single answer, or even because I necessarily think that this is simply a moment in history where our media must reinvent itself for a new age that may yet be brighter than the last. The fact remains, though, that local papers and even national papers are closing, and it cannot be right for the Government to stand idly by in the knowledge that these undesirable events are happening.

Via this new clause, I seek to plant in the vast expanse of the Minister’s mind the idea that the Government should seek to reassure themselves and our constituents that if our media falls into a state of disrepair, we will have explored every possible option — whether considering copyright laws, or looking at who owns the lucrative conversation around a story to ensure that a publisher and a platform benefit equally — to find the media a role. I hope that we would ensure that we do not lose the press that have kept us all on our toes for many years, simply for want of looking for a solution.

Mrs Hodgson: I want to speak for my two or three minutes in support of new clause 19 and new clause 31. I welcome these two new clauses after my many years of campaigning to put fans first and to improve access to free school meals.

Hungry children struggle to learn in school, and they fall behind their peers. That is why it is important that we improve the provision that is on offer and the access to it, and new clause 19 will do just that. This policy proposal was first introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) as a ten-minute rule Bill earlier this year. I have fully supported this policy change, and I congratulate my hon. Friends on the Front Bench on bringing it forward. It is estimated that having a child on free school meals can save a family up to £400 a year. A school will net £1,320 a year for each child who is currently on free school meals or who has been in receipt of free school meals in the previous five years. The proposed changes are simple and have been tried and tested by Calderdale Council and Greenwich Council, which have both used data sharing to improve the take-up of free school meals and, in turn, pupil premium in their boroughs.

I want to speak briefly to new clause 31. I thoroughly welcome this new clause, which has been introduced by the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) on behalf of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee after its excellent short inquiry into bots and ticket touting a few weeks ago — I had the pleasure, as I said earlier, of witnessing it at first hand — following the amendment originally tabled by the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) and supported by the Labour Front-Bench team and me. The new clause would take us one step closer to sorting the market out, but it is not a silver bullet; far from it. Alongside the new clause, we need the enforcement of existing legislation, such as the Consumer Rights Act 2015, and the implementation of the Waterson review recommendations on the secondary ticketing market.

Over the years, like the Minister and the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty, I have heard about examples — I have experienced it myself— of people trying to buy tickets but finding that they were already sold out, and within minutes finding those tickets up on the secondary market. I never relented; I refused to buy any tickets but finding that they were already sold out, and within minutes finding those tickets up on the secondary market. I never relented; I refused to buy any tickets from touts, but one can only deduce that there is a serious issue about how the tickets get on to the secondary market so quickly. One way in which they do so is definitely through the use of bots. Fans are not getting a fair crack at getting tickets, just as the Minister and other Members have not had a fair crack at getting them.

In the past 18 months, there has been a massive escalation in the number of tickets harvested by the aggressive software used by touts, with these attacks becoming more and more sophisticated. Attacks appear to emanate from all over the world, but the majority of attacks on ticketing systems are orchestrated by UK-based and UK-resident touts. Some 30% to 50% of tickets for
high-demand events are harvested by aggressive software and immediately placed for resale on viagogo, GetMeIn!, StubHub and Seatwave, despite the best efforts of the industry, which has tried to police itself and to bring in technical solutions. The industry has tried to sell tickets through fan clubs, but even those are attacked. Where tickets are sold by ballot, there are ballot bots. Where fan club registration is required, there are email-generating bots that flood systems with thousands of false identities. There is not one single way to offer tickets for sale to the public for which there is not already a bot out there that will attack the system.

The situation is deteriorating. Primary ticket sites have to detect an attack, examine the data, identify the software used, reverse engineer it and develop measures to prevent a further attack. That process can take months. In the meantime, a tout can simply pay a coder overseas a few hundred pounds to develop a new bot to circumvent the new security features. Bots can be coded to attack a specific ticketing system in as little as a day.

Although legislation is in place in the form of the Computer Misuse Act 1990, which has broad applications that could be used to address bots, it is 25 years old and it is yet to be tested in this regard. This is an arms race that the primary ticket sellers simply cannot win. The secondary market has already shown its blatant disregard of civil remedy legislation, such as the amendment to the Consumer Rights Act 2015, which is flouted daily. The only effective deterrent is a very clear criminal offence, with appropriate punishment on conviction, and that would be provided by new clause 31.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Members who spoke for only two minutes. Their courtesy has been noticed and they will get brownie points. There is now plenty of time left for Mr Pete Wishart.

Pete Wishart: Thank you ever so much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests in relation to my recorded work.

I would say that this has been a good evening. The concessions we have heard from the Minister are most definitely to be welcomed. I am a veteran of the former Digital Economy Bill. Looking around the Chamber, I can see a few people who still bear the scars of that experience. I must say—this is my first contribution on this Digital Economy Bill—that this one seems to be being given a much more convivial and consensual outing. I am looking at the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), and I just hope we do not get a version of “Smoke on the Water” from the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), as we did when we went out to celebrate the passage of the Digital Economy Bill last time. The hon. Gentleman does a fantastic impersonation of the right hon. Gentleman singing that, which I hope we will never hear in this House.

We have made real and substantial progress, and I welcome the Minister’s words on new clause 15. That was the provision I wanted to address most firmly. When we consider search engines, we must remember that these are the pipes or the infrastructure, and they create no content of their own. Our creative industries are very important to this country. They are driving the economy now—they are growing at a faster rate than the rest of the economy—and we are firing economic growth on the imagination of the people of this country. What a way to grow our economy. It is therefore absolutely right that we should make very good progress on this, and the Minister’s words are welcome.

I would only say to the Minister that we are listening very carefully, and if the companies do not come up with the voluntary code, we will need him to act. We need him to ensure that our artists, creators and inventors—those who produce in this country the wonderful content that is known right around the world—are properly rewarded for their works. We are all looking forward to seeing what plans will be introduced.

On new clause 16, I have the pleasure and privilege of chairing the all-party writers group, and we welcome the Government’s clear commitment to deal with the very real measures on e-learning. All writers and authors, all those involved in publishing and all those across the country who support literature and books have been asking for this for a long time. Again, we welcome the solid progress that will be made.

Lastly, we welcome the progress that the Government have committed to make on ticket touts and the whole issue of bots. I have been in the House for 15 years, and one of the first debates I was involved in was about ticket touting. Many Members have stood up in the House and demanded solid action from Governments when it comes to this really pernicious industry, which corrodes our live music scene. Live music is one of the major features and one of the growing parts of music across this country. Artists continually go on about this issue, and, at last, it looks as though it will be addressed. I pay tribute, obviously, to the hon. Members for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), but also to people such as John Robertson, the chair the all-party group on music before the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty, who stood up in the House to try to get something done about ticket touts. Again, we have made solid progress.

As we wind up these proceedings on the Bill, we have heard the Minister make these commitments—he has said that he is prepared to make progress—and it is now incumbent on us all to ensure that these commitments are brought into legislation. We have made very good progress on the Bill this evening. We have a range of provisions that mean my hon. Friends and I will be able to support the Bill. We look forward to the Government honouring their commitments, and we look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say on Third Reading.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): We have a whole minute to spare.

Matt Hancock: Since the Secretary of State will open the Third Reading debate, may I take this opportunity to thank the House for all the comments we have heard, especially those from Opposition Front Benchers? It has been a very collaborative effort, especially on this group of provisions, but also more broadly. I hope that the Bill leaves the House in better shape than it entered it, as it goes off to be considered in the other place. I thank everybody involved, from the officials in the Box to all the stakeholders more broadly. I ask the House to support the Government’s proposals.

Question put and negatived.
New Clause 8

RESPONSIBILITY FOR POLICY AND FUNDING OF TV LICENCE FEE CONCESSIONS

"After section 363(5) of the Communications Act 2003 insert—

“(5A) It shall be the responsibility of the Secretary of State to—

(a) specify the conditions under which concessions are entitled, and
(b) provide the BBC with necessary funding to cover the cost of concessions,

and this responsibility shall not be delegated to any other body.”—(Kevin Brennan.)

This new clause seeks to enshrine in statute that it should be the responsibility of the Government to set the entitlement for any concessions and to cover the cost of such concession. This new clause will ensure the entitlement and cost of over-75s TV licences remain with the Government. It would need to be agreed with Clause 76 not standing part of the Bill.

Brought up.

Question put, That the clause be added to the Bill.

The House divided: Ayes 220, Noes 267.

Division No. 98] [9 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Ballard, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Brabin, Tracy
Brady, Shabana
Brady, Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Burton, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Gwynne, Andrew
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Heppburn, Mr Stephen
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Holker, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinnock, Stephen
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leslie, Chris
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Iwan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khali
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCaffrey, Callum
McCarry, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGarry, Natalie
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
Onn, Melanie
Osamar, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Starmer, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Sturt, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thompson, Owen
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twiggy, Derek
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Tellers for the Ayes:

Jeff Smith and Nic Dakin

NOES

Duddridge, James
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Fabricant, Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, r, Mark
Foster, Kevin
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, r, Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, r, Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, r, Mr Robert
Gove, r, Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Green, Chris
Green, r, Damian
Greening, r, Justine
Grieve, r, Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, r Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hafon, r, Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, r Matt
Hands, r Greg
Harper, r Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, r, Sir Alan
Hayes, r Mr John
Heald, r Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, r Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, r Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernad
Jenkyns, Andrea
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, r Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirkby, Simon
Knight, r Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteong, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Leadsom, r Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, r Sir Oliver
Lewis, r Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lilley, r Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Julian
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, r Mrs Maria
Mills, Nigel
Milbon, Mr Anne
Mitchell, r Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, r Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Mundell, r David
Murray, Mrs Sherryl
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sam
Nokes, Caroline
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, r Priti
Paterson, r Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, r Mike
Penrose, John
Percey, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulier, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, r John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, r Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, r Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, r Sir Nicholas
Soubry, r Anna
Spelman, r Dame Caroline
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, r Sir Desmond
Sysms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Timpson, Edward
Tohill, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Vara, Mr Shalesh
Villiers, r Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, r Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, r Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, r Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the NOES:

Mark Spencer and David Evennett

Question accordingly negatived.

Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Zeichner, Daniel

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bradley, rh Karen
Brine, Steve
Brooke, Andrew
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, r Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, r Alistair
Cairns, r Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Cartlidge, James
Cash, r Sir William
Caulfeild, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Therese
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, r Mr Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doye-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick

28 NOVEMBER 2016
Clause 75

**FUNCTIONS OF OFCOM IN RELATION TO THE BBC**

Amendments made: 20, page 75, line 37, leave out “Section 198 of the Communications Act 2003” and insert—

’( ) The Communications Act is amended as follows.
( ) Section 198’

This is consequential on amendment 21.

Amendment 21, page 76, line 6, at end insert—

’( ) After section 198 insert—

“198ZA Penalties for failure to provide information

(1) This section applies if—

(a) under a power conferred by virtue of section 198(2A), OFCOM require a person other than the BBC to provide information, and

(b) OFCOM determine that there are reasonable grounds to believe the person has not provided the information.

(2) OFCOM may give the person a notice which sets out the determination and specifies—

(a) what information the person must provide,

(b) the time within which the person must provide it,

(c) a penalty that OFCOM may impose if the person does not provide it, and

(d) a period in which the person may make representations.

(3) OFCOM may impose a penalty on the person if they fail without reasonable excuse to provide the information in accordance with the notice.

(4) The penalty may include an amount for each day the person fails to provide the information after the time required by the notice.

(5) The penalty in respect of any notice—

(a) must not be more than OFCOM determine to be proportionate,

(b) must not be more than the penalty specified in the notice, and

(c) must not be more than £250,000.

(6) OFCOM may withdraw a notice without imposing a penalty, and that does not affect the power to issue a further notice in relation to the same information.

(7) OFCOM must publish and keep up to date a statement of their proposed approach to issuing notices and imposing and recovering penalties under this section (subject to the guidelines published under section 392).’”

Section 198 of the Communications Act 2003, together with the Charter and Framework Agreement, enables OFCOM to impose penalties on the BBC. The amendment provides for OFCOM to be able to impose penalties on other persons if they fail without reasonable excuse to provide information for the purposes of OFCOM’s regulation of the BBC.

Amendment 22, page 76, line 16, leave out subsection (6)

—(Matt Hancock.)

Subsection (6) is not needed. The expression it defines is not used except in a textual amendment where the definition in the Communications Act 2003 will apply anyway.

Clause 45

**DUTY TO REVIEW OPERATION OF CHAPTER**

Amendment made: 4, page 44, line 10, at end insert—

’( ) The relevant Minister may only make regulations under subsection (5) with the consent of the Scottish Ministers if the regulations—

(a) repeal this Chapter,

(b) amend or remove the power of the Scottish Ministers to make regulations under section 40(4),

(c) affect the disclosure of information under section 40 by a Scottish body to another such body,

(d) affect the use by a Scottish body of information disclosed under that section by such a body, or

(e) affect the further disclosure to a Scottish body by such a body, or by a member, officer or employee of such a body, of information disclosed under this Chapter by a Scottish body.

( ) The relevant Minister may only make regulations under subsection (5) with the consent of the Welsh Ministers if the regulations—

(a) repeal this Chapter,

(b) amend or remove the power of the Welsh Ministers to make regulations under section 40(4),

(c) affect the disclosure of information under section 40 by a Welsh body to another such body,

(d) affect the use by a Welsh body of information disclosed under that section by such a body, or

(e) affect the further disclosure to a Welsh body by such a body, or by a member, officer or employee of such a body, of information disclosed under this Chapter by a Welsh body.

( ) The relevant Minister may only make regulations under subsection (5) with the consent of the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland if the regulations—

(a) repeal this Chapter,

(b) amend or remove the power of the Department to make regulations under section 40(4),

(c) affect the disclosure of information under section 40 by a Northern Ireland body to another such body,

(d) affect the use by a Northern Ireland body of information disclosed under that section by such a body, or

(e) affect the further disclosure to a Northern Ireland body by such a body, or by a member, officer or employee of such a body, of information disclosed under this Chapter by a Northern Ireland body.”—(Matt Hancock.)

This amendment and amendments 5 to 11 make provision for the relevant Minister to obtain the consent of the Scottish Ministers, the Welsh Ministers or the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland to certain regulations which, following a review under clause 45, amend or repeal Chapter 3 of Part 3.

Clause 47

**INTERPRETATION OF THIS CHAPTER**

Amendments made: 5, page 45, line 11, leave out “(7)” and insert “(6)”

See the explanatory statement for amendment 4.

Amendment 6, page 45, line 21, at end insert—

“‘Northern Ireland body’ means—

(a) a Minister within the meaning of the Northern Ireland Act 1998,

(b) a Northern Ireland department,

(c) a Northern Ireland public authority within the meaning of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007, or

(d) a person providing services to a person within paragraph (a), (b) or (c).’”

See the explanatory statement for amendment 4.

Amendment 7, page 45, line 35, at end insert—

“‘Scottish body’ means—

(a) a person who is a part of the Scottish Administration,

(b) a Scottish public authority with mixed functions or no reserved functions (within the meaning of the Scotland Act 1998), or...
(c) a person providing services to a person within paragraph (a) or (b).

See the explanatory statement for amendment 4.

Amendment 8, page 45, line 36, at end insert—

"‘Welsh body’ means—

(a) a person who wholly or mainly exercises functions which could be conferred on the person by provision which falls within the legislative competence of the National Assembly for Wales, or

(b) a person providing services to a person within paragraph (a)."

See the explanatory statement for amendment 4.

Amendment 9, page 45, line 36, at end insert—

"Scottish body’ means—

(a) a person who wholly or mainly exercises functions which could be conferred on the person by provision which falls within the legislative competence of the Scottish Ministers, or

(b) a person providing services to a person within paragraph (a)."

See the explanatory statement for amendment 4.

Amendment 10, page 46, line 1, leave out subsection (5)

See the explanatory statement for amendment 4.

Amendment 11, page 46, line 9, leave out subsection (7)

— (Matt Hancock.)

See the explanatory statement for amendment 4.

**Clause 53**

**Duty to review operation of Chapter**

Amendment made: 12, page 51, line 23, at end insert—

'( ) The relevant Minister may only make regulations under subsection (5) with the consent of the Scottish Ministers if the regulations—

(a) repeal this Chapter,

(b) amend or remove the power of the Scottish Ministers to make regulations under section 48(5),

(c) affect the disclosure of information under section 48 by a Scottish body to another such body,

(d) affect the use by a Scottish body of information disclosed under that section by such a body, or

(e) affect the further disclosure to a Scottish body by such a body, or by a member, officer or employee of such a body, of information disclosed under this Chapter by a Scottish body.

( ) The relevant Minister may only make regulations under subsection (5) with the consent of the Welsh Ministers if the regulations—

(a) repeal this Chapter,

(b) amend or remove the power of the Welsh Ministers to make regulations under section 48(5),

(c) affect the disclosure of information under section 48 by a Welsh body to another such body,

(d) affect the use by a Welsh body of information disclosed under that section by such a body, or

(e) affect the further disclosure to a Welsh body by such a body, or by a member, officer or employee of such a body, of information disclosed under this Chapter by a Welsh body.

( ) The relevant Minister may only make regulations under subsection (5) with the consent of the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland if the regulations—

(a) repeal this Chapter,

(b) amend or remove the power of the Department to make regulations under section 48(5),

(c) affect the disclosure of information under section 48 by a Northern Ireland body to another such body,

(d) affect the use by a Northern Ireland body of information disclosed under that section by such a body, or

(e) affect the further disclosure to a Northern Ireland body by such a body, or by a member, officer or employee of such a body, of information disclosed under this Chapter by a Northern Ireland body.”— (Matt Hancock.)

This amendment and amendments 13 to 19 make provision for the relevant Minister to obtain the consent of the Scottish Ministers, the Welsh Ministers or the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland to certain regulations which, following a review under clause 53, amend or repeal Chapter 4 of Part 5.

**Clause 55**

**Interpretation of this Chapter**

Amendments made: 13, page 52, line 24, leave out “(7)” and insert “(6)”

See the explanatory statement for amendment 12.

Amendment 14, page 52, line 34, at end insert—

“Northern Ireland body’ means—

(a) a Minister within the meaning of the Northern Ireland Act 1998,

(b) a Northern Ireland department,

(c) a Northern Ireland public authority within the meaning of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007, or

(d) a person providing services to a person within paragraph (a), (b) or (c).”

See the explanatory statement for amendment 12.

Amendment 15, page 52, line 40, at end insert—

“Scottish body’ means—

(a) a person who is a part of the Scottish Administration,

(b) a Scottish public authority with mixed functions or no reserved functions (within the meaning of the Scotland Act 1998), or

(c) a person providing services to a person within paragraph (a) or (b).”

See the explanatory statement for amendment 12.

Amendment 16, page 52, line 41, at end insert—

“Welsh body’ means—

(a) a person who wholly or mainly exercises functions which could be conferred on the person by provision which falls within the legislative competence of the National Assembly for Wales, or

(b) a person providing services to a person within paragraph (a).”

See the explanatory statement for amendment 12.

Amendment 17, page 52, line 45, leave out subsection (3)

See the explanatory statement for amendment 12.

Amendment 18, page 53, line 7, leave out subsection (5)

See the explanatory statement for amendment 12.

Amendment 19, page 53, line 15, leave out subsection (7)

— (Matt Hancock.)

See the explanatory statement for amendment 12.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I will now suspend the House for no more than five minutes to make a decision about certification. The Division bells will be rung two minutes before the House resumes following certification. The Government will table the appropriate consent motion, copies of which will be available shortly in the Vote Office and will be distributed by the Doorkeepers.

9.12 pm

Sitting suspended.

9.17 pm

On resuming—
Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I can now inform the House of my decision about certification. For the purposes of Standing Order No. 83L(2) and on behalf of Mr Speaker, I have certified clause 85 of the Digital Economy Bill as relating exclusively to England and within devolved legislative competence. Copies of the certificate are available in the Vote Office. Under Standing Order No. 83M, a consent motion is therefore required for the Bill to proceed. Does the Minister intend to move the consent motion?

Matt Hancock indicated assent.

The House forthwith resolved itself into the Legislative Grand Committee (England) (Standing Order No. 83M).

[MR LINDSAY HOYLE IN THE CHAIR]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That the Committee consents to the following certified clause of the Digital Economy Bill:

Clauses and schedules certified under Standing Order No. 83L(2) as relating exclusively to England and being within devolved legislative competence

Clause 85 of the Bill (Bill 87).—(Matt Hancock.)

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):
The debate will take place now. Come on in, Mr Wishart.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am very grateful to you, Mr Hoyle, and I promise to be brief when it comes to this substantial and significant—[Interruption.]

The Chairman: Order. We cannot hear the hon. Gentleman.

Pete Wishart: We are discussing substantial and significant clauses that relate exclusively to England. We are here, in what is the de facto English Parliament, to debate important measures. The relationship between tuition fees and qualifications is very important to England, and I am surprised that we are not hearing more contributions from English Members. They have a fantastic opportunity to speak at length about England-only clauses, an opportunity that was demanded at the time of the last general election. So many Members, particularly Conservative Members, said then that the system was required, but none of them is here to participate in tonight’s debate.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The former Prime Minister, David Cameron, stood on the steps of No. 10 Downing Street on 19 September 2014 and said that millions of English voices must be heard. This is the procedure that was to allow those millions of English voices to be heard. However, the Constitution Unit produced a report just this afternoon which showed that there had been a maximum of about 40 minutes of debate in all the Legislative Grand Committee procedures. Does that not show that “English votes for English laws” is not meeting the purpose for which it was set up?

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. I have a copy of the report produced by the Constitution Unit, which goes into great detail and depth about the functioning of EVEL.

Clause 85 is critically important to the Bill. It concerns the payment of tuition fees for qualifications in England. It is important that it be debated fully, and it is important for English Members to have their say. That is what “English votes for English laws” is all about. English Members have an opportunity to express their concern about parts of Bills that relate exclusively to England, and we now invite them to contribute to the debate.

According to the Constitution Unit, a maximum of two minutes has been taken every time the House has resolved itself into an English Legislative Grand Committee. We must ensure that we use this time properly and appropriately, because clause 85 is an important measure. It is the only part of the Bill that relates exclusively to England, and I think it deserves all the debate that can possibly be mustered. I am very surprised that not even the Minister is using his opportunity.

We cannot say that this is a waste of the House’s time, because it obviously is not. It is important that the House breaks up its usual routine examination of legislation and forms a English Legislative Grand Committee to consider significant measures such as clause 85. It is important that the ring bells and the House is suspended for two minutes before the certification can take place, and that Members have an opportunity to examine such measures in detail. I hope that I shall not be the only Member to contribute, given that this was considered to be so important that the Standing Orders had to be changed.

I know that other Members wish to speak—[Laughter.] Perhaps they do not, but they have an opportunity to debate this important clause, and I am very surprised that there are to be no more contributions tonight. That demonstrates the absolute and utter absurdity of the EVEL proposals and the Standing Order changes. We are sitting here, and not one Member representing an English constituency is prepared to—

The Chairman: Order. I may be able to help. I think that there will be a speech to follow that of the hon. Gentleman, so he should not worry. Has he finished his speech?

Pete Wishart: Yes.

The Chairman: In that case, I call the Minister.

Matt Hancock: I shall not detain the House for long. All I can say is that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) had an opportunity to talk about clause 85 on Second Reading. Did he do so? No, he did not. There was spare time during the Committee stage. The hon. Gentleman could have joined the Committee, enjoyed our company, and talked about clause 85. Did he do so? No, he did not. On Report, he could have tabled any sort of amendment to clause 85, or, indeed, tried to vote against it, but he chose not to. I think we can see through all his bluster.

Question put and agreed to.

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

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair; decision reported.

Third Reading

Queen’s and Prince of Wales’s consent signified.
The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Bill will cement the UK’s status as a world-leading digital economy. It will help people to connect to high-speed broadband, expanding their personal opportunities and stimulating economic activity. It will improve public services, thanks to better information management, and it will protect the vulnerable from some of the hazards of the digital world. It is an important measure in building a country that works for everyone.

I am very grateful to the House for the way it has engaged with the Bill. I put on record my thanks to the Minister for Digital and Culture; the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the Minister with responsibility for the constitution; the Culture, Media and Sport Committee; the Public Bill Committee; the Whips; and the Clerks, who have all been particularly helpful. I also want to thank the Front-Bench teams of the Opposition and the SNP for their constructive approach.

We are increasing connectivity by moving forward with a new broadband universal service obligation. There are reforms to the electronic communications code and we have greater protections for intellectual property and consumers. We have strengthened protections for children too, and I extend special thanks to my hon. Friends the Members for Devizes (Claire Perry) and for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse).

As well as helping to bring the country online, the Bill enables Government to share information between public bodies, where there is a public benefit. That will help an additional 700,000 fuel-poor households. It means that the public sector will be more considerate when pursuing debts from the vulnerable. There will be fewer burdensome surveys for businesses to complete. No more unwarranted post will be sent to the families of the deceased. We have ensured the provision of both transparency and robust safeguards. Those measures will benefit the whole country.

The Government added a number of important new measures in Committee. There is now further support for the financial technology sector, enabling payment firms that are not banks to access payment systems currently accessible only to banks. That will improve competition in financial services and benefit consumers. We are offering free digital skills training for adults in England who lack relevant qualifications, and the Bill gives Ofcom more power to keep harmful content from being broadcast both on radio and on television. I hope that the successful way that the Bill has been discussed and improved as it passes through this House will reassure and encourage those in the other place as they consider the Bill.

Digital technology offers tremendous opportunities. Many of them are currently hard to predict and some are unfathomable, yet we know that we must be ready now if we are to enjoy innovations in future. I want the UK to be in a position to lead the world in the development of digital technology. I want us to lead the world in digital connectivity and skills for everyone, not just the professionals and not just a privileged few.

The Bill will make our country wealthier, more efficient, more skilful, more connected and safer. I commend it to the House.

Kevin Brennan: I thank my hon. Friends who served on the Public Bill Committee and the many individuals and organisations who submitted evidence to aid the scrutiny of the Bill, as well as the Clerks for their patience and advice. I also thank the Secretary of State and the Ministers for their hard work.

The Minister for Digital and Culture has been most assiduous, as we in the Opposition have tried to be also. On Report earlier, he even tried to speak some Welsh. It reminded me a little bit—as he often does—of Winston Churchill, who when he attempted to speak French said as a warning, “Prenez garde, je vais parler français”, or “Take guard, I am going to speak French.” The Minister did not quite give us that warning when he spoke Welsh. He did say he thought what he said meant that he backed the Welsh language; in fact he said that he backed Channel 4 Wales. I think that is what he said, anyway, in Welsh. I congratulate him on his commendable effort in speaking the language of heaven.

The Opposition will not be opposing this Bill on Third Reading as it contains a number of uncontroversial measures which we welcome and support and have no wish to block. However, that is not the same as saying that we think it is a good Bill. Its weaknesses lie as much in what it omits as what it contains. President Lyndon Johnson once said of a Bill that it was like grandma’s nightshirt; it covers everything. This Bill attempts to cover everything, but I am afraid there are quite a few holes in it, because a digital economy Bill would look much better if it properly recognised the importance of the digital economy to the whole country, if it took account of the pace of change in the development and use of new technology, and if it saw its central role in the way that work itself is changing for millions of people in the UK.

Let us imagine what the Bill would be like if it was much more ambitious about delivering ultrafast fibre broadband and mobile network coverage to everyone who needs it. Imagine a digital economy Bill that recognised the need to provide people with digital skills so that they can benefit from new technologies and the jobs of the future, or paid attention to the need for digital resilience and saw fit to mention cyber-security and preventing online abuse. A digital economy Bill that did any of those things would look very different from the Bill before us.

I want to focus on the areas where there is some agreement. On connectivity, we of course support the universal service obligation, but it is too tiny and too slow a step in the right direction. Labour called for this to be introduced back in 2010, and left fully costed plans for it to be achieved by 2012. The 10 megabits that will be guaranteed to households is less than half of what is needed to achieve superfast broadband. If anyone is wondering whether 10 megabits really is inadequate, they should not just take my word for it: the Minister for Digital and Culture said in a speech to the Broadband World Forum just last month that “while 10 megabits may be enough for today’s needs, it won’t be enough for tomorrow’s.”

Even the Minister admits that his own legislation will be out of date by the time it is implemented.
On age verification, we all share the objective of protecting children from online pornography, and we support the provisions in the Bill that aim to do that, but we remain unclear about how they will work in practice and we hope that more details emerge as the Bill continues its scrutiny in the other place. There are legitimate concerns about privacy and the security of individuals’ personal data, which the Government must do much more to answer. The Bill still lacks any mention of the need for online sex and relationships education for young people, which is at least as important as age verification in protecting children from the risks of early exposure to inappropriate material.

There are some measures related to public service broadcasting which we support and which will help to give greater stability and certainty to the sector, but one way in which the Government could clear up an element of great uncertainty that hangs over our public service broadcasting system is by clarifying their thinking about the future of Channel 4. It is now 14 months since it became known that the Government were considering options including privatisation of Channel 4, and we are still none the wiser as to their thinking. Bringing this matter to a speedy conclusion—I hope by announcing their continued support for Channel 4’s current remit and model—would help to bring stability and certainty not just to that important public service institution, but to the wider creative industries with which its work is intimately bound up.

As this Bill moves to the other place, I hope that the Government will be able to provide reassurance on many of the concerns that have been raised by our colleagues in this House, and to think harder about more of the questions which have so far gone unanswered. It is not too late for the Bill to address questions around people’s rights over their own personal data, on which it is currently silent. It is not too late for the Government to come forward with measures to secure the rights of more than 1 million workers in the digital economy, many of whom are in precarious roles with uncertain rights, hours, contracts and even legal status. It is not too late for the Bill to recognise the needs of the 12 million people in the UK who do not have basic digital skills, which is increasingly necessary to navigate public services, to do business and to get jobs.

If the additional scrutiny to be provided in the other place can do these things and more, then when the Bill comes back to this House it will enjoy more wholehearted support from the Labour Benches than it has so far.

9.36 pm

Calum Kerr: I should like to add to the positive vibes coming from both Front Benchers and join them in thanking the Clerks. I particularly want to thank those in the Public Bill Office, who have been fantastic in dealing with someone who is still relatively new to all this and sometimes does not get things right first time. Officials in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and in Ofcom have also been particularly constructive and helpful to us as we have found our way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) and I entered the Bill Committee with all the optimism of newbies, thinking, “We have such massive logic behind our case that the Government’s going to bite our hands off to get to our new clauses and amendments.” Of course, we learned the hard way that that never happens. Even when they completely agreed with us, there was always a wee excuse for why they had to do things in their own way. I remember that the Minister even spoke to my new clause. The Chair had called him to speak before me, and I sat there thinking, “Oh, this could be one of ours. I fundamentally agree with him.” Then I realised, and thought, “Oh, perhaps we’ll need a consultation on this.”

On Second Reading the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), compared the Bill to a Christmas tree. That was quite an interesting analogy, considering where we have ended up. I said at that time that the Digital Economy Bill’s title was something of a misnomer, in that it lacked any strategy, ambition or drive to take advantage of digital opportunities. There was certainly no guiding light or star on the top of this tree. It is also fair to say that some of the things that have been hung on it leave a little to be desired. However, we should acknowledge that many of its elements are very welcome, as my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) did in his own inimitable style. He has probably now set a precedent by speaking in an EVEL debate, which he will rejoice in.

Some of those welcome elements did not get touched on today. I think we all agree that the reform of the electronic communication code is overdue, for example, and the measures on customer compensation and switching are very welcome, as are some of the powers for Ofcom and the review of spectrum. However, other parts of the Bill leave something to be desired, as I have said. They feel more tokenistic than meaningful. I am referring in particular to the universal service obligation.

9.35 pm

Mrs Miller: We are seeing the internet come of age through this Bill. I very much welcome the change in the tone of Members on both Front Benches. The digital economy in this country is hugely important, but we need rules in this area just as we need them in other aspects of our lives. The acknowledgement that we need clear rules on content is welcomed across the board. I congratulate Ministers on the amendments that have been made to strengthen enforcement, particularly around harmful content, and I hope that when the other place considers the Bill, it will be able to look at some of the other points that right hon. and hon. Members have raised today. I wish the Bill well.

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that constituents in all parts of this country want a fibre future and access to ultrafast, not just fast and superfast, broadband?

Calum Kerr: I totally agree. The Government have missed an opportunity and I am disappointed that they did not accept my new clause 27, although it might be the foundation for the sudden emergence of a strategy on vouchers. Government Members will have to explain to their constituents why 10 megabits per second is okay for rural areas while urban areas aim for a gigabit connection—100 times faster.
The Bill has good intentions in some areas but, as I articulated earlier, its execution will be flawed. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) talked about faulty goods, and I guess these bits are a bit like the parcel under the Christmas tree that looks quite nice, but is deeply flawed when it is opened and will be returned to sender. I would have liked part 5 of the Bill to be returned to sender, but I welcome the Minister’s commitment to continue to iterate and evolve the measures—I thought the amendment paper was going to get bigger than the Bill at one point such was the desire to amend it. I read a tweet from Big Brother Watch that said:

“Good to hear support for GDPR from the minister... can govt now write part 5 so it clearly adheres to it”.

I look forward to continual efforts to ensure that that happens.

In conclusion, among all the sparring and comments— they were light-hearted at times and serious at others—there has been genuine movement on this Bill. We have tried to be constructive in discussions and by setting forward our ideas, and I look forward to continuing in that vein.

9.41 pm

Nigel Adams: I shall speak only briefly on Third Reading. I enjoyed being a member of the Public Bill Committee, which was only the second such Committee that I have served on—[ Interruption. ] I notice the Whips looking at me, but this is by no means an application to be involved in more any time soon.

The team in the Bill Committee was very constructive, and we have just had an encouraging debate on Report, but I want to touch on one issue that is worth pressing home: ticketing, bots and touts. People have said to me that this is free-market issue—rightly so—but a principle of any truly free market is that there is a willing buyer and a willing seller. We cannot forget the second part of that equation. While some fans might be willing to spend, perhaps through gritted teeth, many thousands of pounds on tickets—dozens of times over the face value—to see a favourite artist, not many artists are willing to sell their tickets to parasitical touts. Touts rob artists of their right to set prices that might be more accessible to their fans. If Adele, for example, wanted to charge £10,000 or £20,000 for a ticket to one of her shows, she would, but she does not. As a seller, that is absolutely her right. We should support a free market in which a seller’s right to make such choices to develop their fan bases is respected.

I was pleased that the Minister committed on Report to act against bots if necessary, following his meeting with the Secretary of State and the industry. I have no doubt that all involved would like to work together as the Bill progresses, and I stand ready to play a small part if possible. The fundamental point is that we have now achieved broad cross-party consensus. Other countries have brought in similar laws to outlaw bots, and now is the time for this House to take action. This is a technical area that is not simple to resolve. While this is not the only measure that will tackle ticketing problems, it has cross-party support, as well as support outside the House, including from ticketing companies, which want action and bots to be outlawed. I look forward to the Minister’s response to the Waterson report and hope that any action that the Government take in the other place will give consumers the confidence that this Government are on everyone’s side, not just the side of a privileged few.

9.44 pm

Drew Hendry: I will be brief. Overall, the work of the Bill Committee was positive, and there were several things that we can take forward and look to see the benefits of in the future. I would add that in the future there needs to be much more of a focus on the consumer, and the rights of the consumer and of the end user. There will be further opportunities to make sure that the right solutions are delivered in the right places, particularly for rural areas. When we consider speeds, we should think about going “outside in” and think of those people who normally get the technology latest having the opportunity to get it first. Consumers should also be protected when they buy things—if they make a contract, that contract should protect them as much as it does the company, so there is a balance to be achieved. I welcome a lot of the measures in the Bill and I look forward to seeing progress in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

SPEAKER’S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

Ordered,

That the Motion in the name of Mr David Lidington relating to the Speaker’s Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority shall be treated as if it related to an instrument subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Delegated Legislation Committees) in respect of which notice has been given that the instrument be approved.—( Michael Ellis.)
Business of the House (29 November)

Motion made, and Question proposed,
That, at the sitting on Tuesday 29 November, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 20 (Time for taking private business), the private business set down by the Chairman of Ways and Means may be entered upon at any hour (whether before, at or after 4.00pm) and may then be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours, after which the Speaker shall interrupt the business.— (Michael Ellis.)

9.46 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): We rarely have the opportunity to debate this particular type of motion whereby we are changing the position under Standing Orders, which are here to protect Parliament from the Executive. The Standing Orders clearly say that opposed private business on a Tuesday should start at 4 o’clock and, in effect, run for three hours. The reason is so that the promoters of the Bill, and the people who support it and are interested in it, can know when they should be here. As MPs, we are here all the time. We should not inconvenience the promoters of private Bills, but that is routinely done. Standing Order No. 20 is not being suspended because there is a particular worry about what is going to happen tomorrow; that is happening because the Government routinely do it. If we get into a habit of letting the Government routinely suspend Standing Orders, which are here to protect Parliament, it is a dangerous course to tread.

Will the Deputy Leader of the House tell us why the motion is needed in this case? I have looked at tomorrow’s business, so I know that we could quite happily start with Government business. When we reach 4 o’clock, we could do the opposed private business, after which we could then return to the Government business. What happened time and again under previous Governments was that opposed private business was taken very late at night, which was not fair on the promoters of the Bills in question and was absolutely not the way to proceed. We should not be promoting Government business over the right of Parliament, so I would like the Deputy Leader of the House to tell us why we specifically need to do this in this case.

9.48 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) has, not for the first time, made an interesting point. It is not the case that this is a routine matter, and I take on board what he has said. I undertake to review the situation, and we will write to him with a full and detailed explanation of the matter.

Question put and agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 5 to 12 together.
Ordered.

ADMINISTRATION

That Mr Robin Walker be discharged from the Administration Committee and Mr Robert Symons be added.

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT

That Dr Alan Whitehead be discharged from the Environmental Audit Committee and Mr Gavin Shuker be added.

EUROPEAN SCRUTINY

That Peter Grant and Calum Kerr be discharged from the European Scrutiny Committee and Alan Brown and Dr Paul Monaghan be added.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

That Damian Green and Keith Vaz be discharged from the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy and Yvette Cooper and Mrs Theresa Villiers be added.

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS

That Mr Nigel Evans be discharged from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and Mark Pritchard be added.

PETITIONS

That Mr Nick Hurd be discharged from the Petitions Committee and Luke Hall be added.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

That Anne Marie Morris be a member of the Committee of Public Accounts.

SCOTTISH AFFAIRS

That Maggie Throup be discharged from the Scottish Affairs Committee and Anna Soubry be added.— (Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

PETITION

The boundaries of the Wellingborough Parliamentary Constituency

9.49 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is a great pleasure to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Finedon. I attended a public meeting about the boundary proposals for Wellingborough. Unbelievably, the borough of Wellingborough will be represented by four MPs if the boundary proposals go through. I went to a public meeting in Finedon, attended by hundreds of people on a horrible night in November. They were very animated about the issue. The three lead signatories are Ray Ogle, Councillor Malcolm Ward and Councillor Barbara Bailey. The petition is addressed to the honourable Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled.

The petition states:

The Humble Petition of residents of Finedon, Northamptonshire and the surrounding areas,

Sheweth,

That the Petitioner believes that the boundaries of the Wellingborough Parliamentary Constituency should continue to include the village of Finedon due to the geographical, local government and historical ties that exist in the area.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Cabinet Office to encourage the Boundary Commission for England to retain Finedon as part of the Wellingborough Constituency in its upcoming review.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

[2016-02-18]
Children’s Funeral Costs

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

9.51 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): On 5 June 1989, my little world blacked over and nothing was to be the same again. My eight-year-old son, Martin—a bright, beautiful and wonderful little boy—stepped out onto the road and was tragically knocked down. Much of what happened over the following weeks was and still is a blur.

The pain is so acute and the sensation incomprehensible. The tragedy seems almost surreal. At times I felt I was floating above the room where all this grief was dwelling and that I was not really a part of what was going on. It was a dream—I wished.

Mostly, I felt my life was a bank holiday when shops shut and mail was not delivered and the milkman did not come, so seeing people outside my little world going about their normal everyday business just did not seem right. I asked myself, did they not know that the world had come to an end? I always felt that my brain and my senses were full of cotton wool or clouds and nothing I saw, or I sensed, or I heard or I experienced resonated. It did not hit a hard surface—nothing registered; it just floated around in my head.

I have a vague recollection of chatting with my vicar and the undertaker about the kind of service I wanted. I may well have been given prices at that time, but considering I needed to be told to wash and eat and sleep, it certainly did not register in my brain. I understand retrospectively that a cremation would have been cheaper than a burial, but I had to bury my son.

At the time I was making a decision on the funeral, I was actually deciding whether to join my son on the other side or not; or to stay for Stuart, my then three-year-old who really needed his mam. I calculated—and I use that word deliberately—as I actually sat in the bath and assessed which of my two children needed me the most. I eventually reasoned that Stuart, who was only three, could not lose his mam and brother all in one go. My much loved grandparents were buried together in Morriston cemetery, now in my constituency, and I felt that putting Martin in the grave with them meant that my nana, who loved him dearly, was there to look after him until I could be with him again.

I had to bury my little boy. At least that gave me some peace of mind. Later in life I went on to have another child, Tomas, who is now 15. Stuart, my three-year-old, is now 31, and he and his wife have given me a wonderful grandson, Liam, so I made the right decision in not joining Martin and staying with Stuart, but mothers will understand the position I was in. We all live for our children: when you lose one, you have to decide who will understand the position I was in. We all live for our children; it is completely in the wrong order. No one expects to bury their children; it is completely in the wrong order. So when that tragedy happens, parents will be totally unprepared, both emotionally and financially. Since I first spoke out on this issue, I have received support from colleagues across the House. I have received emails, calls and letters from other parents who are in a similar position to me.

A member of the House staff stopped me to say that he and his wife lost an 18-month-old baby and his local authority charged him for an adult funeral. He had to battle that local authority to get the cost reduced. Another gentleman wrote that he had lost two children, a one-year-old and a 17-year-old. This man told me that he was ashamed to ask for help to cover the funeral costs as he had wanted to give that to his children. Today I learned of a couple who had a very premature baby who passed away after four weeks in special care. When the parents weighed up the cost of a funeral, they just could not afford it so they had to leave the baby for the NHS to deal with. That is not uncommon.

A teacher told me that when her school lost a pupil, it held a non-school uniform day to help parents pay for the funeral. Just tonight CLIC Sargent, the cancer charity, contacted me about a survey that it has undertaken in connection with issues that most concern the parents of children with cancer, and many say that paying for the funeral is a very big worry. I was told of one family whose little boy’s football club undertook fund-raising to help them cover the cost of a funeral.

Across local authorities, fees for children’s funerals vary greatly. On a more compassionate note, I have heard from a mum who lost very, very premature twin babies, and Rhondda Cynon Taf, an authority in Wales, not only covered the local authority fees but absorbed the total cost of the funeral. To Rhondda Cynon Taf, authorities that currently do not charge and those that are planning to scrap fees, I say from the bottom of my heart thank you.

It is a very small amount of money that I am asking the Government to put in. For £10 million, the fees for children’s funerals could be covered right across the country. This is an easy and a small ask, but it would
impact greatly on the cost of a funeral and in no small way give comfort to bereaved parents. At Prime Minister’s questions recently the Prime Minister suggested that the social fund could be used to help, but I say to the Prime Minister that at the darkest moment of a parent’s life, I could not even fill a kettle, let alone fill in a 35-page application form. I have subsequently written to the Prime Minister asking that she consider my request, but I have not yet received a reply.

I conclude by saying to the Minister please do this. Make this happen. It is the right thing to do, it is the respectful thing to do, and it is the compassionate thing to do.

9.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for her work in bringing this sensitive and important issue to national attention. It is always difficult to know how others feel in such circumstances—

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do adjourn.—[Heather Wheeler.]

Mr Jones: Just to reiterate, it is always difficult to know how others feel in such circumstances, although it is always easy to say we do when we have not been in those circumstances ourselves. I am a father of two children, and I am very lucky, but losing a child must be the worst thing that can happen to a parent.

It is important that the arrangements that the state can put in place in such circumstances are as helpful in giving support to grieving parents as they can be. This is clearly, therefore, a matter of great sensitivity and importance, and it is incumbent on all public sector organisations with a role to play to ensure that they are understanding and helpful.

I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for setting out this issue so powerfully. It certainly cannot have been easy for her to come to the House tonight to make a speech on this subject. She has shown great strength and courage in bringing this issue to the House tonight.

[Hon. Members: “Hear, hear!”]

Let me start by setting out the context in which my Department and local government operate. As democratically elected organisations, local councils are independent of central Government and are responsible for managing their budgets in line with local priorities. I understand that a number of local authorities already choose to waive fees for children’s funerals. I hope all local authorities would carefully consider their policy in this area, and whether it is right to go further in the light of the concerns the hon. Lady has raised today. I note that very recently Telford and Wrekin Council and Clipstone Parish Council have decided to do just that, as the hon. Lady requested.

There is also a role that central Government can play. The Government recognise that the period following a death will have emotional, social and financial impacts for the bereaved, and people may need to draw on a wide range of support at that difficult time. It is for that reason that the Department for Work and Pensions operates the social fund funeral expenses payments scheme, which makes a significant contribution towards a funeral for families in receipt of a qualifying income benefit. The scheme meets the full necessary costs of a cremation or burial, including the purchase of a grave with exclusive burial rights. Other costs, such as the coffin, and church and funeral directors’ fees, are limited to a maximum scheme payment of £700. However, there is no restriction on the type of funeral expenses that can be claimed under this category, and applying the limit allows the bereaved a choice of how best to spend the payment.

I certainly hear what the hon. Lady has said about the social fund, and I absolutely understand her concerns about the way in which it works. It is good that we have on the Treasury Bench today my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery, from the Department for Work and Pensions, which operates the scheme, and she will have heard what the hon. Lady had to say about the scheme.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I hope that the Minister has listened to and heard what has been said. As we have heard, parents in a fog of bereavement cannot even think of filling in DWP forms, and a grant of £700 goes nowhere towards the cost of a funeral in many parts of the country—it costs thousands.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) has put an incredibly courageous case for having that cost covered by the Government. It cannot be right to make a local council choose between doing this or providing social care, and that might be the choice that it has. Will the Minister think again and not give my hon. Friend, or any of us, pat answers but really take this away and think about it?

Mr Jones: I fully understand the points that the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) have indicated that those on benefits receive help through the funeral social fund while those who are in work do not, but those on lower incomes should be helped. The Minister will be
aware that various charities such as the Child Funeral Charity can help as well. I want to put it on record that I support the hon. Lady, and all right hon. and hon. Members who are here, in asking the Government to consider this very seriously, and ask the Minister to grasp the understanding and compassion that we want him to have on behalf of the hon. Lady and all the other people out there who need help.

Mr Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and certainly understand the sentiment behind it. I am aware that there are charities that support families in this sense, but I also understand what he is asking of Government, as I do in relation to what the hon. Member for Swansea East is looking for.

My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery is restarting a roundtable group with the funeral industry and bereavement charities, because it is important that the Government have a better understanding of how the funeral industry works in this regard and what more can be done to help.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on the incredible courage that she has shown this evening and in recent days—in fact, years.

Does the Minister recognise that for people of different faiths, this can add additional complexity and cost, particularly if a rapid burial is required? Having in mind particular cases of my constituents who have experienced funeral poverty where faith has been a dimension, may I urge him and his colleagues to make sure that faith organisations, particularly Muslim and Jewish organisations but those of other faiths as well, are represented in the discussions in the roundtable group?

Mr Jones: I fully understand what the hon. Gentleman says. I represent many Muslim constituents and I know that when they have a bereavement in the community, they seek to deal with the burial as soon as possible, quite often within 24 hours. He makes a very good point, and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary has just nodded to me to confirm that she would be more than happy to include the groups that the hon. Gentleman mentions.

As I have said several times, I know that the assurances that I have been able to give tonight will not go as far as the hon. Member for Swansea East would like. I recognise the difficulty and the trouble that she has gone to in bringing the matter to the House tonight. I hope that bringing this matter to the wider attention of the House and of the public will mean that local authorities will consider their approach to charging and take their local residents’ views into account. The Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Simon Kirby), who is here on the Treasury Bench, has heard what the hon. Lady said. I am sure that as a result of tonight’s debate, we will all reflect on what she has suggested the Government do.

Question put and agreed to.

10.11 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 29 November 2016

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Business before Questions

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:


Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

1. Economic Growth: Coastal Areas

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage economic growth in coastal areas.

Mr Philip Hammond: We have already made announcements about EU funding during the transition period, giving a Treasury guarantee to underwrite funding that is allocated to projects in the UK, so that people who bid for that funding can do so with confidence. However, as the hon. Lady suggests, after we leave the European Union we will need to review for England, and discuss with the devolved Administrations for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, how we are to replace the streams of EU funding to which many regions have become accustomed. We need to have a debate in the House to ensure that that funding is used in a way that reflects the UK’s priority in the future, not the priority of the wider European Union.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The coastal communities of Cumbria were deeply affected by Storm Desmond last December. The River Kent, which meets the sea at Morecambe bay, is one of Britain’s fastest-flowing and shortest rivers, and when it flooded last December, untold damage was caused to communities and the economy throughout the county. In last week’s autumn statement, the Government went back on their word from last December to fund the resilience of bridges to help prevent future flooding. Will the Chancellor apologise to the flood-hit communities of Cumbria for that betrayal, and, even at this late stage, will he change his mind?
Mr Hammond: We did announce funds for flood resilience in the autumn statement, distributed from money that had already been set aside for that purpose in the spending review. I did not mention Cumbria specifically in the autumn statement, but I will look at the case that the hon. Gentleman has raised, and will write to him.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcements of the various sums, and may I suggest that the sums the Government have put aside for coastal defence are critical for places such as Whitstable, in my constituency, for generating economic as well as social confidence among the people who live there?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and of course flood defences are categorised as economic infrastructure precisely because they are a critical enabler of business activity and are critical to protect transport, communications, infrastructure and so on, and we will continue to invest in them.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): It is about time we heard from this Government about support for our coastal economies because we have just seen, in last week's autumn statement, a catalogue of six and a half years of abject failure, whether on infrastructure, skills or support for businesses. The coastal communities of Formby and Crosby in my constituency need to hear a lot more from the Chancellor. They need support now and in the future.

Mr Hammond: If the hon. Gentleman had been listening, what he would have heard last week was a catalogue of 2.7 million new jobs created over the last six and a half years, a deficit inherited from Labour at a peacetime record high slashed by two-thirds, a million new jobs created in the UK, record employment levels and 865,000 fewer workless households, all of which will have made an important contribution to improving living standards and prospects in coastal communities throughout the UK.

Housing Supply

2. Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to increase housing supply.

Mr Burrowes: Will the autumn statement's £3.15 billion boost for London housing be flexible enough to meet the aspirations of both Londoners wanting a home they can afford to rent or buy and London's homeless, whose complex needs include the need for supported housing?

Mr Gauke: I can provide that reassurance to my hon. Friend. The Government are committed to supporting housing supply and ensuring that the housing market works for everyone, including Londoners. London's £3.15 billion affordable housing settlement will deliver over 90,000 affordable housing starts by 2020-21 across a range of tenures, including homes for low-cost home ownership and submarket rent, as well as supporting housing for Londoners with particular needs, and of course London will also benefit from the housing infrastructure fund.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): More people in my constituency rent privately than own their own homes and for most of them ownership is a distant or impossible dream. Are the Government considering looking at the supply of private rented housing on longer tenures, perhaps with rent guarantees, and possibly using tax reliefs or other mechanisms the Treasury has in its armoury, to encourage landlords to provide those longer-term tenancies and better security for the many private rented sector tenants?

Mr Gauke: The Government are taking action to ensure that we build more homes. There is a need for flexibility in terms of tenure, which was at the heart of my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), but last week's autumn statement included a series of measures that will help to ensure that we are building more homes in this country, which is what we need.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Why is there such a large gap between the number of planning permissions and the number of housing starts, and what specifically can the Government do to close that gap?

Mr Gauke: There has consistently been a gap. What is important is that there is certainty of supply. We need to ensure that we have the right planning system in place and the right fiscal support, and that is what the Government are determined to deliver.
Concentrix

3. **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): If the Government will establish a public inquiry into Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs’ contract with Concentrix.

[907541]

9. **Robert Flello** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): If the Government will establish a public inquiry into Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs’ contract with Concentrix.

[907547]

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison):** The independent National Audit Office is carrying out an inquiry into the Concentrix contract and it plans to publish its report in early 2017. That is in addition to Select Committee and Public Accounts Committee scrutiny, which has been extensive to date and will no doubt be extensive in the future.

**Melanie Onn:** I should like to take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), who is not in her place, whose hard work got this issue on to the agenda and forced HMRC to act. In July, the independent Social Security Advisory Committee said that the Concentrix contract was a “major departure for HMRC, as decisions about a claimant’s past eligibility to a benefit are being made by a commercial organisation”, and that “this same organisation is then performing mandatory reconsiderations when a claimant challenges the initial decision.”

What are the Government going to do to prevent this situation from happening again?

**Jane Ellison:** The chief executive of HMRC addressed that particular issue in one of his evidence sessions to a Select Committee. I hope the House will be pleased to hear that HMRC has taken back and completed all 181,000 cases from Concentrix and has now cleared most of the mandatory reconsiderations. There are of course issues to consider. That is why the National Audit Office is carrying out its inquiry, which is already under way, and the Government will of course respond to its report in due course.

**Robert Flello:** The Concentrix scandal left huge numbers of people in hardship, and some of them are still paying off the debts to loan sharks that they took out to see them through. Ministers must have seen the complaints letters, and they must have seen what was in the media. Were they asleep at their desks? Were they just caught napping? Concentrix, HMRC and the Minister at the time need to be held responsible for this, and we need a proper inquiry.

**Jane Ellison:** I would make the point to the hon. Gentleman that a proper inquiry is exactly what the National Audit Office will be undertaking, and I am sure that the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) and her Committee will have that report in front of them in due course. This matter will be properly looked at in some detail. Over the course of the contract, considerable savings were made for the taxpayer in relation to fraud and error, but it is true that things went badly wrong towards the end of the contract, which is why swift action was taken.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): While recognising the points made by the hon. Members for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Flello) on the Concentrix contract, which will be covered in the Select Committee’s report, I would like to congratulate Treasury Ministers on responding very fast when these issues really came to a climax in August and on being extremely prompt in looking after constituents who contacted their MPs about this matter.

**Jane Ellison:** I thank my hon. Friend for those words. Having looked carefully at the profile of complaints from Members over the period of the contract, it is clear that there was sharp increase in their number right at the end of the contract, when it became apparent that a number of Members were contacting us on behalf of their constituents. As I have said, it was the sharp decline in service that led to the actions that we took. It is also worth noting that all the 181,000 cases that were taken back have now been resolved and that, where appropriate, compensation has been paid. Most importantly, when claims have needed to be renewed and reinstated, this has been done.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): Given the issues in my constituency that I have raised, I am pleased that the Concentrix contract has now been brought to an end. Does the Minister agree that an inquiry by the National Audit Office, which works for and answers to this House, will be far more effective in getting lessons learned than a long-winded public inquiry that could become a lawyer-fest?

**Jane Ellison:** My hon. Friend is exactly right to say that the National Audit Office inquiry is the way to go. This is an area in which it is deeply experienced and the work is already under way. The report will be produced in the new year. In order to draw conclusions and to find these reports helpful, that speed of inquiry is important. We will have the report early in the new year, and the House will have further chances to scrutinise it at that time.

**HMRC Penalty Surcharges**

4. **Gordon Henderson** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce the effect on small businesses of penalty surcharges levied by HM Revenue and Customs.

[907542]

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison):** Ultimately, the Government want to collect the right tax at the right time, not charge penalties. As it happens, we are currently reviewing ideas for how we charge penalties. A discussion document was published last year, and we recently consulted on a new approach to sanctions for late submissions of returns and late payment of taxes. We are currently considering all the comments received and if my hon. Friend wants to contribute to that process, I will be happy to look at any detailed points.

**Gordon Henderson:** I am more than happy to contribute. A small building company in my constituency has paid large VAT bills on time since 1972. However, on one occasion, because of a mistake by a member of staff, the company’s VAT return was one day late and the company was hit with a totally unfair £12,000 penalty charge. During the review, will Ministers consider changing
the penalty charge system so that they are levied only on businesses that repeatedly fail to pay their VAT on time? “Three strikes and you’re fined” might be a good system.

Jane Ellison: I note what my hon. Friend says with interest. It is worth clarifying that the VAT default surcharge system already contains safeguards to help businesses avoid penalties and that no business incurs a surcharge the first time it makes a late payment. My hon. Friend may want to write to me about that individual case because I cannot address it here in the House. The current system of surcharges is structured in a way that allows the smallest businesses up to four late payments without incurring a surcharge, so I suggest that he writes to me with the details, which I will pass on to HMRC.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The new “Making tax digital” arrangements, which will require businesses to submit quarterly returns, increase the likelihood of sanctions being imposed following late returns or non-submission. How does that fit in with the Government’s promises to make it easier to start a business, to cut red tape and to make businesses more competitive?

Jane Ellison: I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman’s description of “Making tax digital”—an important reform that we will consider carefully. We said in the autumn statement that we will respond in the new year, but it is not right to say that there will be four returns; information will be digitally uploaded to the system more regularly. It is also the case that one of the driving forces behind “Making tax digital” is to help small businesses to get things right first time, because there is an awful lot of error that often costs businesses money that they would otherwise be owed.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I must press the Financial Secretary on that point. I appreciate that the “Making tax digital” programme does have advantages, but many small businesses are worried about quarterly reporting. Will she consider making it voluntary rather than mandatory?

Jane Ellison: I reiterate to my right hon. Friend that it is envisaged that people will upload information quarterly, but that is not the same as four tax returns a year, something which got some currency at the time. Several significant concessions regarding the number of small businesses that were exempt from the system were announced over the summer, but I am listening carefully to the points being made both by colleagues in the House and by some of the important stakeholders with whom we have been engaging. That is why we said that we will respond in the new year. We do not want to rush our response; we want to consider all the points carefully.

Productivity (South-west)

5. Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve productivity in the south-west.

[907543]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Investment and skills are front and centre in our plans to raise productivity across the country, including in the south-west. The autumn statement announced a new £23 billion national productivity investment fund that will be targeted at four areas that are critical to improving productivity: housing; transport; digital communications; and research and development. We also announced in the autumn statement that the south-west will receive £191 million from the local growth fund to back local priorities and support new jobs and £19.5 million extra investment to bolster the area’s resilience to flooding.

Rebecca Pow: I welcome the Chancellor’s words and appreciate that he is keen for funding to be granted and attached to infrastructure projects that will bring a positive economic effect. With that in mind, will he consider supporting road improvements on the Toneway-Creech Castle corridor that leads into Somerset’s county town of Taunton, which will unlock 3,000 housing units?

Mr Hammond: I understand that the Heart of the South West local enterprise partnership bid for this scheme is part of its local growth fund submission; as I said, £191 million has been allocated to the south-west, and details of the individual LEP allocations will be announced in the near future. The Government are very supportive of using infrastructure to open up house building and employment opportunities, and from what she has said about this road, it sounds as though the project in question would fit very well with Government priorities.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): As the Chancellor will know, Bristol is making a real contribution to productive growth, not just in the south-west, but across the country. But as the mayor of Bristol said in his response to the autumn statement, “if the government wants a ‘watertight’ UK economy it needs to stop punching holes in local government’s hull.” Will the Government commit to giving Bristol and cities like it the devolved powers, infrastructure investment and funding they need to deliver on productive growth locally?

Mr Hammond: The Government remain committed to the devolution agenda and, in particular, to supporting mayoral authorities, to ensure that economic growth and productivity are driven from the bottom up. We will continue to work with those authorities to make sure we deliver the funding available in the most effective way to get the result the national economy needs.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I very much welcome the Chancellor’s commitment to road, rail and broadband. Openreach should be broken away from BT to deliver proper competition, because in the hardest-to-reach areas for broadband in my constituency and across the west country, we need some greater players and greater competition.

Mr Hammond: I appreciate what my hon. Friend is saying. He will know that there has been a long and heated debate about the best way of delivering our broadband infrastructure in the future, and Ofcom is at the heart of reviewing this issue. I shall continue to have meetings with Ofcom, and with representatives of BT and others, over the coming days, as will my right hon. Friend the Culture Secretary.
Mr Hammond: No, and if the hon. Gentleman looks at the document we published last Wednesday, he will see that it contained a specific reference to “Fixing the foundations”, which is the base document setting out the Government’s agenda for addressing productivity issues. Of course, the key announcement in last week’s autumn statement was an additional £23 billion of borrowing specifically targeted at the highest-return investment projects; this is designed to raise Britain’s productivity by raising the productivity performance of our regional cities, in particular, and our regions more generally, to that of London and the south-west.

Peter Dowd: It is six years late. The productivity gap has widened for both the south-west and the country, and so has the gap in earnings and wages. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the outlook for wages is “dreadful”, with workers likely to earn less in real terms in 2021 than they did in 2008, and with the biggest losers being lower-income families, with the poorest third likely to see incomes drop. So in tandem with action on the productivity crisis, what are the Chancellor’s plans for action on the wages crisis?

Mr Hammond: First, if the hon. Gentleman looks at real household disposable incomes, he will see that the picture is rather brighter, and they present a much more real picture of what people in the economy are experiencing. He is right to say that real wages are a reflection of productivity performance, and the only way sustainably to raise real wages is to raise the productivity performance of this economy. So rather than whining about whether something was done this year, last year or six years ago, and perhaps with a careful eye on the performance of the previous Labour Government in this area, he might care to welcome the announcement made last week as an appropriate initiative to try to raise the UK’s productivity performance, and raise real wages and living standards over the long term.

Business Investment: UK and East Anglia

6. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage business investment in (a) the UK and (b) East Anglia.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The Government are taking significant steps to encourage business investment in East Anglia and in all regions of the UK by cutting corporation tax to the lowest rate in the G20, delivering a £6.7 billion business rates package and allocating the £23 billion of public investment through the national productivity investment fund to ensure increasing and improved productivity. The autumn statement also announced £27 million for the Oxford to Cambridge expressway road link, as well as funding for the east-west rail link, and local enterprise partnerships in the east of England will also receive up to £151 million of local growth funding.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I welcome the Chancellor’s reply and the announcement of investment in the Oxford to Cambridge corridor and the transformational effect that that could have. Will he also ensure that other schemes to the east of Cambridge, such as the vital Ely North rail junction and improvements to the A47, also go ahead on time? He will be aware that they are crucial to the future economy of west Norfolk and other parts of Norfolk.

Mr Hammond: I will certainly pass on my hon. Friend’s comments about that particular rail scheme to my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary. My hon. Friend will know that we have a large programme of rail infrastructure in place and that the additional funding for the east-west rail link that was announced last week was outside that core rail programme. I hope that he will agree that the Oxford to Cambridge corridor represents a real growth opportunity for the south and the east of England to exploit Britain’s two world-class universities and their world-class research reputations to enhance the productive capacity of our economy.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Since 23 June, there has been a significant depreciation of sterling and two announcements of major investments in UK motor manufacturing. The prospects for investment in UK manufacturing more widely are now much improved. Will the Chancellor be seeking to ensure that the more sensible exchange rate welcomed by Lord Mervyn King, among others, is sustained?

Mr Hammond: No. It is not the Government’s business to sustain or manage the exchange rate in any way, as the hon. Gentleman very well knows. We have an inflation target, but exchange rates are set by markets and reflect market views about the economy and expectations of the trajectory of the economy in the future. He is absolutely right to observe that, over the past six months, we have seen some remarkable endorsements of the British economy through large inward investment decisions made by foreign inward investors.

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Con): May I congratulate the Chancellor on the £23 billion of extra money for this national productivity investment fund, which will confer huge benefits on the whole of the United Kingdom? Although I do not expect him to comment on the considerable merits of the A610 growth corridor and the improvements to the road at Giltbrook, I am very happy to meet him to persuade him of them. On a serious note, will he do everything he can to ensure that excellent schemes such as those are expedited and not caught up in what can sometimes be bureaucratic tangles?

Mr Hammond: It is an excellent scheme indeed. My right hon. Friend will know that it is not only the £23 billion of additional funding for economically productive infrastructure that was announced on Wednesday last week, but a core £150 billion of funding for the same defined purposes over the remainder of this Parliament and the Government’s commitment, repeated last Wednesday, to move to a roads fund from
2020, funded by the revenues from vehicle excise duty, all of which adds up to a sustained commitment to investment in our roads.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Brexit is putting business investment on hold at the expense of job losses. This comes after a long period of escalating debt and slumping growth. Furthermore, quantitative easing has failed to raise confidence and stimulate business investment in the real economy. The autumn statement measures announced are simply insufficient. What else will the Chancellor do?

Mr Hammond: I simply do not recognise the picture that the hon. Gentleman paints. The Bank of England’s monetary actions have undoubtedly had a positive effect in stimulating the economy. The performance of consumer demand over the past few weeks has demonstrated that very clearly. We have the key elements in place, both monetary and fiscal, for our current circumstance, which is the potential for a more difficult period ahead. We need to muster our resources, make sure that we are able to support the economy through this period, and, at the same time, address the fundamental challenges, such as the productivity problem, to ensure that Britain is match fit to meet the challenges that it will face as it leaves the European Union.

Roger Mullin: In that regard, I am sure that the Chancellor would agree that research and development investment is critical to obtaining a high skill, high wage economy and one that increases productivity, as he has recognised. It is therefore disappointing that the autumn statement has failed to match R and D investment as a percentage of GDP in line with other major economies. What will the Chancellor do to fill that gap?

Mr Hammond: What I will do over the medium to long term is get the British economy back on to a firm footing, so that we can fund all those investment needs—which we do have, as the hon. Gentleman points out. Let me turn the question around. Scotland will receive £800 million of additional capital funding through Barnett consequentials as a result of the announcement made last week. From the tone of the hon. Gentleman’s question, I feel sure that the Scottish National party will want to confirm that that money will be used in Scotland, as it will in England, to target productivity-raising capital investment, so that the Scottish economy can perform more strongly in the future.

Leaving the EU: SMEs

7. Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment has he made of the potential effect on the ability of small and medium-sized businesses to raise capital of the UK leaving the EU.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): The UK remains very much open for business and the Government are committed to supporting SMEs to access the capital they need to grow, as demonstrated by the £400 million increase in funding for the British Business Bank announced at the autumn statement, unlocking £1 billion of funding.

Chris Elmore: The Minister will be aware that more than £10 billion of EU structural funds is invested annually in the UK, particularly in Wales. Indeed, in my constituency of Ogmore, many small and medium-sized businesses have benefited from Jobs Growth Wales, which is a success of the Welsh Labour Government. Will the Minister give a cast-iron guarantee to the people of Wales that structural funding will continue, pound for pound, after we leave the European Union?

Simon Kirby: We want to see the economy benefit every part of the UK. It is interesting to note that there are almost 1 million new businesses in our country since 2010, and I note the Prime Minister’s announcement at the CBI conference about the new patient capital review, which will be interesting, I am sure.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that Brexit is essentially a red herring for SMEs in this context, that what matters is that the Government create the right conditions for businesses to do business and that the banks are in a sufficiently capitalised position to lend money?

Simon Kirby: I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend. It is about creating an economic environment in which businesses can grow and thrive. The British economy is strong and will continue to be strong as we prepare for our departure from the EU.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): What would be the impact on SMEs, particularly those in the supply chain of big manufacturing firms such as Jaguar Land Rover or Airbus, if we were to leave the EU without full access to the single market or a free trade deal with the rest of the EU and if we were forced to fall back on World Trade Organisation rules and tariffs?

Simon Kirby: The Government have been clear that we will not comment on every turn of the negotiations. Indeed, the negotiations have yet to start. However, we are absolutely committed to getting the best possible deal we can.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the City of London plays a very important part in helping businesses to raise capital and that maintaining clearing in euros in the City of London will be an important way to ensure that the City retains that status?

Simon Kirby: The City of London is a very important financial centre and we fully intend it to remain as such. Clearing is an important element of the negotiations, and we will do all we can to retain London and the UK as a financial centre of excellence.

Regional Infrastructure

8. Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): What steps he is taking to support regional infrastructure development.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): In the autumn statement, we prioritised additional high-value investments, specifically in infrastructure and innovation, that will directly contribute to raising
Britain’s productivity. The Chancellor announced a new national productivity investment fund of £23 billion to be spent on housing, transport, digital communications and research and development over the next five years. Local enterprise partnerships will receive £1.8 billion of growth deal funding. This will go towards the projects needed to bring about economic growth in local areas, including new homes, transport improvements and supporting businesses and people to access the skills they need.

Jo Churchill: I welcome all those measures to boost productivity and particularly to turn attention to infrastructure and the specifics for the east of England given yesterday. However, given the strategic importance of the A14 trunk road linking Felixstowe port with Cambridge and the rest of the country, as well as its significance to 80% of businesses in Suffolk, does the Minister agree that further improvements to a road that he knows well are vital to productivity?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is right—it is a road that I know well. We certainly agree that the A14 is a critically important part of the network. We are investing £1.5 billion for a major upgrade to cut congestion on the A14, including a new 21-mile road between Huntingdon and Cambridge, and only yesterday my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary was able to go there to witness the start of the work.

24. [907563] Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Is not the simple truth that more than half the money announced for England will go to projects in London and the south-east and that, despite a £50 million shortfall in NHS funding by 2017 and a £130 million shortfall in social care funding by 2020, the Chancellor, like his predecessor, has short-changed Birmingham and the west midlands?

Mr Gauke: No, that is not true. There is a balanced package and all parts of England will benefit from the transport measures. The Barnett consequentials should mean that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland can also benefit in this area. A specific announcement about the midlands hub was made in the autumn statement and there is more to be said about the midlands engine. This is a Government who are determined to ensure that the whole country benefits from economic growth.

17. [907556] Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Can the Minister assure me that digital infrastructure is as important as road infrastructure and that part of the £1 billion broadband fund will be allocated to address the productivity gap in rural areas—in particular, to help shops such as the hollies farm shop in my constituency, which has three business lines and 2 megabits of speed?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend highlights the fact that digital must be key to improving productivity. That is why a £1 billion package was announced in the autumn statement. There was also specific help for rural areas through rural rates relief. Our ambition is clear: to provide the best digital infrastructure we can for urban and rural areas.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): In table 4.21 of the report Office for Budget Responsibility’s it forecast that the Government will underspend on infrastructure by £15 billion in the next five years—two thirds of the additional money announced by the Chancellor last week. Why should the public have any confidence in the ability of the Government to deliver on their promises when their own watchdog clearly does not?

Mr Gauke: The OBR has always taken a cautious view on delivery of infrastructure, but let us remember that we have already delivered 3,000 projects. We have set out an ambitious plan for delivery of infrastructure improvements in the course of this Parliament, and that is exactly what we will deliver.

UK Exports

10. Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): What fiscal steps has he taken to help increase levels of UK exports since the UK’s decision to leave the EU.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): The Government are committed to ensuring that exporters receive world-class support. That is why the autumn statement announced the doubling of UK export finance capacity.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: Last week, the OBR reduced its trade forecast, stating that this is “due to the loss of trade that the OBR judges will result from the UK leaving the EU.”

We all know that this Government would like to have their cake and eat it, but changes to export finance alone will not bridge the gap between ambition and reality. Do the Government seriously expect to meet their own target of doubling exports without continued membership of the single market and without a comprehensive plan to do so? Do the Government stand by their exports target?

Simon Kirby: We do, and it is interesting to note that the Federation of Small Businesses, for example, welcomed the doubling of export finance because it felt that it would help small and medium-sized enterprises reach new markets. It is also interesting to note that the Scotch Whisky Association highlights the importance of exports, and it has seen an increase of 3.1%, to 531 million bottles. Perhaps the hon. Lady might remove uncertainty in Scotland by stopping banging on about a second referendum.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the best thing the Treasury can do to help British business export is to allow it to keep more of the profits it earns by continuing to cut corporation tax?

Simon Kirby: We have legislated for corporation tax to be reduced to 17% by the end of this Parliament—one of the lowest rates in the G7—and we will do all we can to help businesses grow and thrive in this country.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Last week’s autumn statement should have been about providing answers to meet the challenges of Brexit and at least information on the options available. Instead, it appears that the only information we can glean is from photos
Some text from the image is not transcribed due to formatting issues.

snatched of the notes of a senior Conservative official in Downing Street. We know now, in the light of that leak, that many of the Chancellor’s senior colleagues in the Government are reluctant to pursue the transitional deal being called for by businesses when we leave the EU. Will the Minister now provide some clarity by inviting the Treasury and the Office for Budget Responsibility to undertake a full assessment of the public finance implications of the range of policy options associated with Brexit, including access—or not—to the single market, being in or out of the customs union and the potential for transitional arrangements?

Simon Kirby: I have to tell the right hon. Gentleman that that is a normal part of what we do on a very regular basis, and he really should not believe all he reads in newspapers from researchers or Back Benchers—it is hardly Government policy.

John McDonnell: I take that as a no.

Last week, we learned in the OBR report that the OBR was denied any information in respect of assurances provided to Nissan. The OBR said: “On this occasion we asked specifically whether any contingent liabilities had been created in respect of assurances provided to Nissan and the Treasury declined to say.”

This level of opaqueness on an existing deal undermines the certainty businesses need to invest in any future deals. Will the Chancellor now provide the OBR with the information it has requested, so that it can provide a more accurate forecast, rather than being left in the dark or, as it put it, “none the wiser”?

Simon Kirby: Perhaps we should welcome the jobs to start with. However, in answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s question, it was, unfortunately, not possible to confirm this to the OBR in time to feed into the drafting process. Her Majesty’s Treasury therefore provided the same answer as it would to any query on contingent liability.

Public Infrastructure Spending

11. Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What steps he is taking to increase the level of public infrastructure spending.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): In the autumn statement, as I have said already, I announced the creation of a new national productivity investment fund to provide £23 billion of additional investment. That is on top of the £150 billion that is already baked into the baseline, and it is focused on the key areas for boosting productivity—housing, infrastructure and research and development.

Kirsten Oswald: I welcome the £800 million in Barnett consequentials, which the Scottish Government will invest on top of the £100 million they have already announced for capital projects, but what further steps will the Chancellor take to address the almost 10% cut to the Scottish capital budget since the Tories came to office?

Mr Hammond: The Scottish Government will have a full share of infrastructure spending through the Barnett formula, and we will work with the Scottish Government and all other devolved Administrations and regional entities, as we work to raise the UK’s productivity game. That is about infrastructure investment—both public and private. It is about raising skills. It is about raising management capability, and we announced that we would fund the Charlie Mayfield initiative to disseminate best management practice across small and medium-sized enterprises. It is about doing all these things to ensure the UK is match fit to prosper in the global economy in the future.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May I ask the Chancellor not to blindly hand over any extra infrastructure spending in West Yorkshire to the Labour-dominated West Yorkshire Combined Authority for it just to pump money into the Labour heartlands, and instead make sure that money can be spent in other parts of West Yorkshire, including on a Shipley eastern bypass, which would benefit the local economy and the economies of my hon. Friend the Members for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) and for Keighley (Kris Hopkins), too?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I did not know that Labour had any heartlands left, so that is an interesting comment. I will pass on his concerns to my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary and ask him to take them into consideration when he makes his allocations.

Topical Questions

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind colleagues that topical questions are supposed to be sharply shorter, and the same goes for the replies. We made remarkably slow progress in the first session this morning, and we really need to do rather better.

T3. [907531] Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My principal responsibility is to ensure the stability and prosperity of the economy. In the current circumstances, I judge that that requires a combination of near-term measures to ensure resilience and longer-term measures to manage the structural adjustment, as the UK transitions out of the EU, and to address the UK’s long-term productivity challenge. The package announced in the autumn statement last week delivered on both requirements.

Mary Glindon: So far the Chancellor has disregarded Members’ requests to give justice to the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—women. Will he now listen to bodies such as North Tyneside Council, which, under our elected mayor, Norma Redfearn, has written to the Government to ask for a fair transition of the state pension right for all these women?

Mr Hammond: I understand the concerns, but this issue was debated extensively during the passage of the Pensions Act 2011, when the Government made concessions to this group of individuals worth £1.1 billion.

T4.[907532] Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): As the Chancellor will know, this Saturday marks Small Business Saturday across the country. I will be heading out in Bath to do
Communication errors around tax credit payments. What in Wycombe continues to illustrate calculation and lifetime of the next Parliament?

Mr Hammond: This is year four of Small Business Saturday, and the campaign continues to get bigger each year. Small businesses and entrepreneurs are the backbone of the British economy. The Government will continue to support Small Business Saturday this year with events across the country. I encourage right hon. and hon. Members in all parts of the House to be in touch with their local enterprise partnerships and their local branch of the Federation of Small Businesses to find out what is going on locally and to get out there and support it.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Last week, we saw the accumulation of six wasted years of failed economic policies supported by both the Chancellor and the Prime Minister. Following last week’s autumn statement and the publication of the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts, can the Chancellor confirm how much worse off a pensioner on the state pension will be by 2019-20 as a result of the OBR’s downgrades to wage forecasts?

Mr Hammond: I am slightly mystified by the hon. Lady’s question, because the downgrades to wage forecasts will not be the driver of the circumstances of a pensioner on the state pension, given that we have introduced a triple lock that guarantees pensioners an increase in line with inflation, in line with earnings, or 2.5% as a minimum. However, I am happy to look at the specific question and to write to the hon. Lady with a calculation.

Rebecca Long Bailey: Let me inform the House that the forecast is this: a pensioner on the state pension will be £429 worse off by 2019-20, with only the triple lock preventing an even worse decline. After claiming in the autumn statement that the triple lock will now be a pensions’ income falls, so will the total projected official development assistance budget. Can the Chancellor assure us that, within that, the Department for International Development budget will be maintained as much as possible and that, if ODA has to contract, cuts will have to fall on other spending Departments before DFID?

Mr Hammond: No, not necessarily at all. We spend our ODA in different ways, and different Departments have relatively small pools of ODA. Of course, the great majority of it goes through DFID. Where GNI contracts and the ODA budget needs to be trimmed accordingly,

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): My hon. Friend is right to point to the fact that we inherited a complex system in that regard. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has enhanced its online service. There will be an online service, for example, for people making new claims for tax credits starting in April 2017. The use of real time information through pay-as-you-earn has really helped to pick up potential errors in claimants’ income, and it is making a difference.

T5. [907533] Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Chester’s status as a centre for the financial services industry, particularly FinTech, is under threat from continuing problems with retention by businesses, which cannot get staff to come to the area. Staff cannot get there, because our infrastructure is not good enough. Instead of gloating about the Oxford to Cambridge corridor, can we have some news about when money will be spent on the M56 to upgrade it to a smart motorway?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): I will take that as a representation and make sure that my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary is aware of it. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we are already setting out an ambitious programme for road spending over this Parliament. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer made announcements last week about putting in more funding to improve our road network across the country. I am happy to look at the case that the hon. Gentleman raises.

Suella Fernandes ( Fareham) (Con): I recently visited ASV Global in Porchester, an innovator in unmanned and autonomous marine technologies. In just six years, ASV has designed 70 new products, which it has delivered to 10 countries and 40 customers. What further support for research and development is available to companies such as ASV to boost job creation and wealth?

Mr Philip Hammond: We have done two things. Within the £23 billion that I announced last week to raise the UK’s productivity game is a significant increase in public R and D investment. We also said—we will do this before the Budget—that we would carry out a review of the way that tax support for privately funded R and D works, with the objective of ensuring that the UK is the most attractive place in Europe to do private R and D work. I will report at Budget 2017.

T6. [907534] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The autumn statement shows that, as gross national income falls, so will the total projected official development assistance budget. Can the Chancellor assure us that, within that, the Department for International Development budget will be maintained as much as possible and that, if ODA has to contract, cuts will have to fall on other spending Departments before DFID?
I think that that is the way the taxpayer would expect it to be done.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Further to the Chancellor’s answer to my hon. Friend, the Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes), could he set out how QuestUAV in Amble, a manufacturer of mapping and survey drones, and other high-tech north-east businesses will be able to access the R and D funding that he talks about?

Mr Hammond: Public R and D funding will take two principal forms. There will be further funding to the science base in our universities, and there will be funding through Innovate UK, which is accessible by companies to support innovation. We already have an excellent base in basic science. What we need to do now is to up our game in innovation and the application of that science.

T7. [907535] Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): A feature of the modern gig economy is that more and more people are sticking together mini jobs, in most of which they earn below the national insurance threshold. HMRC manages to add together that money to tax it, but it does not manage to add together that money to make sure that those people have pensions. What is the Treasury going to do to make sure that older women, in particular, get access to pensions when they have mini jobs?

Jane Ellison: The right hon. Lady and I have recently spoken about this issue, and as she knows, there has been some work done to look at the broader issue. It is complicated, but I undertake to look at it again and respond to her. Of course, some of the broader aspects of the gig economy will be covered during the Taylor review.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): According to the Library, infrastructure spending per head is 2.5 times greater in London and the south-east than in the regions. Does the Chancellor agree that now is the time for a fairer distribution of investment spending across the UK?

Mr Philip Hammond: The Government are committed to investment in all the regions of the UK. We have delivered more than 500 infrastructure schemes in the north since 2010, and more than £13 billion of spending is planned on transport in the north during this Parliament. In Yorkshire, this includes new trains on the east coast main line, the trans-Pennine railway upgrade and bringing the A1(M) up to motorway standard for its full length. I would just say to my hon. Friend that figures for London and the south-east are distorted by the effect of the strategic Crossrail project, with a cost of £14.8 billion.

T8. [907536] Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am pleased to note that the Chancellor has finally scrapped the arbitrary target for a budget surplus, which would have cut billions more than necessary, but concerns remain about his attitude towards borrowing and debt. Will the Chancellor tell us on what date his charter will come before the House, so that it can be fully scrutinised properly?

Mr Hammond: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a precise date, but I have discussed this with the business managers. The rules of the House mean that 28 days must elapse before the charter is laid. I think that that will put it in the second half of January, but we will have the debate as soon as we can after the statutory period.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): As other Members have mentioned, there is growing alarm about the impact of making tax digital on small business people, of whom I am one. Will the Chancellor confirm that, in time, quarterly tax returns will also apply to Members of Parliament?

Jane Ellison: As my hon. Friend mentioned, we touched on this earlier. Making tax digital is an important reform. I have mentioned already that some important concessions were made during the summer, by taking many very small businesses out of making tax digital, but it has much to offer small businesses. I am looking carefully at all the responses that have been made, and as he knows, I have listened carefully to the points that he has made on a number of occasions.

T10. [907538] Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Will the Chancellor confirm that the devolution of corporation tax, which is conditional on the Northern Ireland Executive’s finances being on a sustainable footing, is not a vehicle for the Treasury to interfere in Northern Ireland’s devolved policies?

Mr Gauke: It is not a vehicle to interfere, but we have been clear from the very beginning that if the Northern Ireland Executive wish to reduce corporation tax rates in Northern Ireland, they need to do so in an environment in which we can be confident that the public finances are on a sound footing in Northern Ireland.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): When I met the leader of North East Lincolnshire Council yesterday, he emphasised to me that one of the major challenges facing our coastal community is that many people retire there and put additional strains on the adult social care budget. Will Ministers assure me that that will be considered when allocating departmental budgets?

Mr Philip Hammond: Yes, demographic trends are of course at the heart of our considerations when budgets are allocated.

Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): With just one in six people with autism in employment, would it not have been better to invest in improving the Work and Health programme, rather than cutting it, to assist people to gain employment and thereby save on benefits? They want to work.

Mr Gauke: The reforms that we have announced will enable us to spend £330 million on practical support to ensure that people in the work-related activity group can work. May I point out that, over the past three years, the number of disabled people in employment has increased by nearly 600,000?

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): The key insight of the Government’s productivity plan is that value can be unlocked through more timely implementation, so will
the Chancellor have a word with the Transport Secretary to see how he can speed up the completion of the final part of the Oxford to Cambridge link from Bedford to Cambridge?

**Mr Philip Hammond:** I will certainly have a word with my right hon. Friend. This is partly about smart delivery, but it is also about having certainty and a pipeline that allows contractors in the supply chain to plan ahead.

**Dame Rosie Winterton** (Doncaster Central) (Lab): Does the Chancellor realise that if he tries to push the funding gap in social care on to local councils, it will be grossly unfair for areas such as Doncaster, where a 1% increase in council tax would raise 21% less than it would for the council in the Prime Minister’s constituency? Will he commit to funding social care fully?

**Mr Hammond:** As I said on Wednesday, with the additional social care precept and the better care fund, we have measures in place that will make £3.5 billion of additional funding per annum available for social care by the end of this Parliament. But we recognise that local authorities have a challenge in the profiling of that money. My right hon. Friends the Health Secretary and the Communities Secretary are very much aware of that and are in discussions about it with health bodies and local authorities.

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s announcement in the autumn statement of £1.7 million of LIBOR money going to Sea Sanctuary to help with mental health provision in Cornwall. Does he agree that that will be a huge help for people all over Cornwall who in the past have had to travel many hundreds of miles to access such services?

**Mr Hammond:** I am very pleased that the money will deliver that effect in Cornwall. It is always good to see fines levied on the appalling behaviour of the few making such a positive difference to the many.

**Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): To follow on from the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton), the demand for social care services in my constituency is set to rise by 10% in just one year, so will the Chancellor take the opportunity today to commit to additional funding for social care?

**Mr Hammond:** No, these are not the occasions when we commit to additional funding. We have a funding settlement in place and substantial increases in social care funding will become available by the end of the Parliament. But as I have said, we recognise that some authorities are facing some challenges on the profiling of that funding, and my right hon. Friends the Health Secretary and Communities Secretary are discussing that issue with local authority leaders.

**James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Does the Chancellor agree that one way to improve productivity in the west midlands economy is to agree a more ambitious second devolution settlement, building on the success of the devolved settlement agreed with the West Midlands Combined Authority?

**Mr Hammond:** I agree with my hon. Friend. As I said on Wednesday, the Government continue to discuss with west midlands authorities the possibilities for further devolution in the west midlands. The other way to get the west midlands economy motoring is to elect a mayor with genuine business experience, like Andy Street.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Scotch whisky industry is the largest net contributor to the UK’s balance of trade and goods. In the light of Brexit, what options is the Chancellor examining to make sure the industry can keep that privileged position of exporting?

**Mr Hammond:** We will have discussions with the Scotch Whisky Association, as we do with many trade associations. Without getting into a technical discussion, I should say that dutiable goods are less likely to be adversely affected by a change in the way we trade with our European neighbours than many other goods, because there is already a specific regime for dealing with them that is unlikely to have to change as a result of Brexit.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues, but I have extended the envelope as far as I felt it in any way reasonable to extend it.
Historical Sexual Abuse (Football)

12.37 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab) (Urgent Question):

To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the Government are doing to support victims of historical sexual abuse in football, and what steps are being taken to help to ensure that there is no repeat of it.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): Nothing is more important than keeping children safe. Child sex abuse is an exceptionally vile crime, and all of Government take it very seriously indeed, as I know this House does.

Children up and down the country are able to play football thanks to the dedication of thousands of adults, many of them volunteers. The vast majority have no stain on their character. However, where people who work with children betray their trust, the effect is devastating.

I pay tribute to those who have summoned up the courage to speak out. It is vital that they know that their voices will be heard, whether they are speaking about historical crimes or about anything that is happening currently. Coaches and parents have a duty of care to children—indeed, everyone does—and must also speak out where they suspect abuse.

My Department, the Home Office, the Department for Education and the Ministry of Justice all have responsibilities in this area. Recent allegations of sex abuse are currently an operational police matter, so Members will understand that I cannot comment in detail.

As soon as this news broke, I spoke to the chair of the Football Association, Greg Clarke, and the chief executive of the Professional Footballers Association, Gordon Taylor. I made it very clear that the Government will support them in addressing these issues head-on.

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children has set up a hotline, supported by the FA, which anyone can call if they want to talk to someone in confidence. That will help to build a picture of the potential scale of both historical and more recent abuse to inform next steps. The number is 0800 0232642.

The FA has instructed independent leading counsel Kate Gallafent QC, an expert in child protection, to deal with its review of the allegations. The internal review will look at what the FA and clubs knew, and when, and what action was or should have been taken. Alongside that, the child protection in sport unit, which assists the FA in relation to its safeguarding procedures, will carry out an independent audit of the FA’s practices.

Today, the Minister with responsibility for sport, the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), will write to all national governing bodies to ask them to redouble their efforts to protect children who play their sports. Additionally, I have spoken to Chief Constable Simon Bailey this morning, the national police lead on child abuse. We have agreed that I will convene a meeting with him, the FA and others to discuss the situation.

It is important to say what measures we have in place today to prevent abuse. The child protection in sport unit was founded in 2001 to work with UK Sports Councils, national governing bodies, county sports partnerships and other organisations to help them to minimise the risk of child abuse during sporting activities. The unit helps organisations to identify adults who are a threat to children and young people, and to develop safeguarding knowledge and skills among all staff and volunteers.

Since 2002, the Disclosure and Barring Service, previously the Criminal Records Bureau, has provided a mechanism to request criminal record information relating to people working or volunteering with children.

The first duty of any Government is to protect its citizens, and the first duty of all of us is to protect children.

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank the Secretary of State for her response. I begin by paying tribute to the members of the Chapecoense football team and all those who lost their lives in the tragic plane crash earlier today. Our thoughts and prayers are with them and their families.

We must pay tribute today to former footballers who have shown unparalleled bravery in sharing their stories and in bringing this issue into the public light. I met some of them on Friday morning and expressed that to each person. In the light of recent allegations of historical sexual abuse in football, the Professional Footballers Association has said that six football clubs have been named by victims; that more than 20 former players have now come forward; that five police forces across the country are opening up investigations; and that FIFA is monitoring the situation closely.

I welcome the NSPCC opening up its hotline. It received more than 50 phone calls in the first two hours of opening. What else are the Government doing to ensure that victims have a safe place where they can speak out confidentially, which is vital?

The FA, in conjunction with regional associations, needs to ensure that the message goes right through our game, from Sunday league to premier league. What are the Government doing to reassure parents, who will no doubt be worried about these claims? This situation has the potential to seriously damage the reputation of football in our country. I welcome the FA announcement that Kate Gallafent QC will lead the investigation. Let us remember that 99.9% of coaches and volunteers have children’s best interests at heart—an overwhelming majority want the best for them.

We need representatives from the FA, the Government, schools and relevant organisations to work with the police not only to ensure that any historical claims are fully investigated, but to ensure that abuse is stamped out and that our young players have a safe and confidential way to report incidents. Will the Secretary of State tell the House what steps the Government are taking to ensure that all the relevant bodies work in conjunction to ensure that victims are supported? As more victims come forward, and as the number of named clubs grows, the police investigation will undoubtedly get bigger. Is there a plan in place to ensure that the police have all the resources they need, and how is the DCMS team looking across the sports sector to ensure that such cases do not happen again in any sporting environment? We have a cross-party duty to protect our children and young adults. Upon this I am sure we can all agree.
Karen Bradley: I join the hon. Lady in sending my condolences to the victims of the plane crash today. Such events remind us how fragile human life is and how important sport is to people. This tragedy has affected people greatly.

I concur with what the hon. Lady said about the unparalleled bravery of the victims and survivors. In my previous role in the Home Office, I met many survivors of child sexual abuse, as the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), who is here today, continues to do. It never ceases to amaze me how brave and profound somebody is who comes forward and talks with such honesty about their experiences.

The hon. Lady asked about the support available, and of course we have talked about the NSPCC helpline. The NSPCC and its helplines stand ready to support any victims of child abuse from whatever walk of life. The PFA also reassured me last week that it stood ready to support victims. It is happy to take calls from victims of historical and non-recent abuse, so that it can support them and make sure that appropriate measures are taken.

The hon. Lady is right that the vast majority of coaches and volunteers are honourable and working in the best interests of children, but it is true that parents and others must remain vigilant, as in any walk of life, and make sure that our children are not left vulnerable to abuse. We must take those necessary steps and remain vigilant, no matter what the activity, be it sport, music, dance, creativity or anywhere children might be with people who might wish to hurt them.

The hon. Lady is right that we need to work together, and I welcome her cross-party support for what we are doing. As I said, I spoke to Chief Constable Simon Bailey prior to coming to the Chamber, and he reassured me about the work of Operation Hydrant, the long-standing cross-force police investigation into all allegations of non-recent abuse. He has assured me that there will be a single policing lead for each of the investigations to make sure that all the information coming in is treated appropriately and that all intelligence is shared. It is incredibly important that we bring perpetrators to justice.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about other sports. As I said, my hon. Friend the sports Minister is writing today to all national governing bodies and regularly meets them, as do I, to make sure that the safeguarding measures in place are as robust as possible. We need to learn all lessons and continue to be vigilant.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the FA’s internal review must be a properly resourced investigation looking at the culture within football that allowed abuse to take place for so long and to go unreported and un-investigated for so long? Furthermore, does she agree that if the report is to have credibility, it must be published in full and in public, so that we can all learn the lessons of football’s problems and make sure that children are safeguarded properly in the future?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is right that the review needs to be properly resourced, and the FA has assured me that that will be the case. When I spoke to Greg Clarke, he made it absolutely clear that it would be transparent in every way. No good will come from anybody trying to cover anything up. We need to know exactly what happened, how it happened and what went wrong, and to make sure that those mistakes are not made again.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): On my behalf and that of the SNP, I echo the comments by the Secretary of State and the shadow Minister about the tragic plane crash in Colombia this morning.

The allegations of sexual abuse are abhorrent and deeply tragic. Anyone who abuses a position of trust to prey on young people and children must be brought to justice. Stereotypes of masculinity in football and society in general can make it extremely difficult for men and boys to come forward and speak out as victims of abuse. The players that have come forward have shown immense courage in doing so, and we hope any other victims will be able to do the same.

The Scottish Football Association has backed the dedicated NSPCC helpline, and remains in contact with the NSPCC and is working with it to respond appropriately if more victims come forward. The SFA has also set up a dedicated email address—childrenswellbeing@scottishfa.co.uk—for people to get in touch confidentially. If anyone in Scotland has been affected, we urge victims to come forward and seek help and support using this email address or the NSPCC helpline. May I ask the Secretary of State what structures her Department will put in place to ensure a joined-up approach across the UK in supporting any victims who come forward?

Karen Bradley: I start by congratulating the Scottish Football Association, which has done joint safeguarding work with UNICEF. I believe that to be a very positive step and I offer my congratulations on it. My hon. Friend the Minister for Sport has been in contact with the SFA this morning, as she has been with other football governing bodies from other parts of the United Kingdom. We want to make sure that we work together on this matter. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on wearing his white ribbon. I am fiddling in my pocket, but I do not seem to have mine there. The white ribbon campaign is a fantastic one, demonstrating that we all stand against abuse. I appreciate that the white ribbon campaign deals specifically with violence against women and girls, but the fact that men are standing up against that abuse as well is incredibly important.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the bravery of the individuals coming forward in a very masculine world, and I think we live in a changed environment in this respect. I think there is more opportunity for people to come forward nowadays. I listened to an interview on Radio 5 “Sportsweek” on Sunday, and I was impressed by the honesty with which an individual victim spoke. It was incredibly brave. It is very difficult, but I urge all victims and survivors to come forward.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): The revelations about football are shocking, and I applaud the fact that the Minister for Sport is going to write to the governing bodies of other sports. When it comes to the monsters who perpetrate these disgusting acts, in times gone by there was a chance that they would have looked at the possibilities in other sports as well. What else, then, are we going to do, other than write to the governing
bodies, to ensure that there is a proper investigation into other sports to make sure that this was not going on elsewhere?

Karen Bradley: I understand that my hon. Friend is particularly concerned about this issue. He, like me, represents a constituency that is close to where the allegations took place. As a constituent MP, I pay particular attention to what has happened to my constituents. I urge both my and my hon. Friend’s constituents to come forward in this respect. The Minister for Sport will write to all governing bodies, as I have said, but this is an ongoing process, and we continue to work with all sports to make sure that safeguarding efforts are as robust as they possibly can be.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): We have to pay tribute to Andy Woodward for starting this process. He took an extremely brave step. I concur with the Secretary of State that we need to encourage others to come forward and speak in confidence in the first instance to the helplines that are available. Simon Bailey has said that he expects other institutions to be brought into this, which might result in other sports’ governing bodies having in effect to investigate themselves. There must be some sort of independent oversight, so will the right hon. Lady tell us what discussions she has had with colleagues in other Departments? What are the Government going to do to ensure that this House and the public can be reassured that there is independent oversight of the investigations into these sports’ governing bodies?

Karen Bradley: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the bravery of Andy Woodward. I understand that during the time I have been on my feet, over 250 reports have been made to the NSPCC helpline, of which 51 are in Cheshire alone. It is also important to make sure that the police have the time and space they need to carry out proper investigations and inquiries, ensuring that they obtain all the evidence. We want to see perpetrators brought to justice wherever possible, and we need to make sure that the police have time to do that. I understand from the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth, who has safeguarding responsibilities, that the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse will look to establish whether it is appropriate for this issue to be covered as part of its overarching work to understand what happened with historical child abuse and the failings in the system.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Before I was elected to this place, I worked as a criminal barrister for 16 years, so I have defended more than my fair share of paedophiles. It undoubtedly takes huge courage for someone to come forward and explain how they were abused as a child. It is also an unfortunate part of the particular wicked perversion of a paedophile that they should be cunning and deceitful. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, although we do not want a witch hunt, we do need to be sure that everybody involved with children in sport understands the nature of these wicked, horrible people? That is why it is so important to put in place rigorous measures to safeguard our children and keep them safe.

Karen Bradley: I agree absolutely with my right hon. Friend, who has huge experience of the criminal law and of this particular area. In my previous Home Office role, I met a number of sporting bodies regarding DBS and other checks, and this included the FA, which I know takes this matter incredibly seriously.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I associate myself with the remarks of others about the hideous and tragic crash in Colombia earlier today.

I pay tribute to those who have come forward and initiated the national discussion that we are now having. It takes immense courage, but the impact on others who might have suffered is huge, encouraging them and strengthening their resolve to come forward. Last weekend, I stood on the touchline watching my son play for Milnthorpe Corinthians against Kendal Wattsfield. Tens or even hundreds of thousands of children play football every weekend. It is our national game. I thoroughly respect what the FA is doing with its investigation. What I am saying is in no way an attempt to undermine or criticise the FA, but given that this is the national game and the potential scale of the problem, will the Secretary of State ensure that there is independence in the investigation and that resources are put into it? We must not simply allow the sport to investigate itself.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman speaks about the huge enjoyment that children get from grassroots sport. In common with him, I enjoy seeing my children play in grassroots sport. I do not think any of us should ever forget the massive benefits that come from children’s involvement in sport—being part of a team, being outdoors, getting into the routine of turning up for practice and the general camaraderie of it all. That is incredibly important. When it comes to grassroots sport, we should take the same approach as parents as we do with any other situation that we put our children into. We must make sure that we are confident that we trust the people whom we allow to make contact with our children. We must trust and respect them, and ensure that they go through the appropriate safeguarding checks.

On the issue of an independent inquiry, it is important to remember that the inquiry led by Professor Alexis Jay is looking at a variety of matters. For example, it has taken the reports of Dame Janet Smith from the BBC, and it is important that the inquiry is given the time to look at institutional failings. Even more importantly, we must allow the police the time and space they need to carry out their investigation.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): All Members share a sense of horror about what we have heard in recent days. Will the Secretary of State thus confirm that all the appropriate resources are in place, so that these matters can be thoroughly investigated. Will she also undertake to ensure that this will be kept under constant review?

Karen Bradley: Yes, and I think our record as a Government stands firm. We could look at Rotherham, for example, and the extra resources that were put in there to make sure that the survivors of child abuse had the confidence to come forward, so that cases could be brought. Yes, the Government stand ready to provide support.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Many parents might be shocked to know that, under changes brought in by the previous coalition Government, there is no requirement for volunteers, such as a football coach, to have a Disclosure and Barring Service check if they are being supervised by someone in regulated activity. This was raised many times when the Bill went through the last Parliament. Will the Secretary of State consider looking further at that to give the reassurance to parents that their children will be kept as safe as possible?

Karen Bradley: I think the hon. Lady should recognise the need to ensure that safeguarding takes place in an effective way. DBS checks are required for people who may be left alone with children. We must ensure that those checks are maintained and that the DBS is allowed to do its job. Of course, if failings are found as a result of these inquiries, I will stand ready to work with other Departments to ensure that safeguarding takes place as robustly and appropriately as possible.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): These really are shocking allegations, but do not many of us here know inspirational coaches in our communities who inspire our children to play sport not just for the sake of achievement and winning medals, but to get fit and to experience that sense of team spirit, togetherness and camaraderie? I fear for the volunteers who give up their time, come rain or shine, to work with young people and encourage them to become involved in sport. Will the Secretary of State work with all sports governing bodies, including the Professional Footballers Association and the Football Association, to ensure that those who give up their time to volunteer will continue to do so?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend has made a point that I have been attempting to make. We must ensure that those inspirational coaches—volunteers who give up their time because they genuinely want to help and work with young people and who have no intent to hurt those young people—are allowed to do their job. We must ensure that we have appropriate, robust safeguarding that gives parents the comfort that they need and protects our children, but we must also ensure that volunteers come forward and those inspirational coaches are allowed to do their fantastic work.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I have had extended conversations with the right hon. Lady’s Department, with the Department for Education and with Sport England. What my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) said is true: there is a big loophole. Indeed, there is a loophole when sports do not have governing bodies, and there is also a loophole when the people involved are self-employed. Will the Secretary of State undertake to look into that, given that it will also be affecting music tuition?

Karen Bradley: I invite the hon. Lady to meet my colleague the Minister for Sport, who would be happy to discuss those matters with her.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) on tabling the urgent question and my right hon. Friend on the way in which she has responded to it. In a place like Kettering, football is 95% a voluntary activity for the players and coaches. Basically, the dads are the coaches and the mums wash the team kit. [ Interruption. ] In the vast majority of cases, the dads are the coaches and the mums wash the team kit: that is what life is like in middle England. I think that they would want me to ask the Secretary of State to ensure that the judges get the message that, when these people are caught, exemplary sentences must be handed out to make clear that such behaviour is totally unacceptable.

Karen Bradley: I think I ought to put on the record that it is quite clear that not all coaches are male. My hon. Friend the Minister for Sport is a grassroots football coach, and an extremely competent one at that. I also know of many husbands who are very good at washing the dishes and making the food. I am sure that my husband, if he is watching the debate, would be concerned if I did not put that on the record. However, my hon. Friend’s point about the sentencing of offenders is very important, and I can tell him that I work with the Ministry of Justice to ensure that appropriate sentences are available.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Given the growing number of professional clubs that are allegedly accused of being somehow involved in this affair, is it not time that the Government concentrated on football governance again? For six years we as a Parliament have dragged our feet, and the coalition and this Government have done nothing about it. Corporate governance and the “fit and proper persons” test should be involved in deciding who runs football clubs, so that those at the bottom, our children, can be assured that they are being looked after by those at the top and that there is responsibility.

Karen Bradley: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Government published the new governance codes for sport on 31 October, and I hope that he welcomes the work we have done to ensure that all sport is subject to proper and appropriate governance. It is important for us to be certain that we can have confidence in our sports governing bodies.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I pay tribute to the courage and bravery of those who have exposed this dreadful act. I know that we are talking about historical football abuse, but will the Secretary of State tell us what strategy she has to work with the Department for Education, the devolved Administrations and, indeed, all the governing bodies of all sports to reassure parents that their children are safe when playing sports, and also to reassure the coaches who give up their time, mainly voluntarily, to provide the sporting infrastructure that enables children to participate?

Karen Bradley: I hope the hon. Gentleman will know that we have a co-ordinated response.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What is being done to ensure that those who are under suspicion in relation to the 1980s and 1990s are no longer involved in our national game, or indeed in any other sport?
Karen Bradley: I can reassure the hon. Lady that the police are making inquiries and that the DBS checks would ensure that those with criminal convictions would not be given disclosure certificates allowing them to work with children. They would also probably be barred from working with children.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Football, by its very nature, is a transient sport. Children move from club to club, and, obviously, professional football players move from club to club and even from country to country. Can the Secretary of State confirm that enough resources will be made available to ensure that victims are positively identified, rather than our relying on self-referral to the helpline? We need to understand how many victims there are if we are to assess the scale of the problem and offer support where it is needed.

Karen Bradley: It is important to look at patterns of behaviour to establish whether players may have been exposed to perpetrators, as would happen in any other investigation of this nature, regardless of what the background of the contact between the perpetrator and the victim might have been. It is also important for victims to come forward. While I accept the hon. Gentleman’s point about the need to go out and actively seek those victims, we will not find any unless some are prepared to come forward. Once again, I pay tribute to the bravery of the victims and survivors who have come forward and told their stories in such an honest way, allowing the police to obtain the evidence that they need, so that we can bring the perpetrators to justice.

Corporate Governance

1.7 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement about the Government’s corporate governance Green Paper, which we are publishing today.

Successful businesses are the backbone of our society and our economy. They are the reason why ours is the fifth largest economy in the world. They create employment opportunities, and they contribute significantly to the funding of our country’s public services. There are many reasons why Britain is a reliable place in which to do business: for instance, our legal system and framework of company law have long been admired around the world. The Government are proud of our thriving industries, and we want to build on those strengths and enhance our competitiveness even further.

One of our biggest strengths is our record on corporate governance. It is already highly regarded around the world, especially for its combination of flexibility and high standards. Despite that record, however, our strong reputation can only be maintained if the Government and business regularly review and upgrade those standards. We want to guarantee not only that Britain is an excellent place in which to do business, but that it is where business is done best.

I am privileged, in my position as Secretary of State, to meet regularly not just those who run successful businesses, but their employees and customers. I have discussed with company heads the way in which their corporate governance is an integral part of their success. It inspires confidence among investors, loyalty among employees and trust among customers. Ordinary working people who work hard for their living deserve to feel confident that businesses act responsibly and fairly.

When an individual business or businesses lose the confidence of the public, faith in business generally diminishes, to the detriment of us all.

There is no conflict between good corporate governance and profitability; indeed, poor corporate governance is a prelude to financial disaster. This Government are unequivocally and unashamedly pro-business, but we also hold business to a high standard. It is right to ask business to play its part in building an economy that works for everyone. Over the last few years, there have been a number of proposals, from both the Government and those representing business, to update our corporate governance framework. In some cases these have been made in response to concerns about the actions of a very small number of businesses which have undermined the reputation of British business generally; whose standards are among the highest in the world. Today, we are launching a discussion paper on how corporate governance could be reformed. I will, as is usual, be placing a copy of the Green Paper in the Library.

The paper considers three aspects. First, it asks for opinions on shareholder influence on executive pay. Members of the House will be aware that executive pay has grown much faster over the last two decades than pay generally and at times is not in line with corporate performance. The document seeks views on this issue, and in particular on strengthening shareholder voting.
rights with a view to making them binding, encouraging shareholder engagement with executive pay, and promoting greater transparency over pay.

Secondly, the document asks whether there are measures that could increase the connection between boards of directors of companies and their employees and customers. It asks whether the establishment of advisory panels and the appointment of designated non-executive directors to take formal responsibility for articulating employee, customer and other perspectives is the right way to proceed. We are not prescribing how this should be done; it would be whatever is most appropriate for the business.

Thirdly, our discussion paper asks for views on whether some of the features of corporate governance that have served us well in our listed companies should be extended to the largest privately held companies.

These are issues about competitiveness, and creating the right conditions for investment, as much as they are, importantly, also about fairness. This Green Paper is designed to frame that discussion, so that we can move quickly to consider which changes are appropriate at this time. We want to hear from as many people as possible about how best we can increase confidence in big business and achieve better outcomes for our economy. This does not mean the imposition of regulation when other avenues are open. One of the strengths of our system of corporate governance has been the use of non-legislative standards adopted by business itself.

We are determined to make Britain one of the best places in the world to work and carry out business. This review will help us achieve that aim and the views of businesses, investors, employees, consumers and others with an interest in successful business are warmly welcomed. I commend the statement to the House.

1.12 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): It is a shame that the Secretary of State did not share the statement with us in advance; presumably we are now expected to get first sight of Government policy through a long lens on Whitehall. But after weeks of press briefings, at least they have finally decided to come to this Chamber, because we have heard a lot about the Prime Minister’s policy on corporate governance, but the more they said, the less we have actually known.

When the Prime Minister launched her leadership, she said she wanted a change in the way big business is governed. She said:

“later this year we will publish our plans to have not just consumers represented on company boards, but workers as well. Because we are the party of workers.”

But it seems there has been a change of mind because just weeks ago we heard it was not about putting workers on boards but about finding a model that will serve workers as well. These things matter, of course, but just about fulfilling the wishes of the six out of 10 members of the public who, as TUC figures show, want to see workers represented on company boards, but workers as well.

When we debated in the Chamber last month the fate of Sir Philip Green, I said that the most shocking thing about the whole affair is that everything he did was legal. A key question today is whether anything that has been proposed would change that: do these proposals pass the BHS test?

Bringing private companies into the plc rule book is a move so targeted at a particular series of events that I expect it will come to be known as the BHS law, but had the proposals outlined today by the Secretary of State been in place six months ago, I am not wholly convinced we would have avoided the corporate governance scandals that have plagued the last summer. To force private companies to abide by the corporate governance code will do little unless the code is tightened. BHS may have been a private company, but Sports Direct is not, and we all know what has gone on there.

Similarly, to strengthen the power of boards to give oversight on how companies are run or their remuneration structures will change little unless the make-up of those boards is also shaken up, yet we all know what has happened to the Government’s commitment to put a diversity of voices on boards. It is a weakness of too many discussions of corporate governance, and a weakness reflected in this Green Paper, that they are dominated by high-profile scandals.

For too long our economy has suffered from an inherent short-termism—a short-termism that sees the long-term health of a company being sacrificed for a quick buck, and that all too often obscures the link between rewards and long-term performance. In 1970, £10 in every £100 went on dividends; now, it is between £60 and £70. It is employees and investment that have lost out from this shift. We see that in our pitiful investment and productivity rates. Britain now languishes 33rd out of the 35 OECD countries on investment rates. Seen in this light, it is no surprise that it takes British workers five days to produce what German workers produce in four—and we see this in the yawning gap between top pay and average pay: in the 10% increase in executive pay when workers are suffering 10 years of stagnant wages.

Our damaging short-termism is also seen in corporate takeovers that occur against the public interest and the company’s interest—takeovers that have instead served as a means to asset-strip, as when Kraft took over Cadbury with hedge funds buying up 31% of the shares and selling Cadbury short.

When the unacceptable face of capitalism surfaces, as it has in the last few months with the scandals in BHS and Sports Direct, what we are witnessing is the extreme manifestation of these broader problems, and that is what makes today so particularly disappointing. Corporate governance reform is not just about improving the image of our corporate sector or placating our innate sense of injustice at the lack of proportionality between the salaries of directors and their employees; nor is it just about fulfilling the wishes of the six out of 10 members of the public who, as TUC figures show, want to see workers on boards. These things matter, of course, but corporate governance reform is also about changing the way our companies, and therefore our economy, work.

The recasting of how our economy works is key to Britain’s success. Without more long-termism in our corporate practices, we will not be able to address the problems—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has had his five minutes. I do not know whether he was then proposing to put questions, but I gently say to Members that in these matters there is a form to be followed—a procedure to be adhered to—and although I have the yawning gap to fill, the hon. Gentleman with great care and attention, he has contributed in the manner of a debate rather than a response to a statement. Ordinarily, I would be very
happy to hear his questions, but Members cannot make a long preamble and exceed their time, and then almost as an afterthought get around to some questioning. So I think we will for now have to conclude that the hon. Gentleman has concluded his contribution. But I am sure the Secretary of State will find in the commentary some implied questions, using the great intellectual dexterity for which he is renowned in all parts of the House.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, and I apologise to the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) for not getting the statement to him earlier; we started a bit sooner than we were expecting, but—

Mr Speaker: Order. As I have mildly castigated the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), I should say that it must be admitted that that would have been helpful.

Greg Clark: You are absolutely right, Mr Speaker, and I apologise.

I hope the hon. Gentleman will contribute to the consultation. It is clear that he shares an interest in improving the standards of corporate governance, which we have done from time to time in this country over many decades. We have a good reputation for corporate governance, and it is important to record that the rest of the world looks, and has looked, with admiration at the British economy, the rule of law and the non-legislative aspects involved. I hope he will agree that the examples of poor corporate governance he mentioned are blemishes on a very strong overall record of responsible corporate behaviour in this country. We should put on record our recognition of the importance of business and our support for the job creators, the risk takers, the innovators and the investors—the people who, through their profits, generate the taxes that sustain our public services.

It is reasonable to have a constructive discussion on this matter through the consultation, and that is what we intend to do. The hon. Gentleman said that executive pay had been escalating. Perhaps he would like to reflect on the fact that the biggest rise in chief executive pay was actually in the period from 1998 to 2010, when the average rose from £1 million to £4.3 million a year and the ratio of chief executive pay to full-time employees’ pay rose from 47:1 to 132:1. He is a reasonable and generous man and I know that he will concede that, under the years of Conservative leadership, the average pay for chief executive has fallen from £4.3 million to £4.25 million a year and that that ratio has fallen from 132:1 to 128:1. So we are moving in the right direction and these further reforms will take us further.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the proposals to have workers and consumers on boards. The Prime Minister has been very clear on this, and it is testament to her leadership that she set out her intentions right at the beginning of her term of office and that we are now coming forward with these proposals. She made it clear that we would not have just consumers but employees represented on company boards, and these proposals will allow that to happen and encourage the practice to be taken up.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the relevance of our reforms to the more high-profile sources of controversy. Of course, one option is to extend the good provisions for public companies to our very largest private companies. He will know that the Financial Reporting Council’s governance code requires extensive monitoring of risk levels for plcs over and above the requirements placed on limited companies. He mentioned cases involving listed companies, and I hope he will agree that having a greater connection between employees and directors is a step in the right direction. Conservative Members are unashamedly and unequivocally pro-well-run business, and I hope that he shares our view. Consistent with that, it is important to work with business, employees and other groups from time to time, to look at what we can do to stay ahead of the pack. That is what this consultation does.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will any of these proposals result in a diminution of the pile of cash on which corporate Britain is sitting, and of the practice of companies buying up their own shares?

Greg Clark: We are encouraging a greater role for shareholders in driving behaviour in the boardroom, because this is a matter of concern. It is connected to the point that—to be fair to him—the hon. Member for Norwich South made about long-termism. We want to see a more patient form of capital sustaining businesses that have the capacity to grow, and I hope that this will come out as part of the consultation.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): May I start by giving a cautious welcome to the Secretary of State’s announcement? It represents some progress, but there are aspects missing and more clarity is required in some areas. There is general consensus that the pay gap between executives and employees is too large, and we firmly believe that addressing that by properly valuing and investing in employees is a key part of addressing the productivity problem. Companies need to be transparent about pay. If their pay for executives is justifiable, they must justify it to their staff and to their shareholders. In particular, the move to give shareholders greater control and a binding vote on executives’ pay is welcome. Indeed, it is incredible that such a situation does not already exist. What is the timescale for the entire process, and when will the changes be implemented?

More needs to be done about boardroom diversity. I was given very short notice of the statement, and it remains unclear what is to be done about diversity in the boardroom. Will the Secretary of State expand on that aspect of the proposals? I think we would all like to see boardrooms reflecting society more completely. That would be good for business and it would send a clear message to everyone across the country that business is a place for them.

Let me turn finally to the question of workers on boards. In the Prime Minister’s party conference speech, she said:

“Too often the people who are supposed to hold big business accountable are drawn from the same, narrow social and professional circles as the executive team.”

From my reading of the proposals and from what the Secretary of State has said, it appears that that will remain the case, but with one person from those same
narrow social and professional circles designated to speak to the employees or consumers. That does not go far enough; it is a missed opportunity. When the Prime Minister said, “We are the party of workers,” was that post-truth or was it never true at all?

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful for the way in which the hon. Gentleman started his remarks, at least. He struck the right tone in welcoming the proposals as a sensible way to proceed, as I believe all business organisations, consumer groups and others have done. I hope that he will contribute to the consultation. He made a point about the value of transparency, and that is very much what we are proposing. We do not want to specify the appropriate pay for a chief executive—I do not think he does either—but it is right that companies should justify their decisions to shareholders and to employees. They should make their case for the pay and the package that they are choosing to offer.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the timing of the consultation. It will close in three months’ time, in February, and we will respond as soon as possible after that, depending on the number of responses. He also asked about diversity on boards and remuneration committees, and he will see that both questions are addressed in the Green Paper. It is important that remuneration committees are advised by and have a greater connection with the workforce, and that they should be less insular in their approach. There has been some criticism that the overlap of remuneration committees in public companies has excluded outside voices. The consultation refers to particular reviews of gender and ethnic diversity on boards, and it is important that we continue to make progress in that regard. We have further to go. Finally, the Prime Minister was very clear that we should have consumers and workers represented on company boards and that is what the proposals will do. This is a big advance and it has been warmly welcomed. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will support it too, when he makes his response to the consultation.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I would like to accommodate the substantial interest in the statement, but if I am to do so, given that there are two notable pieces of business to follow, pithiness will be required from those on the Back and Front Benches alike. That pithiness is first to be exemplified by Mr Michael Gove.

**Michael Gove** (Surrey Heath) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement today. We all know that the dynamic growth on which our future depends will be secured only if there is public support for the free market system that generates such growth. To that end, what more can he say about ensuring that we have working-class representatives at the heart of decision making in our great companies, and about effective curbs on executive pay when pay follows failure?

**Greg Clark:** As ever, my right hon. Friend makes his points powerfully. It is important that all the talents are represented in our boardrooms, for that is how we will achieve corporate and industrial success in this country. It forms part of the case we make in the Green Paper. Pay is appropriate when it is to attract the best talent and to reward success, but what is not in the interests of the company or confidence in industry is when pay does not reflect performance.

**Mr David Winnick** (Walsall North) (Lab): The pay of top executives, bosses in particular, has been scandalous, and some of these people are not keen to pay their taxes and use tax havens. The most effective way for working people to defend themselves in their place of work is to belong to a trade union and for that union to be recognised. Time and again, when the worst exploitation is exposed, the cause is often a lack of trade union representation.

**Greg Clark:** I hope that the hon. Gentleman will congratulate the Government on their reforms over the past five years that have increased the scrutiny and moderation of executive pay. I hope that the trade unions will contribute to the consultation. I met Frances O’Grady last week, and trade unions have an important role to play in our economy.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** I observe in passing that there is an undiluted sea of men seeking to catch the eye of the Chair. If a female Member were to stand, she would be called, but at the moment she is not, so she will not.

**Victoria Atkins** (Louth and Horncastle) (Con) rose—

**Mr Speaker:** If that was a serious bid, I call Victoria Atkins.

**Hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Victoria Atkins:** I welcome this statement. Will my right hon. Friend assist the House by saying how the plans tie in with the need to ensure that business owners comply with not only the letter of the law, but the spirit? I am thinking in particular of the Companies Act 2006 and corporate governance failures that have led to prosecutions—something that may be relevant when the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) talks about BHS.

**Mr Speaker:** She is not a barrister for nothing.

**Greg Clark:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. There are two complementary elements of corporate governance. One is the law and statutory requirements—it is important that they are enforced with vigour—but it is also true that the culture and practices of companies should reflect the high standards that we enjoy in this country and that contribute to business’s high reputation. I hope that we can further increase that through the measures that we are proposing.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and we welcome many of its suggestions. Does he accept that fairness in salaries must also sit alongside fairness in opportunity? Would he therefore consider going further and requiring companies to report on the training and opportunities available to employees for career progression? Would he also accept that alongside the bad practice on which we must clamp down, there is much good
The concept of greater shareholder scrutiny of a company’s activities is one that I commend to the Secretary of State. The innovative forms of employee participation in so many small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly in new start-up companies and particularly, of course, in Cumbria.

**Greg Clark:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Outside of family and education, work offers some of the principal opportunities for progress and making use of people’s talents. The best businesses recognise that spotting and promoting talent is a sure way to corporate success. That is not part of the consultation, but he makes a reasonable point and will have the opportunity to respond to the section that asks whether other areas should be considered.

**David Rutley** (Macclesfield) (Con): I welcome today’s statement. At a time of uncertainty, it is vital that we have greater confidence not only in free enterprise as a principle, but in the listed businesses and privately held companies that operate in our free market. What support has my right hon. Friend received from the business community in favour of the Green Paper, in particular the concept of greater shareholder scrutiny of a company’s activities?

**Greg Clark:** Business wants to enhance its reputation and it is much in its interest collectively to do so. This morning, the Institute of Directors, the CBI and the Investment Association, which represents those who invest the funds that the pension funds of ordinary working people put into British business, all welcomed not only the content, but the approach that is being taken. I am pleased and grateful for that support.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): Last week, the Chancellor adopted Labour policy on fiscal investment to stimulate the economy. This week, the Secretary of State is adopting Labour policy on worker representation on boards—[**Interruption.**]

**Michael Gove:** Come over!

**Clive Efford:** No, you’re coming over here I’m afraid.

We need consistency from the Government. I have been advocating for years that football supporters should be represented on the boards of professional football clubs, but the Government have consistently said that that is not appropriate, so what has changed the Secretary of State’s mind?

**Greg Clark:** There are two Labour Back Benchers here. If one compares that with the number of my hon. Friends who are in the Chamber, there is scant evidence of Labour’s enthusiasm for these reforms. The hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) tried to imply that Labour is the party of working people, but the difference in interest in this statement between the parties shows the opposite. I hope that the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) welcomes the measures that the Prime Minister and I are proposing to give not only employees but customers a voice in the boardroom. The hon. Gentleman is a big football fan and a fan of greater involvement of enthusiasts in football, and I hope that he will contribute positively to the consultation and back our proposals.

**Mr Andrew Tyrie** (Chichester) (Con): Good pay structures encourage wealth creation, but the financial crisis showed that poorly constructed remuneration schemes contribute to catastrophic failures in corporate governance. In response, the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards recommended, among other things, longer deferral for bonuses and clawback for serious misconduct in some cases. Has the Minister examined whether those recommendations have any relevance to his Green Paper and whether they may, with particular regard to large firms, have a bearing on ways to mitigate against serious harm to customers, employees and the wider public?

**Greg Clark:** My right hon. Friend is right that good corporate governance can stop corporate failure and the effects of contamination that his commission was set up to investigate. The commission made some valuable recommendations, many of which have been enacted. When he comes to look at the Green Paper, he will see further proposals for how incentive schemes for executives can be better aligned with the long-term interests of the company and made more transparent.

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The statement represents a welcome step forward, but if the UK Government are serious about tackling income inequality in companies, they should go a step further and introduce fair pay structures whereby the remuneration of those at the top and bottom are linked. That would be a way of ensuring that the economy works for all.

**Greg Clark:** I do not agree with that approach. It is right to have transparency and right that companies engage with their employees and make the case both to shareholders and to the workforce for the choices that they make. However, given our diverse range of companies and industries, it would be a mistake that would be bound to hamper their success if we, in the Government or in this House, were to specify precisely what people should be paid.

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): The second question that the welcome document asks relates to improving links between workers and boards. One possible route would be to encourage more employee share ownership. The evidence shows that that encourages productivity and, at a time of pension and housing crises, it would give people a stake in the future and a saving. Above all, it would make them feel that they are part of the business for which they are working.

**Greg Clark:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The times when we had very high levels of shareholder participation were ones when there was an enhanced understanding of the importance and role of business. I will take his recommendation seriously and take it forward.

**Philip Boswell** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): I urge the Minister to consider that corporate governance leans too much in support of shareholders...
and dividend, and the protection thereof. The focus of any good corporate governance initiative should be: supporting workers' rights; driving towards a fairer pay distribution, an issue much covered by colleagues here, and away from inflated corporate management remuneration; and the reinvesting of any funding in research and development, and good protective governance for employees and management, as well as job creation and job security.

Greg Clark: When the hon. Gentleman reads the Green Paper, I think he will welcome our proposals, which address some of the points he is making to ensure that the pay of the top management is aligned with the long-term success of the company, and to require a greater connection between the workforce and the management, as well as customers and other groups. That is a step in the right direction, and as my colleagues have pointed out, business has warmly welcomed it. This is a timely and useful upgrade in the standard of corporate governance.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Untramelled corporate greed is no more one of our party's values than untramelled trade union power is, so this is an authentically Conservative statement, which I welcome. May I press my right hon. Friend specifically on how he will ensure adequate scrutiny of institutional investors who are discharging their role in respect of corporate governance?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; Conservative Members believe in competition and that it provides the best possible environment, which has benefits to consumers, employees and taxpayers. That is very much our watchword. The Green Paper contains proposals on how we can encourage institutional investors, who, as I said, invest the money from pension funds to which many people in this country contribute, to be more active in exercising their stewardship of the companies in which they invest.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The Secretary of State is right to point out that British corporate governance is already admired around the world, but will he be looking in this consultation at best practice from around the world, particularly in those countries where women have better representation on boards?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. It is important that we maintain and extend our reputation for being the place in the world where business is done best. We have been able to make that proud boast over the years. The representation of women on boards is of great importance, and we are looking at how we can best encourage companies to move in that direction.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome this report on corporate governance, but is not one way of improving corporate governance on boards to encourage more women to get on to those boards?

Greg Clark: Yes, it is, and I hope my hon. Friend will welcome the proposals we are making.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Minister must give credit to some of the Opposition parties today, as one eighth of the Liberal Democrats are here, one third of Plaid Cymru are here and one fifth of the Scottish National party are seeking to take part, so people are taking this seriously. Does he agree that the whole House should be available to take part, and it is unfortunate that now only one Labour parliamentarian who took part in this statement is in the Chamber?

Greg Clark: I share my hon. Friend's surprise and dismay that there is so little interest in the Labour party in extending the rights for working people to have a say in the way companies are run. My disappointment with the Opposition is only matched by my pleasure at seeing so many of my Conservative colleagues, including my hon. Friend.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Alongside other hon. Members, I investigated BHS, a company where corporate governance went seriously awry, so I warmly welcome the extension of stronger corporate governance to large private companies. However, I also hope that as part of the consultation there will be no risk of any ambivalence or questioning about what private company directors are expected to do in those roles and where their obligations lie. There are a range of stakeholders to whom they owe those obligations.

Greg Clark: There are indeed, and the range of stakeholders has long been recognised in company law, as my hon. Friend knows. The question is: in a world in which there are now more very large privately held businesses that do not have a full stock market listing than was the case in the past, is this the appropriate time to extend this measure to those businesses?

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in acknowledging the good point made by the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) about trade unions? A decade ago, as a union representative, I led industrial action against our then fat cat boss, who was making poor business decisions, cutting jobs and having a pay freeze, while still getting his multimillion-pound bonuses. Of course I am now a Conservative MP, and he is now a Labour peer.

Greg Clark: That is a useful parable, which just goes to illustrate further the point I was making about the commitment we have on the Conservative side of the House. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) is also a veteran of industrial action, showing that my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) is not alone in this shared history.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): The self-serving practices of many executives have done much to undermine popular capitalism in this country, but does my right hon. Friend agree that, although it is important to review company law in this fashion, that is no substitute for basic morality, which has been sadly lacking in many recent cases?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is right in what he says, and I think Conservative Members would not regard legislation as being the way to cure all ills. I would take...
issue with him to this extent only: in general, the standards of both governance and behaviour are very high in this country, and most employees have good jobs in successful businesses. We should be proud of the standards that we have, while taking action against those who depart from them.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that giving shareholders more power has a good chance of curbing corporate excess, including excessive pay, and that in Sweden the use of a shareholder committee to control both the appointment and removal of directors, and to approve executive pay, has had extremely positive effects in both those areas?

Greg Clark: I am delighted to see my hon. Friend in this place. When he reads the Green Paper, he will see that the proposal he made in a very well-written paper for a think tank to suggest a shareholder committee in this way is one option we are consulting on. I congratulate him on his influence on this debate and look forward to the responses to it.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Family-run businesses, and small and medium-sized enterprises, are well-known for their good governance and values, so will my right hon. Friend join me in encouraging more of them to come forward in the review and the consultation so that we can get the complete picture of corporate opinion?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. I would like to thank the Federation of Small Businesses, which has helped contribute to the shaping of these proposals, through some work it has been doing on corporate governance. Small businesses are very important. Small Business Saturday is coming up, and I think Members on both sides of the House are very important. Small Business Saturday is coming up, and I think Members on both sides of the House will be paying tribute to and celebrating the vital contribution that small businesses make to this country.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): People in Kettering will be pleased that after years of Labour and Conservative neglect, the relationship between owners and their employees is very different from that in larger businesses. We want to see flourishing businesses in this country. Engaging people not only to earn a good living, so that they can go on to make full use of their talents is an incredibly important matter. Does the Secretary of State agree that one reason why Government Members are unambiguously pro-business is that the opportunities that that gives to people not only to earn a good living, so that they can support themselves, but to achieve their potential and go on to make full use of their talents is an incredibly inspiring way in which people can blossom. That is why we want to see flourishing businesses in this country.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Wider community engagement is often very important in relation to these matters. Does the Secretary of State agree that one contribution that businesses can make is to try to help provide more role models for our young people, as, obviously, we want to see them go into business in greater numbers?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One reason why Government Members are unambiguously pro-business is that the opportunities that that gives to people not only to earn a good living, so that they can support themselves, but to achieve their potential and go on to make full use of their talents is an incredibly inspiring way in which people can blossom. That is why we want to see flourishing businesses in this country.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Secretary of State has already referred to the important role of small businesses in which the relationship between owners and their employees is very different from that in larger organisations. Will he say a little more about the level at which the proposals he has announced today will be introduced?

Greg Clark: In the consultation, we asked what the cut-off should be. Clearly, there is no intention to capture small businesses in the disclosure requirements that are more appropriate to large businesses. That is something that we will consider as part of the consultation, and I hope that my hon. Friend will contribute to it.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): May I first declare my interest as a non-executive chair of a listed public company before I offer warm support for these proposals? I also echo the comments of my hon.
Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) that employee share ownership schemes have had a transformative effect both in our workplace and on our business success. I ask the Secretary of State to look even closer at those schemes, with the aim of making them easier for businesses to implement.

**Greg Clark:** I will indeed. I am delighted that we have had two suggestions from my hon. Friends for this route. I will take them up, and take them seriously. I hope to make further statements to the House in the future.

**BILL PRESENTED**

**Access to Radiotherapy Bill**

_**Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)**_

Tim Farron presented a Bill to make provision to improve access to radiotherapy treatment in England; to define access in terms of the time that patients are required to travel to places providing treatment; to specify 45 minutes as the maximum time patients are to travel; and for connected purposes.

_Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March, and to be printed (Bill 102)._
Members might also be aware of the HYENA study—hypertension and exposure to noise under airports—which looked at 6,000 people between the ages of 45 and 70 and found a relationship between hypertension and aircraft noise. Just a few years ago, The BMJ reported an American retrospective study of 6 million people over the age of 65 that showed a relationship between hospital admissions for blood pressure and cardiovascular problems such as ischaemic heart disease and heart attacks, and, yes, aircraft noise.

Now that we have evidence, we also need better monitoring, more data and more meaningful penalties, so that if aircraft noise becomes a statutory nuisance we have best practice. The Secretary of State for Transport admits already that some planes flying over my constituency fly lower than others and there are records of the so-called quieter aeroplanes reaching 83 dB levels around homes and school playgrounds.

I am asking through this Bill for us to update the 1990 Act. The World Health Organisation gives levels for noise that is considered to be moderate and severe; Members will notice that they are well below the levels encountered by my residents. We have the medical evidence. Many of us have evidence from our residents that this is causing a serious nuisance, so I suggest that we amend part 3 of the Act to take notice of medical and nuisance problems caused by noise from aircraft.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Dr Tania Mathias, Tom Tugendhat, Andy Slaughter, Sir Alan Haselhurst, Jim Shannon, Ruth Cadbury, Dame Caroline Spelman, John Cryer, Caroline Lucas, Adam Afriyie, Paul Scully and William Wragg present the Bill.

Dr Tania Mathias accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on 20 January 2017 and to be printed (Bill 101).
their commitment to the CDC but about our collective focus on humanitarian need at times of crisis. I look forward to seeing the delegation from the all-party group later today, when I will of course speak more about the work that the Government are doing in Yemen, where we are seeing the most awful and horrendous catastrophe. I will speak to the right hon. Gentleman later in more detail about the type of interventions and the support we are providing to those trapped in that dreadful conflict.

By 2020, we will save 1.4 million children’s lives by immunising 76 million children against killer diseases. We will help at least 11 million children in the poorest countries to gain a decent education, improve nutrition for at least 50 million people who would otherwise go hungry, and help at least 60 million people get access to clean water and sanitation. We will lead the response to humanitarian emergencies. We will lead a major new global programme to accelerate the development of vaccines and drugs to eliminate the world’s deadliest infectious diseases, while investing to save lives from malaria and working to end preventable child and maternal deaths. We will also continue the inspirational leadership of my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), on women and girls.

Those commitments stand, along with our commitment to human development and directly meeting the needs of the world’s poorest, which is absolute and unwavering. Indeed, the first major decision I took in my role as Secretary of State for International Development was to increase the UK’s contribution to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria from £800 million to £1.1 billion. That will help to save millions of lives in the years ahead.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is outlining a long list of the Department for International Development’s achievements and her plans for the future, and she is praising her predecessors. Can she explain what has happened since she called for the Department to be scrapped and since she told the Daily Mail this year that most of our aid budget was being “stolen” and “squandered”? Those are her words.

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman has just heard not only what DFID has done in the past under two outstanding Secretaries of State—my predecessors, my right hon. Friends the Members for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and for Putney—which is a legacy that we will stand by in our manifesto commitments, but—[Interruption.] If the hon. Gentleman wants an answer, he should listen to my response.

I have already said that we will lead on major global programmes to accelerate the development of vaccines and drugs to eliminate many of the world’s diseases. The hon. Gentleman has also heard me respond to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) on the question of humanitarian crises and many of the immediate needs to which we are responding. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the very Select Committee of which he is a member is witnessing at first hand how aid is being spent in crisis situations, in refugee camps, and providing opportunities and, frankly, a lifeline to people around the world who are suffering. That is exactly what my Department is doing and what I am doing as Secretary of State, and I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman—[Interruption.] This is not about briefing the press, and, if I may say so, I think the hon. Gentleman’s remarks do a huge disservice to the international development community. He is sitting there smugly smiling, but it is an international community that comes together—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows that he should not make remarks from a sedentary position, but if he is going to make remarks from a sedentary position, he should not use the word “you” because he should not be accusing me of anything.

Priti Patel: It is not just in times of crisis that the international development community comes together. My Department is championing economic development and investing in people and human capital. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman may not like that and may disagree with it, but that is the core purpose of the Department.

Stephen Doughty: The Secretary of State is making some very strong statements. Of course I do not deride the work of the Department; I think it is doing a fantastic job. She has outlined many of the positive things it is doing and the humanitarian aid it is providing to refugees, but why did she say that most of the Department’s budget was being stolen and squandered, without any justification?

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On the subject of the Bill, does the Secretary of State recognise that there are concerns that the CDC is not in fact targeting the poorest countries? Although private sector investment is very welcome, surely it needs to be just as targeted and as effectively monitored as investment in non-governmental organisations and other ways of boosting aid.

Priti Patel: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. It is right that the focus is on development impact and on outcomes. That has been shown by many of the reforms that the CDC has undertaken since 2010. Yesterday, a National Audit Office report was published which showed exactly that.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend please be reassured that her efforts to ensure that we have accountability and transparency in all aspects of public expenditure, but particularly in the area of international development, are a key part of maintaining public confidence behind the 0.7% target?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We owe that to those who contribute to the taxes that enable the Government to make these important decisions about international development, and in particular our
humanitarian responses and how we spend and invest that money. As I will go on to say, there are many examples around the world of lives being transformed, and that is something that our country can be very proud of.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that with regard to the concerns expressed about the CDC, the gravest relate to the period when the Opposition were in government—for example, the excessive levels of pay to CDC staff? Has the Conservative Government not got a grip of that, and is the CDC not much more efficient following the review in 2012 by the then Secretary of State?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments and observation. As I outlined at the beginning, the CDC is an established organisation that we should all be proud of. Clearly, there was a period before 2010 when the management of the CDC was, to put it mildly, not doing what it should have been doing. There were concerns about excessive pay and the lack of focus on development outcomes. Since 2010, when DFID led the way forward in working with the CDC, we have seen great progress.

Tom Brake: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Priti Patel: I must make progress.

As I mentioned earlier, contrary to some of the reports that we have seen in the past week, the future of the CDC will absolutely not come at the expense of DFID’s existing work on humanitarian support, human development and directly tackling what might be called the symptoms of poverty—disease, hunger and preventable suffering.

We all have a deep responsibility to tackle the underlying causes of poverty. That is why successive Governments have rightly focused increasingly on helping countries to grow, lifting the poorest out of poverty forever. That means creating jobs for the world’s poorest people, and driving the structural economic change that will end poverty permanently. To do this, we need to build the broadest possible coalition to fight poverty.

That includes NGOs and civil society organisations from the UK and from developing countries, which do such vital work. DFID’s recent civil society partnership review clearly stated the Government’s desire to work even more collaboratively with them in pursuit of these objectives.

Eliminating poverty also means working in partnership with multilateral agencies such as the Global Fund, with other bilateral development agencies, and directly with Governments in developing countries.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): An example of that was the event that I and the Minister of State, Department for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) went to last week with His Royal Highness the ambassador of Saudi Arabia. DFID is working with wealthy donor countries to unlock enormous potential across the middle east. If not for the leadership shown by DFID, some of that work would be undone.

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. As he knows, a great deal of work is taking place with other Governments, helping them to develop their own capacity for aid, so that they can work more effectively bilaterally and with multilateral agencies. At a time when we see a great deal of conflict in that region, we are working on an agreement with some countries in the Gulf and the middle east on what their own development bodies and agencies can do to support humanitarian relief as a result of crises taking place on their doorstep.

Today I want to explain why CDC is a vital partner in our efforts to end poverty, for it is widely recognised that aid on its own will not eliminate poverty. No country can defeat poverty and leave aid dependency behind without the prospect of a functioning economy, sustainable economic growth, jobs, trade and investment.

Development investments via CDC complement our other work and allow us to fight the scourge of poverty on all fronts. In the world today, faltering economic growth and rising young populations have exposed the chronic need for jobs and better opportunities. At present, most developing countries are not growing fast enough or industrialising fast enough to leave poverty behind.

The additional financing needed to achieve the UN sustainable development goals by 2030 is estimated at $2.5 trillion every year, but current investment levels are less than half that. As the UN and many international development banks have made clear, much of this finance will need to come from the private sector. The chair of the OECD’s development assistance committee, Erik Solheim, has stated:

“There is no longer a dispute about the need for private sector involvement in development. The role of DFIs”—that is, development finance institutions—“is to connect development aid with private investment, and explore how we can employ market forces in the world’s most challenging places.”

Dr Dirk Willem te Velde, head of the international economic development group at the Overseas Development Institute, writing in the Financial Times yesterday, said:

“Statistical evidence to be published by the Overseas Development Institute soon suggests that a £10bn increase in exposure of DFIs in Africa would raise average incomes and labour productivity by a quarter of a per cent, which is actually slightly above the average impact of aid overall. Most jobs are created by the private sector, and working with the private sector to create jobs is vital for inclusive growth.”

We know that that will be difficult in the poorest, most fragile and conflict-affected states. These are the hardest markets, where businesses will not go on their own because it is perceived as too risky, yet it is in those very places that jobs and economic opportunities are so desperately needed. CDC does exactly that by creating jobs, stimulating growth and supporting local business.

There are currently only a few investors in the world with the skills and risk appetite to create jobs and opportunities in the most difficult frontier markets. CDC is one of those investors. CDC uses its expertise and capital to support over 1,200 businesses in more than 70 developing countries to grow and create jobs. It is a great British success story that has a long history of creating jobs in the developing world.

This is not just about abstract numbers; importantly, it is about investing in people. The life-changing impact of CDC’s investments can be seen in countries such as Sierra Leone, where the UK has supported businesses
to get up and running to drive forward the country’s recovery following the devastating Ebola crisis, which killed thousands and damaged the economy. In the words of Henry Macauley, Sierra Leone’s Energy Minister, whom I met just three weeks ago:

“CDC has played an important role in supporting key businesses during the Ebola crisis and continues to do so in Sierra Leone as the economy now recovers. They are an increasingly important investor in the nation’s power sector and I’ve found them to be a great and promising private sector partner.”

The life-changing impact of the CDC’s investment can also be seen through people such as Yvonne, in Uganda. Thanks to a CDC-supported loan, she could buy a vehicle, a scrubbing machine and a vacuum cleaner for her cleaning business and attend training courses. In just 10 years, she had expanded her business from one person to providing jobs for 175 people. It is people such as Yvonne who we should have in our minds as we debate the Bill.

In the past, legitimate concerns were raised about some aspects of the CDC’s performance. That is why, in recent years, the CDC has modernised and transformed its approach. In 2010, DFID undertook a public consultation and an extensive review of the CDC, and began moving the CDC in a new direction, including by bringing in a new board and chair and hiring a new chief executive. Under its new leadership, the CDC has transformed itself. Before 2011, it operated a financial-return-first strategy, with no screening tool to help filter out insufficiently developmental investments.

Keith Vaz: The Secretary of State may have answered this question, or she may be coming on to answer it, but there were concerns about some of the salaries paid to senior officials at the CDC and about the monitoring of administrative costs. Given that we support this organisation, which is moving in the right direction, is she satisfied that there is proper monitoring of that aspect of its work?

Priti Patel: That is an important point. Back in 2009, the CDC’s then chief executive was criticised quite extensively for the level of their salary and other pay, which stood at £970,000. The current chief exec’s total remuneration is now limited to a maximum of £300,000, and that is because the remuneration policies have changed dramatically since 2012. It is also important to reflect on the fact not only that pay across the organisation has been reduced by over 40%, but that compensation is no longer benchmarked, as it was prior to the changes in 2012, against the private equity industry. This is not a private equity firm at all. The CDC is now benchmarked against other development finance institutions, and any bonuses are based on the CDC’s development performance and returns, whereas, previously, they were based solely on financial performance. That has now changed.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con) 

rose—

Stephen Doughty rose—

Priti Patel: No. I will not give way.

Under its new leadership, the CDC has transformed itself. As I said, it operated a financial-return-first strategy before 2011. It has now introduced dual objectives to deliver development impact and financial return. It has developed completely new ways of assessing and measuring development through job creation and of screening prospective investments for development impact. It is an innovative and intelligent investor with a core mission of fighting poverty. That was recognised in yesterday’s NAO report, which stresses that DFID’s oversight of the CDC led to “important, positive changes...a significant departure from the previous strategy”.

Following new objectives agreed with the UK Government, the CDC now invests only in Africa and south Asia, where 80% of the world’s poorest live, and where private capital is scarce. The CDC focuses now on the sectors that create the most jobs and on sectors that create environments for other businesses to thrive, such as infrastructure and financial services. In the last year, CDC-backed businesses have helped to create over 1 million new jobs, and they have paid over $7 billion in local taxes in the last three years. That is money that Governments can use to invest in vital services, such as health and education.

As yesterday’s NAO report recognised, the CDC has addressed Parliament’s concerns about pay, and salaries have been cut, as I have just outlined. The whole ethos of the organisation has changed and, importantly, strengthened, with oversight from DFID. The CDC of today is a different, and much improved, organisation from the one it was many years ago. Some of the media coverage in recent days has not properly reflected that important shift, and I urge all Members to look carefully at the facts rather than some of the reporting.

Of course, there is more to do. Therefore, as part of the Bill, my Department will work to improve the transparency of the organisation further and to strengthen further the assessment of its development impact. As the NAO recognised, my Department has commissioned several independent evaluations of the CDC’s impact. Just last year, a team from Harvard, reviewing the CDC’s investments from 2008 to 2012, concluded that they had been “transformational”, creating hundreds of thousands of new direct jobs and billions of pounds in increased earnings. We are currently in the design stages of a complex new study to generate even more detailed data on the wider market impacts of CDC investments. We are the first Government ever to conduct such an in-depth study into their development finance institution.

There is no question but that the CDC offers value for money. Over the last five years, we have seen significant returns from it. Every penny of profit generated by the CDC is reinvested into businesses across the world’s poorest and most fragile regions, making every taxpayer pound invested in the CDC go further. The NAO further concluded that the CDC now has “an efficient and economic operating model” with low costs, compared with other development finance institutions. CDC salaries are covered by the returns the CDC makes on investments, not from development budgets.

Wherever possible, the CDC invests in countries, and it uses neutral jurisdictions only when it is absolutely necessary to do so, to protect taxpayer moneys from being lost to weak legal systems and to bring confidence to other global investors in the hardest-to-reach markets. However, the CDC uses only financial centres that are
compliant with international tax transparency standards, as monitored by the OECD’s global forum on transparency and exchange of tax information. There are no exemptions.

Far from hiding investments, the CDC was one of the first development finance institutions to make public investment information about every single investment. In fact, with DFID’s support, the CDC is now a global leader on transparency. It has signed up to the international aid transparency initiative and has an online searchable database on its website, allowing users to access information on every investment and fund in the CDC’s portfolio. I can assure the House that my Department will continue to be an active and engaged shareholder in the CDC, ensuring that it continues to deliver for the world’s poorest and the UK taxpayer.

Richard Fuller: My right hon. Friend is outlining a strong case for what she proposes for the CDC. However, on the issue of probity, there are tremendous resources in the City of London, which could provide support for some of the businesses the CDC invests in as they look to get to the next stage of growth capital. Is there any element in the Bill, or are there any DFID proposals, to encourage City of London firms to provide that support for DFID goals?

Priti Patel: It is important to acknowledge the City of London and the great expertise that exists there when it comes to not only investment in some of the most challenging parts of the world but transparency. Through the work the Government have done on tax and transparency, the City of London has moved incredibly far. My Department is working across the City of London on a range of issues, such as insurance. We are also looking at how we can do more on transparency and accountability, and that is absolutely right.

We will shortly be setting out a new investment policy for the CDC, covering the next five years. That will include a new reporting framework to better capture the broader impact of investments on development, beyond job creation and the tax revenue generated. We will ensure there is maximum transparency, so that CDC investments can be scrutinised and, importantly, so that their impact on combatting poverty is made clear. As I stated, the CDC has a strong and transparent track record on which to build. With our support and oversight, we want the CDC to do more, and that is why we need the Bill.

The Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 1999 set a £1.5 billion limit on the overall amount of Government financial assistance that can be provided to the CDC. That limit was reached in 2015. The need to raise the CDC’s capital limit was clearly signalled in the UK aid strategy back in 2015. The Bill builds on the agreed rules about which spending counts as aid. Raising the limit by £4.5 billion to £6 billion and introducing a delegated power to raise the limit further via statutory instrument to £12 billion over time will enable the UK to accelerate the CDC’s growth, so that the UK can deliver on its international development objectives. Let me stress that this £6 billion is not an annual spend; it is a cumulative figure and a limit placed on the total amount of financial assistance that the Government could provide to the CDC over a period of time before coming back to the House to seek a further increase via statutory instrument.

James Duddridge: I fully support what my right hon. Friend is saying. This is a progressive, cross-party movement, and this is not a radical piece of legislation. Decisions have not been made to spend the full £6 billion straight away, but if the Department did commit to spend right up to that limit and fund it each year up to 2020, it would still represent only 8% of the Secretary of State’s budget, so 92% of aid would be spent in a more traditional way. This is a progressive move, not a radical change.

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He is absolutely right about the 8% figure. It is also worth pointing out, putting this into context, that total aid spending over the course of this Parliament is likely to be £60 billion.

Some inaccurate reports have suggested that this Bill somehow paves the way for the entire aid budget to be given to the CDC in perpetuity. That is clearly not the case. Increasing the capital limit does not guarantee that we will use our resources in this manner, or commit us to any increases in capital. My priority is to ensure that we achieve maximum value for money with UK aid. The provision of any new capital to the CDC will require a full and detailed business case that will show how further investment will continue to achieve value for money, have a clear development impact for the poorest, and deliver in the UK’s national interests. Furthermore, it is worth noting that because CDC investments generate a return, any additional money we give to the CDC is not spent once and then lost; it contributes to the CDC’s capital, which is continually reinvested now and in future years. Importantly, therefore, it remains an asset that ultimately belongs to the UK taxpayer.

This Bill is fundamentally about people: improving life prospects by helping individuals to find work and earn money, so that they can feed their families, send their children to school and put clothes on their backs; empowering girls and women to determine their own future; and giving people in the poorest and most marginalised places hope, so that they do not feel the pressures to migrate or turn to some of the extreme causes that we see around the world. The CDC is just one part—a relatively small part in the context of overall development spending—of our crucial investment in developing countries. We will continue to invest in our life-saving, life-changing health, education and sanitation programmes, meeting our manifesto commitments. Ultimately, though, this is about jobs, growth and enterprise that will defeat poverty for good. It is right that Britain leads the world to tackle poverty across the world given that we still have more than 1 billion people living on less than a dollar a day. The UK Government are playing a leading role in building a more prosperous world. This Bill is the right thing to do for the poorest people in the world and for British taxpayers, and I commend it to the House.
Kate Osamor: The vast majority of Members of this House support the UK’s guarantee to spend 0.7% of gross national income on international development. This view is supported by the people of this country, who understand that our aid programme makes a significant contribution to creating peace and economic sustainability around the world and to building a more secure and stable international community. Our aid budget makes a huge difference to the lives of hundreds of thousands of the world’s poorest people. Underpinning the faith that the British people have in our aid programme is the knowledge that the money that is spent in developing countries—taxpayers’ money—is transparent; that the funds are provided for projects that have clear objectives and tangible outcomes; and that the money goes directly to source, with no middlemen, no creaming off the top, and no profiteering from people’s poverty.

We will always welcome any measures that aim to improve the quality of life of those less fortunate than ourselves. This Bill, with the right safeguards, could achieve that. The job of Opposition Members, and of the whole House, is to ensure that some of the previous excesses and failures of the Commonwealth Development Corporation are not repeated. I say that as a friend of the CDC. It was the post-war Labour Government of Clement Attlee who created the forerunner of the CDC. Much of the work of the CDC is vital, and we should of course work to strengthen its ability to support businesses and create jobs around the world.

However, we have a number of serious reservations about this Bill. Since the Government are proposing up to an eightfold increase in the amount it can contribute to the CDC, it is right that we ask questions. Let me begin with executive pay at the CDC. While we would all acknowledge the steps that have been taken to curtail the excesses of the past, what guarantees have the Government received that we will see no repetition of the eye-watering salary hikes that people awarded themselves in the past? It would be fundamentally wrong for the extra money proposed in this Bill to be used to fill the bank accounts of the executives of the CDC instead of going to those who need it the most.

James Duddridge: Does the hon. Lady accept that no one is considering going back to those bad old days? While I do not want this to be a partisan issue, because I think there is a wide degree of consensus, the original deal with the chief executive was signed off by Clare Short, and the new deal, which reduced the salary by a third and placed a cap on the maximum, was signed off by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) when he was Secretary of State. There is no going back to those bad old days; this is about working together on the new framework.

Kate Osamor: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am concerned that we learn from the past. I am not here to pull punches: this is about learning from the past and ensuring that we move forward in the correct, transparent way.

The second question the Government must answer is on the priorities of the CDC. Recent history is not kind to the CDC and the decisions it has made on the allocation of its funds—UK taxpayers’ money. In recent years, the CDC has become a more commercial organisation. In 2004, the CDC created the private equity arm, Actis. In a deal that raised serious concerns on the governance of the corporation, 60% of the equity firm was sold to managers at the CDC at a bargain basement price. In the space of a few years, they had turned the CDC from an aid agency into a cash machine. With the focus turned to maximising profits, mainly for those who worked at the CDC, the traditional areas of financial support that the CDC had focused on for nearly 60 years were being abandoned. Food security through agriculture programmes went, safe and clean water projects were cancelled, and transport and infrastructure projects were abandoned. Poverty reduction—surely key to any development objectives—withered on the vine of self-interest and, I am afraid to say, earning a fast buck.

It is worth comparing the principles and values on which the CDC was founded to achieve its aims with the realities of its present-day operation. In 1998, the CDC spent 50% of its budget on agribusiness in Africa. That investment had two virtues: first, it helped to feed people in those countries, where starvation and hunger were rife; and, secondly, it enabled communities to become more self-sufficient, created jobs, and was a step on the ladder out of poverty. Today, funding for agribusiness has dropped to just 5%.

We see similar patterns in the CDC’s infrastructure programme. For people to live healthy lives, and to enable communities to thrive, not simply survive, we need to help create a solid infrastructure as part of our development priorities. Dirty water and poor sanitation robs the lives of over 300,000 people each year. Infants and young children are especially susceptible to diseases because of their immature immune systems. Their young bodies simply do not have the right immune system to cope with waterborne diseases. According to UNICEF, over 40% of medical facilities in Africa do not have access to clean water. Dirty water and a lack of good sanitation do not just rob people of their lives; they make a country less productive. A recent study estimated that there was a $150 million shortfall for water and sanitation projects in sub-Saharan countries, while the World Health Organisation estimates that we need £535 billion in investment to achieve universal access. I accept that those are huge sums of money, but look at the benefits. It is estimated that every dollar spent on improving water quality and sanitation delivers $4 in increased productivity. With such overwhelming evidence for the health and economic benefits, the case for investing in infrastructure programmes should be beyond doubt.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Another dimension, when we are talking about health, is the pharmaceutical industry and the products that it sells to some African countries. Surely, the Government should be looking at this area and trying to make pharmaceuticals a lot cheaper for those countries.

Kate Osamor: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. We need not only to look at the health of poorer people but to make sure that they can access water and sanitation.

It is surprising, if not shocking, that the CDC reduced infrastructure support for water, sanitation and roads from 35% of its budget in 1999 to just 8% a decade later. If the money is no longer going to support agribusiness
[Kate Osamor]

or infrastructure, where is the CDC spending it? Let us begin by looking at some of its recent investments, such as Xiabu. I do not know about you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I am partial to a takeaway on a Friday night—so, it seems, is the CDC, because it has provided thousands of dollars to the Chinese fast food chain Xiabu. That may be a good commercial investment, but is it the best use of the CDC’s resources? Can the Secretary of State set out what guarantees she has obtained that the UK’s increased contribution to the CDC will not go towards such projects?

While the Secretary of State is here, I would like to hear from her that the Government will seek assurances that in Africa the CDC will put more emphasis on food security than it puts into funding the building of new shopping malls at present. I have no doubt that the people of Accra are grateful for their brand new shopping mall, but what strategic role it plays in increasing life expectancy in Ghana is a mystery to me.

James Duddridge: The people who were employed in the construction of those shopping malls in Accra—I have seen them recently—would disagree with the suggestion that that has not helped families in Accra and in nearby villages. Less than 1% of the CDC budget has gone on shopping and infrastructure, which provide a lot of jobs. Agriculture, which the hon. Lady talked about earlier, is incredibly important, but it is less important than it used to be in the modern economy in Africa, where there is a greater degree of diversification and urbanisation.

Kate Osamor: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I know that he went around Africa in his previous role as a Minister, so he knows a lot about Africa, but there are parts of Ghana where there is no electricity and parts of Ghana where there is no water. Yes, middle-income families may enjoy going to malls, but while many people are living in poverty I do not think that a mall is the best use of CDC resources and money.

The examples that I have given lead me to my third and fourth questions for the Secretary of State. The Government propose to increase funding from £1.5 billion to £6 billion, with the option for the Secretary of State to raise it to £12 billion at a future date. But it seems she is putting the cart before the horse. As yet, the CDC has not published its investment strategy for 2017 to 2021. In the absence of an investment strategy outlining how the additional resources would be spent by the CDC, the Government are essentially proposing that we provide the CDC with a multibillion-pound blank cheque. In 2015, the coalition Government gave the CDC a cash injection of £735 million, and the Secretary of State published the business case for that increased funding at the time. Will the Secretary of State place in the House of Commons Library the full business case for that increased funding? Will she assure the House that if the Government wish to extend that to £12 billion, a business case will be brought to the House?

Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend was in the House when the Secretary of State gave me a very welcome assurance concerning Yemen, which we appreciate. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is so important that emergency and humanitarian aid should be ring-fenced and that any resources to the CDC—whatever they may be, after the business case has been prepared—should not take money away from that emergency and humanitarian aid, which is important in Yemen and in other parts of the world?

Kate Osamor: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. Yes, humanitarian aid is paramount. In times of crisis, we need to know that that money will be ring-fenced to ensure that those who need it most will be able to get it.

During proceedings on the Bill, we will be setting the Government six questions, which we hope they will be able to address and gain our support. I began my response to the Secretary of State’s opening speech on Second Reading today by setting out the key principle that should guide us on international development funding—transparency. Indeed, the lack of transparency over the CDC’s work has created considerable scepticism about its activities and some of its investments. When spending taxpayers’ money on international development in an age of austerity, it behoves the Government to do all in their power to reassure everyone that their money is being spent properly and effectively. The Secretary of State would alleviate some of the concerns felt by Opposition Members—and, I am sure, in the country at large—if she were to insert a transparency clause into the Bill, which would meet the Government’s stated aim and their commitment to transparency, value for money and tracking development results.

That is particularly important when it comes to the CDC’s use of tax havens for its investments. It is extraordinary that the CDC has routed its investments through tax havens. The CDC and DFID have a moral duty to adopt the highest ethical standards if they are to have moral authority as the UK’s leading development actors. We should not be rewarding tax havens with UK taxpayers’ money, and the Government could and should lever the CDC away from the use of tax havens. Not a penny of the proposed £6 billion should find its way to a tax haven, and the Bill should be explicit in enshrining that principle.

Providing any organisation with £6 billion—and potentially £12 billion—is a significant step, and that is particularly true of an organisation with such a chequered recent past. The House would welcome a clear sense from the Secretary of State of how her Department has evaluated the costs and benefits of providing the CDC with such a significant sum of public money. There is a clear need for the Minister to set out how DFID’s investment plans for CDC have been informed. Has that been achieved by assessing other options for investing these resources? Has it been achieved by comparing their value for money and the potential for development impact?

There are two issues that the Secretary of State should address to demonstrate the Government’s commitment to transparency. At present the CDC is not subject to the scrutiny of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact. That is an anomaly, and it should be rectified immediately. Will the Secretary of State insert into the Bill a provision to enable ICAI to scrutinise and audit the effectiveness of the CDC, particularly given the significant increase in the CDC’s funding proposed in this Bill? Secondly, I would like an assurance
from the Government that the CDC will not be sold off or privatised during this Parliament. It would, surely, be wrong for this House to provide billions of pounds of taxpayers’ money, only for the CDC to be handed over to a private equity firm or suchlike company.

When the Colonial Development Corporation was established in 1948, it had bold ambitions. For much of its life, the CDC has achieved those ambitions, first as the Colonial Development Corporation and then as the Commonwealth Development Corporation. Lives have been saved and lives have been improved as a direct result of the CDC. Sadly, the CDC has lost its way in recent years. The ethos and values that drove its inception six decades ago have been lost, sacrificed on the altar of fast-buck economics. We are beginning to see some welcome reforms to the CDC, but history has taught us that we must remain vigilant.

As I set out at the beginning of my speech, the Opposition firmly believe in the principle of aid as a vehicle for improving the life chances of millions of people. The question the Government must answer before they gain our full support for the Bill is: will they provide the assurance and the guarantee to deliver what we all seek, which is a CDC that truly lives up to its mission “to support the building of businesses throughout Africa and South Asia, to create jobs and make a lasting difference to the lives of people in some of the world’s poorest places.”

To achieve this, the Government must place the right safeguards in the Bill in Committee. If they do, and the Bill achieves the twin objectives of supporting the people who need it the most and of making the funding fully transparent, the Government will have our support.

2.50 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to my outside interests, which are listed in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

This is an extremely good Bill, and I hope it will be welcomed in all corners of the House. During my brief remarks, I very much hope to be able to satisfy the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), who leads for the Opposition, on the perfectly fair questions that she posed. The fact that the Government are able to bring the Bill before the House today shows the success of Britain’s development policies in general, and specifically the success of the CDC reforms that we introduced in 2010 and 2011. Today’s Bill is the fruit of those reforms.

It is worth reflecting a little further on the history of the CDC. As has been said, it was founded in 1948. It was the first development finance institution—another British lead—and an early example of Britain’s generosity and of recognising the importance of the private sector and of job creation. The CDC made a huge contribution in the years after the war to agricultural development in the poorest parts of the world with which Britain had a close connection. By 1997, the formula had become a little tired, and the Commonwealth Development Corporation, as it had become, was losing money, which was hardly a good example of private sector entrepreneurship for poorer countries to emulate.

In 1997, the Blair Government considered privatising the taxpayers’ CDC. That would have been a huge mistake, since the whole point of the organisation is to complement the private sector, not to compete with it. In the end, the Labour Government privatised the management, while leaving the capital in the public sector. The then Government turned it into a fund of funds; it invested in other people’s funding vehicles, while the private sector did what it is supposed to do, which is focusing on making money.

When I travelled as the shadow International Development spokesman, other countries’ development finance institutions would say to me that the transformation of the CDC after 1997 was a warning to other development finance institutions of what not to do. When I travelled in countries where in the past the CDC had generated enormous good will, people used to say to me, “Whatever happened to the CDC? It has simply disappeared.” Of course, that was right. As the CDC was investing in other people’s funds, it had simply disappeared.

In 2010, the coalition Government said that the CDC, this former great development finance institution, had lost its way. The CDC was under regular attack in the press—particularly in Private Eye—and my judgment, as the Secretary of State, was that the attacks were largely valid. It had been turned from a somewhat sleepy development corporation that was losing money into a city slickers private equity business. It was mostly staffed by the same people, who saw their civil service salaries soar to the exotic levels normally populated by very successful hedge fund managers and private equity investors. The central aim of the coalition was to re-inject the CDC once again with its distinguished development roots without losing the ability to earn a commercial return. Our aspiration on entering government in 2010 was that just as DFID is undoubtedly the leading development ministry in the world, so the CDC should become the envy of all other development finance institutions—the best Government-owned DFI anywhere.

We had three key aims. First, we wanted to regain control of investment expertise by bringing the responsibility for investment back into the CDC. In other words—Labour Members may care to take note—we decided to reverse the Blair Government’s privatisation by bringing the expertise back into the public sector. Secondly, we wanted to broaden the toolkit of financial instruments by which the CDC could achieve this. Thirdly, we wanted to shift the geographical focus of the CDC on to the poorest and most difficult parts of the world—Africa and south Asia. The CDC had previously focused on a loose collection of geographical locations in a very undifferentiated way. Of course, capital in such circumstances naturally gravitates to the areas of lower risk and higher return. That was exactly what we did not want it to do, because for the CDC and development, those are the areas of least value.

It was with dismay that I read in the Financial Times of all newspapers—it has a reputation for outstanding financial journalism, and should therefore know better—a rehash of a past that the CDC has long left behind completely. A moment of research would have shown Financial Times journalists that they were completely out of date. The Financial Times said that “the government should place the CDC under the same broader level of public scrutiny as DFID.”

The CDC is overseen by DFID, the Treasury, the shareholder executive, the International Development Committee, the Public Accounts Committee and, as yesterday’s report shows by the NAO. Perhaps a rather better researched piece, those Financial Times journalists could explain who might be added to this already extensive list.
Contrary to the Financial Times view, the CDC is now well on its way to achieving a reputation as the best DFI in the world. The reforms that we introduced inevitably confronted vested interests, and involved an area of expertise that we did not of course have any right to expect within the civil service. We wanted the CDC to provide both pioneer and patient capital. We wanted pioneer capital because we wanted to show the reach of the private sector at its best in promoting economic activity, jobs, decent working practices, and the provision of key goods and services to the poorest in the most difficult places in the world. We wanted patient capital because it can take a longer view of the financial return and can therefore complement the private sector by adding what is often the key ingredient to the mix—funding that would not otherwise be available to generate jobs, whether in the power sector or in infrastructure—in, once again, the poorest places. All of this is in the additional benefit of delivering value for money and a return for the British taxpayer, while having a substantial impact on poverty alleviation.

The Bill is part of the proof that these reforms have worked and that this new approach is succeeding. I do not think it is fanciful to believe that in 50 years’ time, the CDC rather than DFID will be seen as the embodiment of the UK’s strong support and success in helping the world’s poorest and most excluded people. The flow of CDC-type investments made by the developed world in the poor world is now overtaking, in quantum, the level of aid. I believe that the work the CDC is carrying out should command everyone’s support from the far left of the Labour party to the development-sceptic press.

To achieve this position, the CDC has faced the need for and delivered radical change. This would not have been accomplished without the high quality of leadership at the top that has prevailed throughout. We were successful in hiring Diana Noble as the chief executive. Diana Noble will retire next year, and the taxpayer and the development community owe her a great debt of gratitude. She has changed a passive organisation by recruiting outstanding new talent. People tell me that the spirit in the CDC has been transformed. She inherited an organisation of 50 people, a figure that was subsequently reduced to 40 but now stands at approximately 220.

Those extraordinary changes would not have been accomplished, either, without the skills and commitment of Mr Jeremy Sille, a senior and experienced City financier who served as an adviser to DFID and was subsequently a non-executive director of the CDC while the reforms were implemented, and of Graham Wrigley, who now provides his expertise as the CDC’s chairman. That team, above all, has delivered those changes and deserves the gratitude and thanks of Parliament and the taxpayer. Their personal reward will be the transformation of the lives of very large numbers of extremely poor people.

Our reforms turned the CDC from a one-product business—a fund of funds—into a multi-product one. I am not a golfer, but if I may use a golfing analogy, the CDC was traversing the golf course of international development with only one golf club, that of investing in other people’s funds. We have now equipped it with a full variety of golf clubs, including equity and debt, direct investments, trade finance and infrastructure lending. We have also regained control of the golf swing rather than delegating it to others—I have probably pushed the metaphor as far as I should.

Inevitably, operating in markets such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ethiopia is accompanied by considerable risk. Along with development impact, the CDC considers whether it is truly bringing additional funds that are unavailable elsewhere to each investment. It always seeks to avoid the lurking dangers of corruption that are ever present in development. It is a young business that will not always get it right, but for a young banker starting out in the financial world, as I did in 1979, there are few more exciting places to aspire to work across the financial world than the CDC, whose employees deploy their financial skills in an area where they have the power greatly to elevate the social condition of some of the poorest people in the poorest areas of the world. By the way, salaries have been sharply reduced and are well below what the staff at the CDC would earn in the commercial world.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I am just being slightly mischievous, but will my right hon. Friend confirm that all those interested in a career in the CDC cannot expect to spend too much time on the golf course, either on a Friday afternoon or on any other day of the week?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) replies to that intervention, may I just say to him that those of us who do not understand cricket are absolutely delighted to have had a golfing metaphor? It is so much simpler.

Mr Mitchell: I do not play golf, but I assure my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) that the staff in the CDC work phenomenally hard, including on Friday afternoons.

There are only a few investors in the world with the skills and risk appetite to undertake such difficult but vital investments, doing the hardest things in the hardest places. In 2014, in response to the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, the CDC partnered with Standard Chartered bank to support lending to local businesses and help the country’s economic delivery. In 2013, the CDC made an investment in Feronia, an agricultural production and processing company in the DRC, which is one of the most difficult countries in the world in which to invest. That investment would help people to lift themselves and their families out of poverty and provide much needed support to local agriculture, a sector that the hon. Member for Edmonton quite rightly mentioned. It should never be forgotten that the overwhelming majority of jobs are created by the private sector, not by Government, and having a job—being economically active—is how people all around the world lift themselves out of poverty. Of course, inevitably, not all those investments will succeed.

Since 2011 the CDC has focused its attention intensively on quantifying development impact. For example, this year it invested in a power plant at Virunga park in Matebe that is providing 96 MW of clean energy, creating around 100,000 jobs and boosting economic development.
It is the first investment by a DFI in that region of the DRC since the 1980s. In 2015, the CDC invested in the largest independent power producer on the continent, Globeleq Africa, also bringing in Norfund, Norway’s development finance institution. That will add thousands of megawatts of electricity generating capacity over the next 10 years, addressing a massive gap. In my view, the CDC is the only DFI with the vision or appetite to undertake that type of work, including changing the whole strategic direction of the company and replacing the senior team and board.

The Bill ensures that the CDC can receive from the taxpayer the capital injection it will require to carry out the development work with which it is tasked. Many Governments are channelling development funding through DFIs such as the CDC because they use capital injection to address market failure, as the Secretary of State pointed out, and invest funds on a revolving basis in business in developing countries. The extent of the success of the CDC’s development investment means the Bill is required.

In its report published yesterday, the National Audit Office said:

“Through tighter cost control, strengthened corporate governance and closer alignment with the Department’s objectives, CDC now has an efficient and economic operating model”

with “thorough” governance arrangements. It also said that the CDC’s “current portfolio of investments reflects the strategy it agreed with the Department in 2012...CDC has met the target for financial performance it agreed with the Department.”

Finally, the report made it clear that the CDC measures its effectiveness through financial return and development impact targets—targets that it has met. Measuring development impact is extremely difficult, partly because it is so long term. But above all it is about job creation. It is likely that the CDC is currently involved in investments that will create more than 1 million jobs. In any event, it is to be congratulated for the steps it has taken to quantify development impact and to be encouraged to go further.

For now, my advice to my successors in the Government is to leave the CDC to grow and deliver on the objectives we have set it and to hold it to account for what it does. However, probably the most anxiety-inducing statement the CDC team ever has to face is, “Government officials are coming round to interfere today in what you are doing.” When we hired the current CEO, Diana Noble, who has done such a brilliant job, I remember promising her that Ministers and officials would set the course for the CDC—as the shareholder properly should—but would then leave her to get on with the job and to deliver. I trust my promise is being honoured.

3.7 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I hope, Madam Deputy Speaker, that before I begin my remarks on the Bill, you and the House will allow me to note that today marks the third anniversary of the Clutha tragedy, when a police helicopter crashed into the Clutha bar in Glasgow, killing 10 people. We remember them and pay tribute to them and to the first responders on the scene that night. We hope that, in due time, families and friends will get the closure they require and the answers they seek through a fatal accident inquiry process.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am sure that the whole House joins the hon. Gentleman in remembering those who lost their lives that day, and their families and friends.

Patrick Grady: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Bill is a rare piece of DFID-led legislation—the first in this Parliament, I believe—so I take this opportunity to welcome the new Ministers to the Government Front Bench and the shadow Ministers on the Opposition Front Bench. Lots of Scottish National party spokespeople seem to have been doing that in recent weeks and months, so at least there is consistency from our Benches.

Today’s debate gives us the opportunity to look in detail at the Government’s specific proposals on increasing the funding they can provide to what was the Commonwealth Development Corporation, now more regularly known as CDC Group or the CDC. In doing so, it is worth exploring how the Bill fits into the broader context of the UK’s aid spending and the direction the Secretary of State is setting, and how those fit with the global framework and consensus on poverty reduction.

Aid works. It has saved and transformed countless lives around the world. I have had the privilege of witnessing that with my own eyes in places such as Malawi and Zambia, and of meeting people from all over the world whose lives have been transformed by aid, when they have travelled to Scotland and the rest of the UK to share their testimony.

SNP Members happily give credit to the UK Government for meeting, in recent years and after 40 years of delay, the 0.7% of gross national income target for overseas development assistance spending. Despite the progress made in recent years, the need for aid spending has not gone away. As many analysts and institutions have said, including the International Development Committee, aid flows will need to continue to grow from the billions to the trillions if we are to meet the sustainable development goals—they are also known as the global goals—that have been agreed at the United Nations and if we are to tackle the challenge of climate change. The Secretary of State spoke about market failure. Lord Stern once upon a time described climate change as the biggest market failure of all, and that must be at the forefront of our minds.

I give credit to the Government for their leadership in negotiating and building consensus on the sustainable development goals, but the task is to continue to show leadership as the world works towards meeting them to end poverty and hunger; achieve universal education and gender equality; eliminate preventable disease and empower communities around the world. The first and most important question we must ask of the Bill is how it will help to meet those goals. What assurances can the Government give us that, in their agreements with the CDC and in setting policy direction, the investments that the CDC makes will be geared to the achievement of the global goals?

As a number of hon. Members have said, the Bill is tightly focused, which is perhaps a missed opportunity, because there is a chance to make more explicit in the Bill or the Commonwealth Corporation Act 1999 that poverty reduction is as much a duty of the CDC as it is of the Department for International Development.
It is not clear in the Bill how much scope there is for amendments, but who knows how creative hon. Members will be in Committee?

Such a reassurance from the Government would help to make a stronger and clearer case for the role of development finance and for that specific development finance institution. The CDC is rightly proud of being the oldest such institution in the world. As a pioneer, it has had numerous successes, as we have heard, but it has also learned a number hard lessons over the years. To maintain support in the House, it will need to continue to do so. Stories of lavish expenses and inflated salaries, of channelling funds through tax havens, and of investing in luxury hotels and shopping malls, will not inspire confidence among the aid community or the public at large. As we have heard, the National Audit Office yesterday raised a number of concerns about transparency and impact measurement. Despite the progress and reforms of recent years, in 2013 still only 12% of new investments were made in the least developed countries of the world.

Since the Secretary of State’s appointment, she has made great play of seeking value for money for the taxpayer and increasing aid spending transparency. Will she commit to holding the CDC to the same standards as other stakeholders and recipients of DFID funding? She said in her speech that transparency would happen as part of the Bill, but I do not see it in the Bill, so how can we have those transparency guarantees? The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) asked can we have those transparency guarantees? The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) asked who else could scrutinise the work of the CDC. The hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) rightly suggested that the Independent Commission for Aid Impact could continue to have a role. Perhaps that provision should be in the Bill.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is right that ICAI should have a role, which it has because it can follow all official development assistance expenditure. He can rest assured that I should have added ICAI to my list.

Patrick Grady: I am happy to take that reassurance from the former Secretary of State, but I hope to hear it from current Ministers.

Fiona Bruce: As chair of the sub-committee of the International Development Committee that scrutinises the work of ICAI, perhaps our sub-committee could be added to that list.

Patrick Grady: DFID and the other bodies rightly face considerable scrutiny, which is as it should be, but we must ensure that it is extended and applied equally to all DFID stakeholders and all the resource that is spent. Perhaps there was an opportunity for the Bill to go further and to place statutory duties on the CDC to report on all its spending to the standards set by the international aid transparency initiative. I wonder what creative amendments might appear in that respect.

Let me be clear that I am not objecting in principle to the concept of development finance. There is a role for the private sector to play in stimulating the economies of developing countries and helping people into work—if carefully managed, it can support innovation and diversification. The Secretary of State’s letter to Members in advance of the Bill gave the example of the CDC’s early investment in the African mobile phone operator that eventually became Celtel. The investment was made when the technology was unproven and the market barely existed. I have seen first hand the impact that mobile phone technology makes in improving people’s lives across sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, I have been a customer and user of Celtel services on many occasions.

The Scottish Government recently launched their own development finance initiative as part of their international development strategy. The Minister for International Development and Europe, Dr Alasdair Allan, announced in October £1 million of Scottish Government funding to help Malawian businesses over a three year period, which will be match-funded by private investors, providing £2 million in total to invest in Malawi. Those investments will be managed by a new Scottish company, the African Lakes Company Ltd, which has been registered as a limited company for that purpose. The African Lakes Corporation was originally established in Glasgow in 1878 to develop trade as an effective way of displacing slavery in Malawi. More than a century on, that mission has been revived with a contemporary view to investing in Malawi’s future. Through their support for that venture, the Scottish Government aim to show that responsible investment can help Malawi and similar countries to reduce dependence on aid, support the growth of existing businesses and create sustainable livelihoods.

The question is therefore less about the principle of development finance and more about how it is managed and how it fits within the overall picture of aid spending. The Scottish Government commitment of £1 million over three years represents just under 4% of their annual development fund budget. The figures proposed in the Bill are of a far greater order—the Bill proposes the quadrupling of the funding cap from £1.5 billion to £6 billion, which would take the total amount that DFID can invest to the equivalent of around half the annual aid budget. I take the Secretary of State’s point that that will not necessarily be invested in one go, but if my understanding of the Bill is correct, it could be invested in one go in principle, which is a concern to some of us. The new maximum, which will be decided by statutory instrument, could be £12 billion, which is approximately the total annual aid budget. It is therefore worth asking, as the hon. Member for Edmonton did, where those figures came from and how they were arrived at. Why £6 billion and not £5 billion or £7 billion? Where is the needs analysis behind that figure?

As we heard in Treasury questions today, total aid spending is very likely to fall as a result of a slowing economy. The 0.7% target is by definition a proportion of total GNI. With further economic uncertainty on the horizon, there is no guarantee that the current figures will remain stable, let alone increase. Would it have been more sensible for Ministers to express the funding limits in the Bill as a percentage, or through some kind of formula that relates to the total amount of aid funding, to make investment in the CDC relate more clearly to the total aid budget at any one time? Although making the case that recognises the importance of development finance, it also recognises that it is only one small tool in a box, as the Secretary of State said.
We have been presented with the Bill, which incidentally was not mentioned in the Queen's Speech, without seeing the long-promised policy statements in the shape of the bilateral and multilateral aid reviews. We therefore have no real idea exactly how the increase in the investment cap fits with DFID's broader policy direction and goals. The Secretary of State has said that no disbursements will be made to the CDC without a robust business case. Will she assure us today that such business cases will have poverty reduction and the sustainable development goals, and people rather than profit, at their heart? As I asked earlier, has she given any consideration to the opportunity for building that into the Bill as a statutory duty on the CDC? [Interruption.] If the Secretary of State is not here, I hope that at least one DFID Minister can answer those questions at the end of the debate.

I and many other Members are keen to explore in Committee and other stages the question of how that significant scaling-up of DFID finance to the CDC fits into its broader policy goals and the wider global aid agenda. If satisfactory answers are not forthcoming, and if the Government are not willing to offer the reassurances and amendments we suggest, we reserve the right to oppose the Bill in its entirety on Third Reading.

Greater clarity is urgently needed from DFID and the Government as a whole on the purpose of their aid budget and how they will achieve that purpose. A global consensus framework exists, which this Government, or at least the Government elected in May 2015, helped to negotiate and write in the shape of the sustainable development goals. I said last week in Westminster Hall that, despite what may be read in some of the gutter and right-wing press, there is still public and political consensus in the UK on the importance of aid and the need to tackle global poverty.

The Secretary of State talks increasingly about making aid work in the national interest, but that raises the question: what is the national interest and how is it different from the goal of poverty eradication? Surely meeting the global goals in and of themselves is in the national interest, otherwise there is the implication that previously aid did not work in the national interest or that we have a deeper interest in its effectiveness beyond what the SDGs aim to achieve. If that is the case, what is that interest? What better or more noble purpose is there than the eradication of poverty and disease and the building of peace and equality for all? Surely a global community where everyone's basic needs are met, where education allows people to thrive and where health and wellbeing contribute to more peaceful societies is by definition in our own interests, as well as the interests of those we are seeking to help.

That is why the goals must be at the heart of the work of the CDC. Ending poverty should not be a happy or convenient by-product of profitable investments; it should be the other way around. If investments that create jobs and provide services that lift people out of poverty go on to make surpluses that can be reinvested in more of the same, all to the good, but it should not be assumed, especially in the context of fragile and developing countries and economies, that generating a return on investment will of itself provide a rising tide that floats all boats. Old-style aid-for-trade and trickle-down investment have left us with a world where we still need a 15-year timetable to meet the global goals, after 15 years working towards their predecessors, the millennium development goals; yet we live in a world of plenty with the knowledge, resources and capacity to meet and exceed all the targets in the goals. What is lacking is the political will. The Government must show they understand that and that their support for the CDC is but one small and proportionate intervention in the struggle for a fairer, more just and more peaceful world.

Every penny that the Government invest in the CDC is a penny not invested in traditional, proven methods of aid delivery, so they have to show why each of those pennies is not better spent on gender empowerment, nutrition, farming, education or any of the other programmes working in partnership, on a non-profit basis, with specialist and grassroots organisations on the ground in developing countries. If they want to maintain the consensus in the House on the use and purpose of aid, the Government must show willingness in the coming stages of the Bill to engage on the points that I and others have raised. I look forward to continuing that debate in the coming days.

3.22 pm

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my outside interests, among which are some financial interests in developing nations.

The scale of the development problem facing us is largely to do with the projected world population growth over the coming years, so it is right that the CDC focus on Africa and south Asia, as they are key areas of population growth. Twenty African nations are posting fertility rates in excess of five children per woman, and in some that figure is over seven. Africa is predicted to account for 80% of world population growth, quintupling its 1.2 billion population to add around 5 billion to the global population this century, while the number of Africans aged 15 to 24 is expected to nearly double by 2050 to 452 million.

These facts present some of the most outstanding challenges of our time: the impact on global warming, which we heard about earlier; environmental degradation; the impact on biodiversity and access to resources; and the potential consequences of war and migration, all of which can also have a big impact here at home. The only way to meet these immense challenges is to give people opportunities close to where they live, and that is what the CDC is helping to deliver: more job opportunities; better education so that people can take advantage of those opportunities; better health and reproductive care; and the involvement of women in the workforce. We should be helping other people to invest in these sorts of things.

The difference between the CDC and other kinds of aid is that these funds can be used to create businesses that can go on and have their own life and be recycled. Yes, some of the capital can come back to us, for us to reinvest, but, more importantly, these businesses can have a life of their own. If they are doing something well, they will be asked to do it again and again with their own capital, personnel and creativity. If we are to tackle those almost insurmountable challenges, they have to have their own life. The CDC can deliver that potential for scalability into the future and help us to cope with those challenges.
[Marcus Fysh]

The CDC is also great because it presents an example of good governance and an opportunity for us to lead by example—to inspire entrepreneurs, to build capital and expertise in local markets, and to develop companies and structures capable of stewarding their own capital into the future. This is about building trust in the future in nations where often a pound tomorrow is worth a lot more than a pound in just a few years, because they do not have the necessary confidence in local structures, in the enforceability of contracts or in their politics. If we can build that trust into the future through these methods, we can help to create a virtuous circle that has a great impact.

This investment can also bring us opportunities in terms of commercial information and so on. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) made some great points about the way the CDC works and about some of the great people involved with it. This is about creating human connections and using this country’s abilities to help nations develop in a positive way, to break down the barriers to development, to tackle crony capitalism, to reduce regulation, taxes and subsidies and licences, which often favour particular operators, and to enable more rapid growth and greater flexibility in those economies. That will also give stable politics a better chance in these places. I will happily support the Bill, and I commend it to the House.

3.27 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I have clearly touched a nerve with some of my comments about the Bill, which I am afraid I will not be giving the wholehearted support that some in the House have given it today.

The Government have attempted to portray the Bill as a minor technical matter, which should go through on the nod with minimal scrutiny and to which we should all give a big hurrah. What appears to be a minor technical two-clause Bill, however, is in fact far more significant and controversial. As we have heard, it proposes an immediate quadrupling of the limits on taxpayer funding of the CDC and then suggests a further doubling at the whim of the Secretary of State and without further primary legislation.

Now the CDC expansion, which has been significant from 1999 to the present day, has required only £1.5 billion of taxpayers’ money, a large amount of it in the very poorest countries. However, by stark contrast, the Bill will permit an increase of up to £12 billion over an as yet undefined period, although the explanatory notes make it clear that the Secretary of State intends to “accelerate CDC’s growth over the current Spending Round”. That could imply giving three times extra to the CDC—£4.5 billion—in three to four years’ time than it has needed in the last 17 years. According to the explanatory notes, this is justified as a response to an as yet undefined or evidenced “forecast market demand over CDC’s next strategy cycle and in order for the CDC to play a fuller role in the delivery of the UK’s international development objectives.”

Ministers rarely take powers without the intent to use them fully, and the transfer of powers to use secondary legislation should always be subject to robust scrutiny. I will explore in due course whether I believe this Bill, and the proposed increase for the CDC, meets three key tests. It is not whether it has met its plans as defined in 2012, but whether, first, it has demonstrated enough effectiveness to justify such a huge increase; secondly, whether it ensures an adequate focus on tackling poverty in the poorest countries; and thirdly, whether it acts in a coherent way with respect to the rest of DFID and indeed wider HMG policy.

Let me first suggest my own answer as to why such a huge increase has been proposed, and why now. One of the primary reasons may lie in a little noticed change to the reporting of our aid spending—official development assistance or ODA—last year, which saw the CDC’s contribution to meeting the 0.7% aid target dramatically altered. Until 2015, the investment activities of the CDC could either add to or subtract from our total aid spending. Simply put, we used to look at the net benefit of the CDC to developing countries by subtracting money flowing back to the CDC from the new investments it was making. In fact, this resulted in a positive contribution to our aid spending of £228 million in 2010; £91 million in 2011; £103 million in 2012; £100 million in 2013; and £42 million in 2014.

In 2015, however, there was a significant change. Instead of reporting with the same measure, which incidentally would, according to the House of Commons Library, have resulted in a negative contribution to the aid budget of minus £9 million, DFID changed its reporting so that the capital flow from the UK Government to the CDC is scored as ODA by DFID rather than the CDC scoring its own net disbursements as ODA. Instead of a negative impact on aid last year, the UK reported the capital increase reported to the CDC as aid, which was £450 million—a stark difference. We now looking at the total money DFID puts into the CDC counting as aid, regardless of which country or sector it ends up in, let alone whether it resulted in a net flow of resources to the poorest countries.

Why does this matter and how does it relate to the Bill? It matters because it would allow the Secretary of State to classify the entirety of future capital increases to the CDC as ODA or aid, potentially diverting, and effectively privatising, up to £12 billion of our future aid via the CDC, yet continuing to count it towards the 0.7% target. This is particularly important, given the different focuses and priorities of the CDC. I acknowledge that the differences have narrowed in recent years, and I shall come on to praise the work undertaken by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) in this area. However, the differences between the CDC and DFID’s objectives, and indeed its stated aims, are still significant, not least over whether our aid is focused on the very poorest countries that most need our support or on higher-income countries where we can more easily achieve quicker and bigger returns on investment. I shall return to this point.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman suggests that the aims are significantly different, yet 83% of the new CDC investments are in DFID partner countries and 56% of new investments are now in fragile and conflict-affected countries. Is that not in line with DFID’s objectives?

Stephen Doughty: As I shall come on to explain more fully, there has been a significant change and there has been a narrowing, but there is still a significant difference.
If we look at the bulk of the spending still being in India, we see a significant divergence from DFID’s priorities, as I shall come on to show. We were told that aid to India had ended, but apparently it has not.

This is also significant when coupled with an answer I received to a parliamentary question. I discovered that the amount of aid—ODA—to be spent by Departments other than DFID is set to increase from 18% this year to 26% in 2019. That is over a quarter of our aid spending going through Departments other than DFID. Even if we focus on the lower end of the implied proposal to spend billions extra via the CDC by the end of the spending review—let alone the £12 billion—we could be looking at anywhere from 35% to 45% of the DFID budget being spent, but not by DFID in the traditional sense. If the Secretary of State used her full power and more quickly than expected, it could be even higher. It is particularly ironic that the Secretary of State who promised us greater effectiveness, transparency and accountability in our aid spending appears to be willing to hand over billions of our aid funding to less transparent and less accountable parts of government.

Mr Mitchell: Surely the hon. Gentleman can be reassured by the fact that the Government have a double commitment, applying not just to the 0.7% but to the way in which it is spent under strict rules. Of course, any money that is spent by another Department is subject to the full investigation and rigour of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, which is a very important part of the equation. All ODA expenditure is subject to review and analysis by the development watchdog.

Stephen Doughty: Absolutely. I shall return shortly to what the NAO report actually said, as opposed to the slightly glossed-over version that we heard from the Secretary of State.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I have seen the NAO’s report, and what concerns me is the fact that it states:

“It remains a significant challenge for CDC to demonstrate its ultimate objective of creating jobs and making a lasting difference to people’s lives in some of the world’s poorest places. Given the Department’s plans to invest further in CDC, a clearer picture of actual development impact would help to demonstrate...value for money”.

Is that not the central problem? Does it not lie at the heart of the Bill?

Stephen Doughty: Indeed. I apologise for not being present at that meeting, but, as you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I had other commitments at the time. Obviously, the hon. Lady cannot attend all the meetings of all the groups in the House at any time either; she and I are both busy people. I hope that the Committees will investigate those matters, not least because of the volumes that we are talking about, but also because of the lack of transparency when it comes to documentation and the ability to scrutinise CDC’s spending, not least through its use of tax havens.

These dramatic shifts—under the cover of a “minor technical change” that we should all rush through in the House—must always set the alarm bells ringing for those of us who seek to scrutinise the Government and their decisions. I do not want to spend long on this, but we must feel additional alarm when we look at the agenda of the Secretary of State and consider what she has said about the Department being scrapped and about money being “stolen” and squandered. She does not like some of the headlines that have appeared in the Daily Mail. Obviously, she does not like the headlines that have appeared in newspapers such as the Financial Times. However, we are now seeing wild claims and accusations in the right-wing press which are clearly coming from her Department. Indeed, her special adviser has previously called for the 0.7% target to be abandoned, and in 2013 in The Sun described aid as an “unaccountable, bureaucratic and wasteful industry”.

Why does all this matter to the Bill? I believe that, faced with the legislative and political constraints of the cross-party support for the 0.7% aid target, the Secretary of State has opted for a stealthier route and has chosen...
to undermine the Department by diverting and reclassifying aid. I appreciate that others may not share my sense of scepticism, so let me now deal with three practical objections to the Bill. The Secretary of State said that she wanted facts, so let us have some.

I should make it clear at the outset that I am not opposed to the existence of a development finance institution of the CDC’s nature, or to its playing its part in our portfolio of international development efforts. Nor, obviously, do I oppose the funding of private sector projects. The development of a vibrant private sector, key infrastructure and the support of new and emerging businesses in the world’s poorest countries should be a key part of any balanced portfolio of development assistance, alongside investments in basic public services such as health, education, water, and support for agricultural improvement to tackle hunger and nutritional challenges.

The Secretary of State likes to give us the impression that she is the only person ever to have realised the importance of private sector development and trade to tackling poverty and promoting economic development, but the fact is that both have been at the heart of DFID’s work since it came into being, under Governments of all political persuasions. Supporting trade is crucial to international development.

**James Duddridge:** I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point that economic development has been important to DFID, but does he agree with me that successive Governments have been wholly unresponsive to co-ordinated work on economic development, whether we call it prosperity or trade? Successive Governments have not pulled that together and grabbed the opportunity, which could really help to grow continents such as Africa out of poverty. Much more should be done, and this House should be holding the Government and future Governments to account on this, and ask them to do more, not less, with the private sector.

**Stephen Doughty:** It is a mixed record. We had a joint DFID-DTI—as I think the Department was called then—Trade Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas), who did a lot of good work in trying to bring those things together, ensuring investment went to key infrastructure projects, different corridors in Africa and elsewhere, but it is a mixed record and the hon. Gentleman makes an important point.

There are many CDC investments that I and others welcome, which are well run and have delivered poverty-reducing outcomes in the poorest countries. We have heard about some of them today, such as those in Sierra Leone and Uganda. Indeed we were with the National Audit Office earlier today talking about some of the projects it had visited which clearly do justify our investment.

But where is the robust business case for such a large increase of billions of pounds of taxpayer spending? Why has this Bill been published before a CDC investment strategy? In the explanatory notes, the Secretary of State describes forecast market demand as the justification for the Bill. However, she has not explained this at all there; neither has she done so today, and nor did she in answer to a parliamentary question I put to her. I asked her to explain this concept of forecast market demand, but instead of an assessment that might justify this spending of up to £12 billion of taxpayers’ money, I was given some classic development waffle, such as:

“As set out in the UN’s Global Goals, urgent action is needed to mobilise”.

The answer did not go into any level of detail that we would expect on the spending of such a considerable sum of money.

Let me also be clear that, as Members may have gathered earlier, I am also critical of a whole series of actions and policies at the CDC that I am sorry to say occurred under the previous Labour Government; the sell-off of Actis was mentioned, and there was also excessive remuneration, and massive investments made in markets that already attracted foreign investors—which incidentally is still going on. These are just some of the issues that should have inspired tougher intervention. To give credit where it is due, many of the actions that the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) took in agreeing that new strategy took us away from some of the mistakes made in the past, but my question is whether they have gone far enough in justifying such a huge increase in the funding.

We should look at what the NAO said. Yesterday’s report noted:

“Our previous scrutiny of the Department’s oversight of CDC led to important, positive changes.”

It points to improvements in financial performance, organisation and prospective—let us return to that issue in a moment—development impact, as well as the clamping down on executive remuneration. The NAO also agrees that the strategy set by the Department in 2012 has been met.

However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) pointed out, the question for the House today is not merely whether the CDC has made improvements on a previous record deeply mired in controversy, or whether it is now adhering to the strategy set for it—which we can argue was right or wrong—in 2012; the question before us is whether a good enough case has been made that the CDC is performing so well and so effectively that it should receive that volume of increase in funding versus other potential outlets for that development spending. It is common sense that asking any institution, let alone one with a history of recent problems, to take on a significant increase in its funding over a short space of time may lead to less optimal outcomes and, at worst, failure. Were we proposing an additional £12 billion for those dangerous campaigning NGOs or the dastardly World Bank, or worse still the EU development funds, I have no doubt that the Government Benches would be crewed by the anti-aid brigade warning of the risk of our aid being “stolen” or squandered. But because it is for a more obscure part of our development finance architecture and has the words “private equity” and “private sector” associated with it, we seem to be willing to accept a lower level of assuredness.

**Mrs Flick Drummond** (Portsmouth South) (Con): Did the hon. Gentleman also read the bit of the report that says:

“Through tighter cost control, strengthened corporate governance and closer alignment with the Department’s objectives, CDC now has an efficient and economic operating model”,
and DFID’s “governance arrangements of CDC are thorough”?

**Stephen Doughty:** I did; I have read the whole report. It also states:

“‘It remains a significant challenge for CDC to demonstrate its ultimate objective of creating jobs and making a lasting difference to people’s lives in some of the world’s poorest places.’

It goes on to make other serious criticisms. On reporting impact, the NAO says:

“Changes in reporting development impact over the last four years have made it difficult for CDC and the Department to set out a consistent picture of what has been achieved.”

It criticises the CDC’s failure to deliver on the evaluation contract, which was a key part of the business case for the last recapitalisation involving more than £700 million. It criticises the CDC’s claim to have created 1 million jobs, stating that

“in 2015 it reported that more than one million direct and indirect jobs had been created…CDC does not attribute these jobs directly to the investment it makes in the company. Since 2012 it has been considering how to measure job quality but has not yet established an overall methodology to do so…its progress has been slow’.

Worryingly, the NAO warned that

“recruitment and retention challenges remain a significant risk to CDC’s operations.”

That is crucial for an organisation planning a massive financial expansion.

The CDC has indeed clamped down on excessive pay, although the CEO still takes home more than £300,000 a year, which is significantly more than the Prime Minister. However, the NAO also reports that

“the Department and CDC will shortly be negotiating a new remuneration framework”.

Could we expect salaries to go back up? Particularly worrying, one would think, for a Secretary of State who thinks that most of our aid is being “stolen” or squandered is some of the NAO commentary on the CDC’s efforts to tackle fraud and corruption. The NAO tells us that the CDC has

“only recently established systems to consolidate records of all the allegations it receives…This made it harder for it to provide comprehensive reporting to the Department.”

The NAO report states that DFID’s own internal audit team concluded that the figure of just four allegations of fraud and corruption at the CDC in the entire period from 2009 to 2016 was “surprisingly low”. At the very least, the CDC is worthy of the same level of robust scrutiny and criticism that is levelled at other development funding outlets.

**Fiona Bruce:** The hon. Gentleman asks where the business case is. Has he seen the letter of 23 November from the Secretary of State? In it, she says:

“No new capital to CDC would be released without a business case subject to full Ministerial scrutiny and approval and the agreement of CDC’s board.”

**Stephen Doughty:** That might be reassuring to the hon. Lady, but it does not reassure me, not least because the CDC has not even let the evaluation contract that was a key part of the last business case.

Let me turn to the disjoint between DFID’s priority countries and those in which the CDC operates. That disjoint is likely to grow even larger with such a significant uplift in funding. Even with the refocus in 2012, the list of 63 countries in which the CDC is allowed to invest is significantly larger than the approximately 35 countries on which DFID normally focuses its efforts. The list includes many countries to which DFID has ended its bilateral funding. The CDC can invest in India, South Africa—albeit with caveats—the luxury Indian ocean islands of the Seychelles, the Maldives and Mauritius, and many countries across north Africa including Egypt. Despite their problems and challenges, those countries would not normally be regarded as among the poorest in the world.

According to the House of Commons Library, the CDC spends more in gross aid and official development assistance than DFID does in certain—often middle-income—countries and regions, including some rather odd examples such as Algeria, Costa Rica, Mauritius, Morocco, South Africa and Thailand, as well as the more expected locations such as Cameroon, Niger and Côte d’Ivoire. Even if we discount the pre-2012 legacy investments in Latin America, the CDC is still investing the largest amounts in higher-income countries, according to data released to me in another parliamentary question.

At the top of the CDC investment list are India, which has received £760.5 million since 2009, South Africa with £194 million and, oddly, Egypt with £53.6 million. If we include the pre-2012 legacy investments, we find even more odd examples. India, South Africa—with caveats, as I said—and Egypt remain on the list of eligible countries for CDC investments, which is rather remarkable, given the fact that the last three Conservative Secretaries of State have made a huge meal of the fact that aid to India was ending. I find this strange. I took a long time to be convinced of the need to end our aid programme in India. There is clearly severe poverty in a whole series of Indian states. It is odd that a lion’s share of the CDC’s investments continue to go into a country that is not exactly the kind of frontier place for investment that the Secretary of State was talking about earlier. Is she really saying that India struggles to attract private investment capital and that we should be there at the forefront of those giving aid? I would find that hard to believe.

The House of Commons Library has found that the share of new investments in the poorest least-developed countries increased, but from just 4% to 12%, and the increase was from less than 1% to just 4% in the lower-income countries. The lion’s share of the CDC’s investments remained in the lower middle-income countries. The CDC’s own annual report for 2015 admits that its top four highest country exposures are India with 23%; China with 14%; Nigeria with 7%; and South Africa with 6%. It also tells us that just 6% of its investment goes into agriculture and just 6% into education. Bizarrely, those are not far ahead of real estate and mineral extraction. Focus has clearly improved, but the easiest and quickest returns for the CDC remain in certain sectors that are far removed from traditional, vital development impacts and in huge markets such as India and South Africa, not the world’s poorest countries. If the Secretary of State’s agenda is all about building a bilateral trading relationship with India in the post-Brexit environment and if we need to push our aid that way to sweeten deals, we should come clean about that. Many people feel that things are headed that way. Funds are not going towards the Department’s original development objectives.
Why does the CDC require such a potentially massive capital injection of taxpayers’ money when it managed perfectly well without one until last year? It recycles 100% of its profits and has total net assets of £4 billion, which rose by 16% in the last year, and an investment portfolio of £3 billion. Why does it need additional money in such large volumes?

Turning to tax havens and coherence, the Chancellor told us in last week’s autumn statement that the Government are committed to tackling tax evasion, avoidance and aggressive tax planning, and today the Business Secretary told us all about Government plans to crack down on corporate governance. The Government have repeatedly claimed that they have attempted to crack down on tax havens—not least in the aftermath of the Panama papers. Yet we find the CDC’s investment vehicles in those very papers. No less than 11 CDC subsidiaries are located in the Cayman Islands, 40 in Mauritius, and five in the Channel Islands. Oxfam points that three quarters of CDC investments in 2013 were routed through jurisdictions that feature in the top 20 of the Tax Justice Network’s financial secrecy index. Christian Aid has also been critical of the CDC, stating that it “has been shown to be a heavy user of secretive tax havens, which serve both to obscure what is really going on with its investments and can also reduce the amount of tax its investee companies pay in poor countries”.

Even if Ministers, the International Development Committee or others wanted to scrutinise properly what is going on, the lack of transparency and detail provided by the CDC and the fancy shell companies make it incredibly difficult.

Our wider development and sustainability policies might also be incoherent. Many CDC projects are clearly coherent with DFID objectives and the sustainable development goals. We heard about electricity in Uganda, which is linked to deforestation, habitat degradation and climate change.

Without being able to get more detail from the CDC’s documents, it is difficult to know where the money is going and what it is being used for; but those are odd inconsistencies. The CDC apparently invests £29.2 million in GEMS Education Africa, the website of which describes a network of private fee-paying schools and education providers in “leafy, residential” locations that charge anything from around £18,000 to 1,287,000 Kenyan shillings a year—up to £10,000. The CDC also holds a 22.8% share in Rainbow Children’s Medicare Private Ltd, a fee-paying private hospital group in India that the NAO visited as part of its inquiry, saying that the investment was apparently in the whole company and not even focused on improving access for the poorest, for example. The former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), mentioned Feronia Inc. in which the CDC has invested £15.1 million. The main boast on its website is of replanting 13,000 hectares of palm oil, a commodity which is linked to deforestation, habitat degradation and climate change.

I am normally able to make a case for our development spending by appealing to moral duty and our national interest, not least when it comes to dealing with countries of conflict or instability, or with the huge migration flows we see. I am heartened by those among the younger generations who care about the prospects of our fellow humans around the world. I recently visited Moorland Primary School, in one of the more deprived areas of my constituency, where children told me that they wanted me to speak to Ministers to get more money provided for education in the poorest countries and to ensure that children are able to go to school and that they have healthcare and clean water. I will struggle to explain to those children why the Secretary of State wants to spend billions of our taxes handng money to what is, in effect, a privatised firm that does not need this amount of money; that gives large portions of it to countries that do not need it; that pays its chief executive officer more than £300,000 a year; and that invests through tax havens. It has some laudable aims, but it is not proving its effectiveness.

In conclusion, the Bill massively increases that funding to CDC and it fails three crucial tests. The first of those is the effectiveness test: the NAO assessment simply does not provide the evidence needed to back up such a huge increase in funding—has CDC even requested it? Secondly, it fails the poverty-focus test, as CDC remains massively focused on higher-income countries and high-return sectors, rather than on those that we should be pushing our efforts into. Thirdly, it fails the coherence test, given the continued use of tax havens and projects that simply do not sit comfortably with our wider development objectives. In its current form, this is a bad Bill. That does not mean that I do not support the continuation of the CDC and that I do not recognise that much of its work is good, but this level of increase is a stealthy way of diverting money away from our work in DFID, alongside the diversion to other Departments. We ought to scrutinise the Bill very carefully in Committee.

3.56 pm

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I suspect I am going to have the privilege of serving on the Committee with the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). I will not go into this at the same length as he did, but he should beware: we are both supporters of DFID and of the 0.7% budget, but our enemies out there will use his comments and his narrative to criticise the fundamentals we believe in. I do not want to stand in the way of proper scrutiny, but hon. Members on both sides of the House should be very careful about the tone of the language we use, because we do now have consensus going forward.

I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and say from the outset that I am incredibly proud of our 0.7% commitment and of the
work that the CDC does, I would find it strange to find any Conservative MP standing to support the work of Clement Attlee and Clare Short in one sentence, let alone one debate, but we do stand united in this work, despite the blips over the years, many of which my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) has resolved or has at least been able to point in the right direction.

My experience of the CDC has been substantive over time. I was a young banker in a small place called Nhlangano, one of the poorest places in Swaziland. It was CDC investment in the Shiselweni Forestry Company, my main client, that really generated wealth for that area. It put food on the table for the thousands of citizens and the hundreds of other clients that I had as a banker in that country. Over the years, Swaziland has been helped by 16 different CDC projects. The one for which I was the banker has now moved on—it is profitable and continuing, but not under a CDC auspice—but the CDC is still in the forestry sector in Pigg’s Peak, Swaziland.

In the Ivory Coast, I was interested in delving into a francophone country, looking beyond the Commonwealth, to see what we were doing in developing middle-income countries that can provide inspiration and trade throughout the geography of west Africa. Although I did not have any clients from the the CDC, I used to work for Banque Atlantique Côte d’Ivoire, now part of the Atlantic Bank Group, in which the CDC has invested. The small bank I was a member of had only about 30 employees. I am not sure exactly what has happened subsequently, but during that investment period that small bank has become much larger, with banks in Benin, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Togo, Senegal and Cameroon. Those countries—a real mix of countries—are hard for British development aid to reach, but are a really good example of where the CDC can assist.

I wish to mention, as other colleagues have, the great work of Diana Noble, who took on the job at a difficult time and who has transformed the organisation and led a very strong team. I wish her well in her future beyond the CDC.

To those who work at the CDC, I say thank you, because in many ways they are between a rock and a hard place. People involved in African private equity feel that those at the CDC are putting development before profit and are not earning lots of money. The non-governmental organisations think that they are putting profit before development. In truth, they are in a sweet spot in the middle, and they do exactly what Clement Attlee wanted: to do good without losing money. In many ways, this is the gift that keeps on giving. Comparison has been made between a pound that goes into traditional aid and a pound that goes into the CDC. The main difference is that the pound that goes into aid is spent immediately, which is very positive, but the pound that goes into the CDC is retained—it is an investment that grows, whether that is by the 7.8% that we have seen over the past five years, or by a slightly more modest investment target of 3%, which focuses more on the development aspect.

As a former banker, I am perhaps the only Member in the House who can get thoroughly excited about compound interest, but, over time, this is a growing pool of money. There are those who will wonder why we are talking about £1.5 billion, when the assets of the CDC are nearly £3.9 billion. That shows the power of investment—of retaining the money. It is the gift that keeps on giving.

I, too, have looked at the investment in palm oil in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where 9,000 workers are employed. I have dealt with places such as the DRC and Burundi—other colleagues have interacted with them—and they are horrendously difficult places in which to work. They are also politically difficult for the UK Government, but the CDC, through its intermediaries, provides inspiration in those places.

The CDC also actively targets countries that are low on the World Bank’s ease of doing business index, of which I am a great advocate, as a way of proving that business can be conducted more effectively if one can speed up the ease of doing business.

Celitel has been mentioned. Indorama in Nigeria is fantastic. Like Sir Paul Collier, I very much believe that the real benefits and advantages of economic development in Nigeria will come through Port Harcourt and not through the oil industry.

This is, to reiterate a point I made in an intervention, a progressive Bill. I do not share the concerns of the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth that it is a Machiavellian way of diverting money. A business case will come. I do not believe that the Secretary of State will bring forward a business case to spend the full £66 billion over the course of this Parliament. Even if she does, it will still only be 8% of the overall DFID budget for those years. Obviously, the £12 billion of investment is compounded over time. It should not be compared with the slightly larger figure, which is our annual investment in the budget. We need to be careful that our enemies do not take advantage of our criticisms and use the similarity of the figures to make it look like there has been a sea-change on this Bill. If this Bill was about taking money from the poor and making money for the sake of it in India and South Africa, I would not support it.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP) rose—

James Duddridge: I will not take the intervention, because I want to conclude.

I strongly support the CDC. It is the right move and it is a progressive move. I hope that Members from both sides of the House will agree to have a proper debate in Committee and to support the Bill on Third Reading to start to grow Africa in particular but also Asia out of poverty.

4.4 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge). The hon. Gentleman was very robust in saying that the CDC is a gift that keeps on giving, as the aid keeps getting recirculated, but I would gently suggest that if it was as simple as that we would not need international aid at all, because we could just have that gift keeping on giving. It is quite clear that we still need international aid and we need to protect international aid budgets.

It is clear that there is consensus across the House that the principle of the CDC is a good one; a not-for-profit private sector company that encourages growth and
additional investment in developing countries is very welcome. We have heard that it has stimulated growth and investment with varying degrees of success over a long period of time. We have also heard that it is not infallible; it has had issues and is starting to address them in a welcome way. Yesterday’s National Audit Office report shows that there are still further issues to address, so I agree we need a robust debate in Committee to try to pick up on them.

We have heard about salaries, and excessive salaries have clearly hit the news in the past. Yesterday’s report welcomes progress on reducing average annual salary costs from a high of £154,000 in 2009 to £90,000 in 2015. That is still quite a decent average salary; I think most people could live off that. The report acknowledges that the CDC has expressed concern about staff attrition and difficulties in recruitment as a consequence of lower salaries, but the report also notes that the staff attrition rate has plateaued at about half of its peak in 2012. I also note that salaries have increased again year on year from 2013. That suggests that a balance has been reached between staff attrition and salaries, but we need to watch that salary levels do not keep on increasing year on year. As we have heard elsewhere, £300,000 for a chief executive is a good salary. It is higher than that of the Prime Minister or of the Secretary of State for International Development. That chief executive’s salary has exceeded £300,000 for two years running now.

Mr Mitchell: Although £300,000 is a large salary, will the hon. Gentleman at least accept that in coming to take this job Diana Noble took a massive salary reduction? He should bear that in mind when considering these salaries.

Alan Brown: I note the right hon. Gentleman’s comments and, yes, if she took a massive reduction in salary that is clearly welcome, and the overall salaries have reduced, which sets a marker for the future if Diana Noble chooses to move on. At least there is a lower salary peg, and she has led the way with that. I accept that, but we need to recognise that it is a substantial salary. That cannot be forgotten.

The NAO report also states that there is now a greater focus on investing in poorer countries rather than markets that already attract foreign investors. That is welcome, but according to a Library paper investment in the poorest countries has increased from 4% to only 12%, with 4% of investment in the next income tier countries. Investment in the upper middle income countries exceeds the combined total of 16% in the lower two tiers. More work needs to be done and a measurable target should be put in place to encourage investment in the lowest income countries.

The NAO report also confirms that, as regards its financial performance, the CDC’s annual return on its portfolio ranges from 4% to 18% against a target of 3.5%. Normally, when a target is massively exceeded that suggests that it is too low or, as seems to be the case here, the returns are too high. If the returns are too high, either more money is being returned from the countries that have been invested in than is necessary or not enough marginal projects are being invested in. That needs to be considered. I accept that some of the historical returns are due to legacy projects that were invested in and had much higher returns because of the hedge fund system, so I hope that that will continue to be addressed and that we will see lower returns and the right investment in projects.

Although the NAO report says that there is a robust core business and that the CDC is in a good place to go forward, as has been mentioned by some hon. Members, what stands out is the need for better assessment and reporting of outcomes and the planned impact of investment. A more accurate assessment of the jobs created is required, as well as “a clearer picture of actual development impact”.

That is crucial. To this end, it is clear that the NAO recommendations on performance targets and an evaluation contract must be implemented as soon as possible.

The NAO believes that the absence of a measure of additionality is a flaw, as additionality is a core principle of the investment strategy. That needs to be remedied. The Department should consider making it mandatory for the CDC to report on the four indicators outlined in paragraph 2.23 of the NAO report, which correlate to the CDC business case.

As has been mentioned, several organisations have expressed concern about the CDC’s tax transparency. “Transparency” is a buzzword that has been used by both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State. If the CDC does not lead by example, it does not encourage other investors to avoid the use of tax havens. Worse still, the use of tax havens reduces the tax take of developing countries, preventing their Governments from generating additional revenue that they could invest in capital schemes, services or revenue support schemes. As long as the CDC has a model whereby it re-invests profit, it cannot adopt the “profit at any cost” ethos of the worst of the private sector. That becomes self-defeating, and smaller returns resulting from paying its full tax dues should not be a matter for debate.

It is clear that the use of tax havens takes away from the sustainability of developing countries. It is some five years on since the International Development Committee advised that transparency is essential for the public to hold the CDC to account. At present, the CDC is still some way off best practice and the transparency that the Government aspire to. The CDC scored “poor” in the 2012 aid transparency index, so for the Government to commit huge amounts of extra funding before improvements are made is not consistent with the Secretary of State’s stated aim of improving transparency across the aid budget. Aid cannot work in the national interest if three quarters of the CDC’s investments are routed through jurisdictions that feature in the top 20 of the Tax Justice Network’s financial secrecy index. That cannot be in the long-term national interest.

Oxfam has highlighted this issue, as well as other concerns about transparency, suitable investment and the use of tax havens. In addition, Christian Aid, which is a member of the ACT Alliance, a global coalition of more than 130 Churches and organisations engaged in humanitarian assistance, has called for an end to the use of tax havens. It is clear that the practice must be ended.

The founding principles of the CDC are good. Some of its working needs to be fine-tuned, and it is important that this happens before any more Government money
is funnelled in. It needs to be explained what share of the overall aid budget this increase constitutes and what other types of aid might be reduced to make way for this investment. As others have asked, why have the Government introduced this Bill before publication of the CDC’s investment strategy for 2017-21? I note that the autumn statement last week shows a net decrease in overseas development assistance of some £80 million next year and a further £210 million the following year. It is crucial, therefore, that an arm’s-length company is not funded at the expense of other required aid. As the NAO report states, “It remains a significant challenge for CDC to demonstrate its ultimate objective of creating jobs and making a lasting difference to people’s lives in some of the world’s poorest places.” We must not forget that. We need put in place everything that is necessary to allow that to happen.

4.14 pm

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Although this is a relatively straightforward Bill, which I had hoped would have the support of all Members of the House, it is worth examining some aspects of the strategic background to our DFID commitments.

I associate myself wholeheartedly with the wise and experienced words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) when they touched on the transformation of the CDC’s work over the past half-decade or so. I must confess that I did not recognise some of the rather more jaundiced views of its work, as set out in the rather long contribution from the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty).

Fiona Bruce: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the selective quoting of the NAO report by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, who is no longer in his place, did not do justice to its conclusion that, overall, DFID’s grip on the CDC is strong and that the CDC has made radical improvements since the NAO’s last report in 2008?

Mark Field: I agree with everything my hon. Friend has to say.

I am glad that the Secretary of State is now back in her place, and I wholeheartedly support her somewhat expansive approach, which has been criticised in certain quarters during the debate. She appears determined to ensure that the UK utilises all its assets, including the DFID budget, to secure an optimal deal for the nation, not just as we extricate ourselves from the EU, but in the years to come.

That must mean extending DFID’s reach beyond the traditional aid referred to in the debate to broader development and infrastructure and to things such as security, but also to community sustainability and resilience across the globe. That change is long overdue, and I should like briefly to set out some of the somewhat negative ways in which DFID’s culture has developed since the Department was established in 1997, which I sincerely trust the Bill will help to address.

DFID was originally seen as a key component of an ethical foreign policy, centralising in a single Department overseas aid money that were previously in the budgets of the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office. The result was that those major Departments of State were left at that time with little or no financial autonomy on key international projects—regrettably, in my view.

Instead, a new culture of programming took hold in DFID, which managed out what was seen as inappropriate spending that could cause presentational problems for the Government of the day. Cautious mandarins became more risk averse, and DFID project money was routinely awarded to known international bodies, such as the World Bank or UNICEF, rather than to smaller, nimble UK organisations and businesses.

That ensured that the Government would not be seen to be promoting corporate Britain abroad under the cloak of humanitarian assistance, but it also left those recognised brands to deal with any fallout, should questions be raised about the success of particular programmes. Indeed, the very respectability of those organisations tended to mute any testing questioning about the effectiveness and impact of what has become an ever-larger amount of British aid money. That shift, I fear, went hand in hand with the emergence of increasingly professional bidders, who learned to speak the language of DFID programmers to win contracts.

Too often, the result has been ponderous, expensive and wasteful programming, and I know that that culture is very much in the sights of the Secretary of State, who wants to eradicate it. In part, DFID programmers have often been overloaded with cash, which has been increasingly bundled off to the international bodies I mentioned. I am therefore absolutely delighted that the Bill increases the scope for money to be used by domestic bodies that are within the Government’s control and able to enact the Government’s priorities in the new world rapidly unfolding before us.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield laid out the way in which the CDC rightly operates. There is rightly oversight from not just the Government but a range of Select Committees, but we ultimately leave the organisation to get on and do the job that it is best able to achieve.

We need, above all, to ensure that DFID is not as process driven as it has perhaps been in the past, which has reduced our agility in this field and risked the benchmark for the success of our development aid being simply the amount spent, rather than the added value delivered, as has been referred to. That does not make our ongoing 0.7% commitment to overseas aid wrong—some of my right hon. and hon. Friends would probably disagree with that—and I am absolutely supportive of it, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East. Indeed, the case for extending Britain’s reach in this field grows stronger every day as we are confronted domestically with problems whose roots start many thousands of miles away.

I do, though, question whether, particularly as we leave the EU, large parts of DFID’s budget should not now be made available to the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence or the Department for International Trade, all of which should, necessarily and rightly, come under some scrutiny and oversight from DFID, but there should, none the less, be that sense of joined-up co-operation within the Government. That would enable and authorise those on the ground, whether in overseas embassies, military bases, or part and parcel of our intelligence services, to spend sensibly, carefully and locally against agreed objectives rather than within the rather ham-fisted DFID programming process.
Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I am listening very carefully to my right hon. Friend and agree with everything he has said so far. Does he agree that there are still some savings to be made by bringing all those agents and representatives of Her Majesty’s Government abroad under one umbrella? Too often we see competing officials from the different Departments who, to save money, should all come under the umbrella of, probably, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is quite right to slap down the former Foreign Office Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire), on his implied suggestion that we should go back rather than forwards and put DFID under the Foreign Office: that is basically what he was saying. We have long ago said that that is the wrong way to proceed. Let me point out that there are already pooled funds of the type that he describes. In my day at DFID—I have every reason to believe that this continues—whenever there was eligible funding under the ODA rules that the Ministry of Defence or the Foreign Office wanted to spend, they would always have access to those funds. The huge amount of DFID money that goes through the Foreign Office now bears testament to that.

Mark Field: I would like to think that I am much too diplomatic to slap anyone down, although he knows where we are all coming from.

Sir Hugo Swire: Just to clarify this, I am not sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) was correct in saying what I was proposing. I was certainly not suggesting that the Department should come back within the Foreign Office. I was merely saying that I saw huge synergies to be achieved overseas where we have representatives from many Departments, including the Ministry of Defence, DFID and the former Department of Energy and Climate Change and that we should look towards making greater savings so that we can spend the money where it is needed.

Mark Field: I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield was not wilfully misleading anyone on these matters. I am going to be slapped down myself by the Whips if I am not careful, because I need to make a little progress.

I hope that in further empowering the CDC, which, as has been pointed out, is 100% owned by Her Majesty’s Government, we are now making way for a more cross-departmental approach, with the DIT and indeed the FCO able to access CDC funds for projects within the key Commonwealth states, particularly in Africa and South Asia.

In this very dangerous and uncertain world, the importance of integrating our foreign aid with military, diplomatic and trade commitments cannot be overstated. To prevent crime and curb new waves of immigration and to stop the spread of disease, our efforts can be made more effective by concentrating on the source of an issue. Hunger relief and health programmes may of course be laudable in their own right, but British people want urgently to understand how DFID money benefits them personally, and so there will no doubt be widespread support for more money being channelled through bodies such as the CDC rather than—dare I say it?—virtually unaccountable international organisations that have previously received millions of pounds in UK aid. We should also, as a matter of course, communicate how strengthening our ties with developing countries will be of huge benefit in terms of our trade, energy and security interests in this post-Brexit era. By moving away from a situation where too much of DFID’s budget and powers has been placed in the hands of international non-governmental organisations, I firmly believe that we will be able better to fulfil many more of our nation’s broader strategic interests.

4.24 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field). It is quite pleasant to be in the Chamber listening to the debate, because even though we appear to have differences over tactics and policies, there does seem to be some agreement on the overall objectives that we are trying to achieve, and I very much welcome that.

As far as I can recall this is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) said, the first opportunity we have had in this Parliament to discuss the wider strategic direction of the Department. I welcome the fact that the Government have achieved the 0.7% target. I commend them for doing so and providing an example to the rest of the world, particularly to our partner nations, to encourage them to do better with their aid budgets. Now that the Secretary of State is back in her place, I congratulate her and welcome her conversion to supporting her Department’s aims, rather than continuing with her previous attitude.

I was first exposed to the idea of international development as a kid at school in the late ’60s and early ’70s, when my mum was an enthusiastic participant in Christian Aid Week. I remember her spending a lot of time trying to raise money for Christian Aid to support projects in southern and eastern Africa. That was a long time ago, when I was very young, but I thought it was remarkable that, despite the fact that many people in my community lived in straitened circumstances, there was a common decency—people understood that there were always others who were worse off and that they had a common humanitarian responsibility to make some effort to assist, no matter how small.

Even in those days, there were critics of aid—of Christian Aid, Oxfam and all the others—who took a less selfless and more parsimonious attitude. Their criticism was twofold. They questioned whether the aid was actually going to the people in the destination country who needed it most, and there was a continual suggestion that the people working in aid and organising the efforts were lining their own pockets.
Many of our NGOs—Christian Aid, Oxfam and others—have had to work for the last 40 years under the veil of those accusations. They make quite sure that they can counter those accusations and demonstrate that they are directly involved in projects in the countries that need it and that they work with the people in those countries to achieve sustainable development. They have also had to make public details of their organisation and cut their administrative costs to the core, so that they can demonstrate that they are delivering the maximum number of pennies per pound for the purposes for which that money was given.

I commend all those NGOs for doing so, but here is the problem with the CDC that we need to address. This does not apply to the majority of the projects in which the CDC is engaged, and it is not the CDC’s objective, but in quite a few cases, and not just occasional instances, public money—taxpayers’ money—has been used for purposes that people such as my mum would have difficulty comprehending. How can we justify, for example, the use of $3.5 million to support the development of a gated community in El Salvador for the super-rich? How can we justify the development in Nairobi of the Garden City Village and the shopping mall—$2 billion spent in that instance? How can we justify the development in Mauritius of the ocean village, with apartments costing a minimum of half a million dollars? It is difficult to hold those examples up and say that we are doing the right thing.

We need to make sure that that does not happen again. I have had arguments with people who justify such projects on the basis of the trickle-down theory. They say, “It may be a five-star hotel in an area of desperate deprivation, but look at the jobs that are being created.” Anyone who seriously thinks that an investment of $20 million or $30 million to create 50 low-paid service jobs in a hotel is an efficient use of aid money needs to re-examine their priorities. Let us assume that we do not have to engage with that neo-con argument.

I am not simply talking about things not being achieved; the situation is worse than that. By spending money on such projects and making mistakes with them, we may replicate and ingrain some of the structural problems that prevent us from raising the lot of the population in the first place. We need to be absolutely clear that such projects should not be some sort of international welfare scheme for capitalism, where we allow people to get super-rich while the poorest stay right where they are or, in relative terms, possibly become even worse off.

In that context, I want to mention the whole question of salaries and remuneration within the CDC. This is not to criticise or castigate any individual in any way, but I thought the Secretary of State did well to keep a straight face earlier in the debate when she talked about the chief executive’s salary being reduced to just £300,000 per year. Most people would question whether it is right that someone leading an organisation whose ostensible role is to combat global poverty should get that level of reward in that job. I accept that part of the game is to play the private equity markets and to try to lever in funds, and we need to let people play such games. However, I welcome the education from the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who described the renationalisation of a part of government that was privatised under the Blair Administration. That was right because, while these people are engaged in private equity schemes and trying to play capitalism at its highest level, they should remain public servants. Their ethos and their remuneration—how they are rewarded—should be as part of the Government operation that is working for such people on behalf of this Parliament. They should not be cut loose and allowed to pretend that they can operate like private bankers. I very much hope that we can have a solid look at the level of remuneration that operates in the CDC.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) has mentioned, yesterday’s National Audit Office report says a number of things. I was struck by the fact that it says—the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield remarked that people working in the organisation looked over their shoulder with some apprehension when the Department’s officers came to call—there is a need to clarify that the Department should not be involved in individual project decisions and should distance itself. I agree: you do not own a dog and then bark yourself. If we are to hire people to do the job, particularly where it entails taking risks, we should let them get on and do it. I accept that, but the corollary is that we need to be much more hands-on in determining the strategy within which they operate and about the objectives that they are trying to achieve with their individual decisions. I therefore think it is probably putting the cart before the horse to have a discussion on this Bill before we have seen the CDC’s strategy for 2017 to 2021, which I presume is in preparation somewhere. Will the Minister tell us in his response whether we will be able to look at the strategy when it comes to the House?

The other point I want to make is about transparency. In 2013, three quarters of all the money going through the CDC’s accounts went to fund projects in the top 20 least transparent countries, where we are trying to improve things. Back when we discussed the Panama papers earlier in the year, the then Prime Minister and Government were very explicit about how we would try to clean up this mess and about how Britain would lead a campaign for financial transparency throughout the world. The absence of such transparency of course creates the conditions for illegality and for corruption in many of the target countries that we are trying to get aid to. I presume that that attitude has not changed and that we are still trying to lead a campaign for financial transparency. I therefore think it is very important, through the realm of the CDC, to make sure that when we try to lever in deals in these countries, we do so in a completely transparent way. We could start by making a commitment that the CDC will pay all the taxes due on projects in the countries in which it operates. We should also make sure that we use whatever pressure we can apply through third parties to advance the campaign for transparency.

That is pretty much all I have to say, except that we still live in a world where we have tremendous challenges and problems of extreme poverty, malnutrition, disease and illiteracy. I accept the need to play international capitalism at its own game and to try to lever in funds—to operate in the way that the CDC has been doing—but the end objectives must always be to make that situation better: eradicating poverty, combating illiteracy, eradicating disease. When we come back to look at the strategy document, we must set ourselves the challenge of making sure that everything the CDC does—every project it gets involved in—can, at the end of the day, be justified by attaining those objectives.
Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in support of a Bill that will strengthen one of the world’s oldest and most respected development organisations. The Commonwealth Development Corporation has always enjoyed cross-party support and has been an important part of the transition of Britain from colonial power to leader of international development. The Bill is a sign of the focus this Government have given to the CDC and to our overseas development programmes across the board. We can be proud of our commitment to supporting overseas development in all its forms.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) said, when this Government took office in 2010 the CDC was a byword for strategic confusion and mismanagement. Everyone from the National Audit Office to Private Eye could find something to object to in either its structure or its activities. Thanks to the work of this Government, initiated by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and followed up by his successors, the CDC and the way DFID manages it have evolved and improved. The CDC has radically transformed its approach over the past five years, following new objectives agreed with the UK Government. It targets investment where it is most needed, has the greatest impact for the poorest and delivers value for money for the UK taxpayer.

Many of the fears about the Bill and criticisms of the CDC that have been aired today belong to a different era. Some of my constituents have raised the issue of the amount of money that we spend on foreign aid. It is important that that money is spent wisely and transparently. We need to observe the remit of supporting businesses that struggle to achieve the global goals for sustainable development by 2030, we need to mobilise the private sector and work together. That helps the CDC in two ways. It allows it to target its involvement at areas that genuinely meet the remit of supporting businesses that struggle to attract private sector investment. It also helps it to meet one of the goals set out in yesterday’s NAO report, namely better tracking of the success rate of the CDC’s investments. The CDC now concentrates on the poorest countries in Africa and Asia, where business finds it hard to attract stable and responsible investment from the private sector. It is right that the development finance institutions lead the way in those countries, and we should not be shy about it.

We invest more in aid overall than our European partners and invest less through development finance institutions. The CDC estimates the investment gap of unmet demand for capital investment in Africa to be more than $100 billion. If we want to bring jobs and growth to the poor, we must help them to help themselves. This simple and, I hope uncontroversial Bill does that. It is not an approval or a commitment to give the CDC access to £6 billion immediately, but to give it when there is a strong, robust, accountable and transparent business case that will provide the best value that aid can provide. I hope the House supports the Bill.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): Sitting through the debate and listening to so many informed contributions has been informative, even the speech from the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). Perhaps it was a little overlong in duration and repetitive in argument, but none the less it was a valuable contribution to the overall debate. Many of us welcome his general support for the direction of travel in the Bill and his points about oversight were well made.

Although I fully support the 0.7% commitment to aid, I do not agree with its statutory underpinning, which I believe will lead to unintended consequences. One reason why I welcome the Bill is that it helps in that respect. I fully and wholeheartedly welcome the Secretary of State’s introduction of the Bill for three principal reasons: it is modern; it will prove to be effective; and most importantly, it sets a tone of mutual respect between the United Kingdom and those countries and peoples who are the recipients of our DFID budget. The Bill will do that by harnessing the power of entrepreneurs around the world. It is those people who hold the key to so much in terms of the improvement of lives in less developed countries.
The CDC is an institution in which taxpayers can trust. We have talked about oversight and past concerns—as my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) spoke of his experience as Secretary of State, when he saw people’s recognition of the brand’s strength. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), who is no longer in his place, spoke of his ministerial experience. Trust in our DFID budget is important. It is not enough for hon. Members to say, “It doesn’t matter. Everything’s fine. We all agree.” Out there in the country, there is tremendous scepticism—it is fuelled not only by the press—about the amount of money, whether it is being spent in the right way, and whether we should continue with the 0.7% commitment. Having institutions that we can trust to spend the money wisely is important. The Bill gives us that and is a big step forward in restoring trust.

The Bill is modern. As I have said, I am not knowledgeable about DFID issues in general, but I was drawn to the 2015 speech by Bono at Georgetown University, when he said: “Aid is just a stop-gap. Commerce, entrepreneurial capitalism takes more people out of poverty than aid...of course, we know that.”

He was correct. Through the Bill, we must counter some of the pre-scepticism about the role of the private sector in developing countries in achieving some of our development goals. We must put our foot down on the accelerator of supporting the private sector through institutions such as the CDC.

I am tempted to quote Sir Angus Deaton from Bloomberg—he is the Scottish-American economist who won the Nobel prize last year. He said:

“Aid funded projects have understandably done much good...but the negative forces are always present: even in good environments, aid compromises institutions, it contaminates local politics and undermines democracy”.

The greatest bulwark against the corruption of political institutions, and one of the greatest defenders of democracy, is the opportunity for people to have a stake in something. People having a stake in a small business can preserve and protect freedoms, as well as enhance economic wellbeing. Human happiness is not solely a matter of one’s GDP; once one gets above a minimum, other issues start to matter, such as freedom and social environment.

Having that stake is also effective. The CDC and its work as a fund of funds created a distinctive expertise in investing in first-time funds in some of the most challenging investment environments across the world. We should be proud of that track record. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield for explaining the move to direct investment. I had been sceptical, thinking it was drawing the CDC away from a pivotal part of its success, but I now better appreciate the role of direct investment, thanks to his contribution. The CDC nurtures investment talent. Growing entrepreneurship and private enterprise is not just about entrepreneurs; it is about developing people to spot the talented entrepreneurs from the less talented, and in that the CDC does a tremendous job.

That said, I have some questions and concerns about the Bill. Will the Minister explain how, if we are to give more money to the CDC, the skills within it can be developed and monitored? As many hon. Members have said, the worst thing is to pile money in if the team investing the money does not have the skillset, capacity or capability to invest it. What will we do about the investment focus areas? Contrary to other comments, perhaps, I am keen to see the investment focus move into more modern areas that provide opportunities for companies in developing countries to trade with the UK, as well as provide domestic support. Will the CDC be able to lever investors from other countries into its fund to develop further its capital for international development? Will he comment on the likely value of the CDC in the near term, given the comments by President-elect Trump on international development and the likely impact of the rising dollar on turbulence in local currencies in many developing countries?

Finally, I support the Bill because it will create mutual respect. It is time for us to recognise that development in developing countries is a matter for many UK citizens through the diaspora. There is no imbalance in that relationship: a British Nigerian sees themselves as a British subject and, on an equivalent basis, looks to their heritage in Nigeria. The work of DFID should reflect that equivalence in its treatments. The Bill is perhaps a first step towards promoting mutual respect. Other possible measures are turning back protectionist intellectual property restrictions between developed and developing worlds, using the opportunity of Brexit to lower trade barriers, and creating more and effective ways to harness remittances between ourselves and developing countries.

This is a small but important Bill because it sets the tone in the right direction. It sends a message that this organisation, which had a long history of effectiveness, went through a period of turbulence and is now back on the right course, can have the confidence of the British people as it continues to pursue its development goal for people in the poorest countries of the world.

4.48 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): On behalf of other members of the Select Committee, I inform the House that many of them are abroad on a visit to the middle east but would have spoken in the debate had they been here. It would be wrong for me to indicate how they would have spoken or whether, like me, they support the Bill, but I will put on the record one or two comments previously made by members of the Committee. As long ago as 2011, my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) said in a debate on the CDC:

“It is extremely important that the Government should continue to support CDC.”—[Official Report, 14 July 2011; Vol. 531, c. 169WH.]

An IDC report on jobs and livelihood in the last Parliament stated:

“We are encouraged that CDC has followed our recommendations and has refocused on job creation.”

A final Select Committee example is a recent report on the sustainable development goals, which stated:

“The Government must ensure that the work it carries out to encourage private sector investment, through CDC...is focused on developing and fragile states.”
It went on to mention “a positive impact on the achievement of the SDGs”, which the CDC had the potential to achieve. It was interesting to note that in response the Government stated:

“CDC’s mandate is aligned with achievement of the Goals”.

Before I touch on a few of my prepared remarks, I would like to deal with some of comments made by another member of our Select Committee, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). He mentioned his concerns about the effectiveness, the poverty focus and the coherence of the CDC’s work, and I would like to respond to these.

The hon. Gentleman said that there should be more emphasis on health and education. However, the CDC’s development impact is amplified by the billions of pounds in local taxes that are generated by the companies it invests in. These help to support the public services such as health and education in developing countries. Over the past three years alone, these companies have generated over £7 billion-worth of local tax revenue. It is important to remember the impact that these taxes can have on those kinds of essential services.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about coherence, and he and others have mentioned transparency, but DFID works very closely with the CDC to ensure that it is at the forefront of global standards of transparency in development impact. Information about all the CDC’s investments is available on a comprehensive database on its website, with details of the name and location of every investment in the portfolio. I am sure that further information would be made available if members of the Select Committee requested it. If DFID is working, as we know it is, with the CDC on a new results framework, this will result in an even better capture of the broader impact of investments on development—even beyond job creation and tax revenue generated.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman raised his concerns about investment by the CDC in a private, fee-paying hospital in India, stating that this might be at odds with DFID’s general approach towards the expenditure of UK aid. However, I clearly remember the Select Committee visiting a private, fee-paying school in Africa not so long ago, and Committee members agreed that DFID’s support for that school was in fact, well spent, particularly when there was no other option for children in that area to obtain an education. I believe these issues need to be looked at in context, and I am not so sure that support for this hospital is so out of line with DFID’s general approach.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Lady raises the issue of private fee-paying education and health. The issue is about where we focus our efforts. Does she not accept that if we continue to support the expansion of private healthcare and education as opposed to supporting public systems that enable free access to healthcare and education, we will effectively supplant countries’ ability to provide national healthcare and education systems that support all their citizens, including the poorest?

Fiona Bruce: As with so many of these cases, it is not an either/or. It is often both when the need is clearly there and the money can be well spent.

I shall move on to my few prepared remarks about the Bill. I absolutely support the Bill and speak in favour of it. It is essential to look at how to support capital investment in countries where there is a paucity of it. A 2014 report from the UN Conference on Trade and Development calculated a £2.5 trillion annual investment gap in key sustainable development sectors, so the CDC has a very important role to play. It is important to remember that the Bill will allow DFID and the British people, as the CDC’s motto states, “to do good without losing money” on an even greater scale than hitherto. I cannot believe that anyone, even aid sceptics, could really object to that.

The NAO report, published yesterday, chronicles the many positive steps that the CDC has taken and the many improvements that it has made. We have heard many references to the report. It says that through “tighter cost control, strengthened corporate governance and closer alignment with the Department’s objectives, CDC now has an efficient and economic operating model.”

This morning I spoke to NAO officers who had produced the report over eight months and had visited many projects, including some in Africa. They said that DFID now had a really good grip on the CDC’s work, that there were good lines of communication between the CDC and DFID, and that DFID’s in-country know-how was being utilised, while it was rightly not interfering in day-to-day management. They identified several cases of CDC investments in areas where the private sector would not have initially dared to go, but three years later private sector money had come in. Indeed, in several instances they saw the results of what they described as “catalytic” investments. They said of the 13 or 14 funds they had inspected in Africa that, with one exception, they were “transformational”. I think that we have a really positive report on which to act.

Of course, there are views about previous investments, but I think it encouraging that 98% of investments are now in Africa and south-east Asia and 82% are in one of the seven priority sectors identified in DFID’s key objectives, which were devised in 2012, following the excellent review conducted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell).

Without further ado, I shall end my speech, although there is much more that I would like to say in praise of the CDC.

4.56 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow so many distinguished speakers in all parts of the House. I thank them all for their contributions.

Let me begin by paying tribute, like many others, to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), the former Secretary of State for International Development, for the good work that he has done. He gave us an eloquent history lesson, explaining how the CDC began. I accept much of what he said, but I think the whole House is united in accepting that his important reviews of the CDC back in 2011, and the strategies and policies that developed as a result, have left the CDC in a better place than it was in four years ago.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) rightly reinforced the House’s commitment to the 0.7% target. He also made an important point, which has not been made enough today, about the implications
for our strategic development goals. He welcomed the National Audit Office report, as do I, but urged caution in respect of its findings on transparency and the impact of monitoring, about which I shall say more later. He rightly pointed out that we are still awaiting the important multilateral and bilateral aid reports. However, the Secretary of State has assured me that they will be published on Thursday, and I am grateful for that speedy response.

I think the whole House agrees that my hon. Friend, Mr. South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) is a passionate advocate, and he demonstrated that again today. He made some very important points about the sheer level of funding, another issue about which I shall say more later. He also drew attention to three boxes that needed to be ticked. I agree with him that the case has yet to be made.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), as always, made a passionate speech in his own style. He made an important point about the strategy and policy investment that was not forthcoming, and, like many Members, suggested that we were virtually putting the cart before the horse.

We on this side of the House want to reaffirm our commitment to poverty alleviation, which should be at the centre of DFID’s work. We recognise that the development of businesses around the world has a strong role to play in international development, through building economies by improving infrastructure and helping to put money into people’s pockets at the end of a hard day’s work, which is one of the surest ways of alleviating poverty. We also recognise that it has a strong role to play in the achievement of the eighth sustainable development goal: promoting economic growth, productive employment and decent work. It is therefore right that during the passage of the Bill we scrutinise both the Bill itself and what it will do, or will not do, for developing countries and the ability of the CDC to deliver for them.

Despite the Bill’s small size, it will have huge ramifications for the developing world and the UK’s development agenda. As previously outlined by my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State, we have several important points that we would like to see addressed.

The first is the worrying concern about the sheer size of the increase in assistance that DFID will be able to give to the CDC. In 2015, the previous International Development Secretary committed an additional £0.7 billion of funding to the CDC, but the Bill seeks to dwarf that by a large measure, by increasing the assistance to £6 billion. Moreover, the Secretary of State seeks the power to increase the limit to £12 billion through a statutory instrument, creating unease on the Opposition Benches that the Secretary of State will easily be able to extend the limit by £6 billion just through an SI, a move we believe to be wrong in principle.

We acknowledge that the assistance limit may have been reached—a substantial limit that has stood for just as substantial a period of time—but increasing assistance to this level has the potential to result in a considerable movement of ODA spending away from DFID in the traditional sense. That is particularly troubling given that the answer provided to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) stated that 25% of ODA will be spent outside DFID and that the Secretary of State repeatedly states an intention to move DFID’s focus towards trade over traditional aid and development. If the Government want to move so much of DFID funding through the CDC, we need assurances that it is not a mechanism through which they can effectively privatise development, placing more money in the hands of investment funds whose main focus at the end of the day is not poverty but profit, while at the same time moving it out of the hands of development NGOs.

This takes us on to the next issue that we have raised today: for what purpose does the CDC require further assistance? After all, the current £1.5 billion assistance limit has stood a strong test of time and the CDC’s business model sees it largely self-financing, with healthy profits reinvested in projects. Therefore, if we are to support this Bill throughout its passage, we need to see updated documents provided and published by the CDC—namely, a new strategy for 2017 onwards, alongside a new investment policy for the next five years, both of which must set out what the CDC intends to do with such massive assistance being made available to it. Essentially, we must avoid a situation in which we would be putting the cart before the horse by granting funding assistance before actually seeing what purpose it will be used for.

Another area of concern raised is the scrutiny and oversight of the CDC’s development impact. On this issue, we note the findings of yesterday’s NAO report. The accuracy of the CDC’s self-assessment through its development grid and its declaration of the development impact of its investments cannot be guaranteed, because it assesses their prospective impact rather than the actual impact. Consequently, the CDC might believe that it is having a positive impact, but the actual impact could be very different. If DFID wants to increase its assistance to the CDC, it must carry out full, frequent and regular assessments of the development impact, beyond the CDC’s own measuring criteria.

We on this side of the House have raised concerns over the use of tax havens by the CDC, and our concerns are well founded. In 2013, £180 million of the £375 million given to investment funds by the CDC went to funds domiciled in notorious tax havens such as the Cayman Islands, Guernsey and Jersey. That is almost 50%. This use of tax havens denies tax revenue to developing countries, avoids capital gains tax and deepens existing governance and corruption issues in developing countries. This is happening despite the Prime Minister’s recent announcement of a crackdown on the use of offshore tax havens in the wake of the BHS scandal, and it is exactly the opposite of the kind of work that the CDC has a duty to carry out.

We have outlined our substantial and genuine concerns about the Bill, and we hope that the Government will give us a genuine response to those concerns and to the six questions that the shadow Secretary of State set out earlier. We look forward to hearing their response. We will not oppose the Bill’s Second Reading this afternoon, but if we do not receive adequate assurances or see positive steps being taken by the Government to address our concerns, we reserve the right to withhold our support for the Bill on Third Reading. Facilitating economic growth is of course important in the developing world, but development should always be the focus, and we on this side of the House will work to ensure that it remains so.
5.7 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): I want to say a great thank you to all the hon. and right hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. I particularly praise the tone set by the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) and the way in which he picked up on the good atmosphere in the Chamber. I also pay tribute to the tone set by the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) and by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), and to the constructive way in which they have approached this short but quite technical piece of legislation.

Four major types of concern seem to have been raised today, and I will try to deal with them briefly, with the aim of stopping at exactly 5.20 pm. Those questions were as follows. Why are we focusing on private sector-led economic development? How do we balance the private and public inclusion in that development? Why are we using development finance institutions and, in particular, what quantity of money are we putting into them? Why are we specifically putting money into the CDC? That last question relates to concerns that have been expressed about the governance and transparency of the CDC. I shall try to deal with those four types of challenge in turn.

The first is a general concern about the weight that we place on the private sector’s role in economic development in general. That concern was expressed by a number of people today, particularly Members on the Opposition Benches. The shadow Secretary of State used the word “profiteering”, and the hon. Member for Edinburgh East talked about international capitalism. The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) spoke of distracting our attention away from humanitarian concerns, and the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patricia Biggar) was worried that some of the investments might be made at the cost of other potential investments. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) emphasised the fact that aid is needed as well, and the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) emphasised the importance of health and education.

The way in which to deal with these generic concerns about the role played by the private sector in economic development—and with all the matters in the general portfolio of the Department for International Development—is to state that what we are talking about today is just a part, not the whole, of what DFID does. Economic development is absolutely vital—I will come on to that—but it is currently less than 20% of the Department’s overall portfolio. The shadow Secretary of State quite rightly raised water and sanitation as important elements of our Department’s strategy—they are—but they are not primarily delivered through development finance institutions. The £204 million that we spent in 2015–16 came from other parts of the Department’s budget. As for the humanitarian concerns mentioned by the right hon. Member for Leicester East, the £2 billion that we are spending over this period on Syria alone comes from other parts of the departmental budget.

However, as pointed out by the hon. Member for Yeovil (Marcus Fysh), poverty alleviation cannot happen without economic growth, and that relies on the private sector. It relies on the private sector for jobs, for Government revenues and for the services that the sector provides. It is not a zero-sum game. The hon. Member for Glasgow North issued a challenge when he talked about investments coming at the cost of others, but it is not that kind of zero-sum game. To take a specific example, we were criticised by one Member for some of our investments in electricity, as opposed to other forms of infrastructure, as though that was somehow at the expense of other developmental objectives. However, that electricity not only delivers jobs through the business side, but allows us to deliver our objectives in health and education. We cannot have a decent education service and get children into school if there is no electricity and they have to go 10 miles to pick up firewood. We cannot deliver decent healthcare in Africa unless there is refrigeration for immunisation drugs and unless we have the electric lighting that allows doctors to perform surgery in the clinics.

We are delivering on the STGs, particularly goals 7 and 8 on energy and economic growth. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who is both a distinguished international civil servant and a President of an African state, has said that poverty in Africa cannot be eliminated without private sector growth. That also reflects the demands of Africans themselves. I was taken by the statements of my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) about mutual respect. Recent surveys conducted in sub-Saharan Africa show that sub-Saharan Africans identify energy and jobs as two of their top three priorities at a level of 80% or 90%. We should respect their wisdom and desires when we talk about the kind of development investments that we make.

The next question is how to balance the roles of the public and private sectors in delivering development. I do not want to talk about this too much, but it is clear that there are serious constraints on the public sector’s ability to deliver all forms of commercial activity, partly because it often lacks the skills to ensure that those things happen. It lacks the skills to understand the market dynamics, the logistics, the productivity and the efficiency. We have all seen well-intentioned charitable and Government development projects attempt to set up businesses that have not worked. However, as Opposition Members have pointed out, the private sector cannot do it on its own—there are clear market failures. Returning to electricity in Africa as a good example, the private sector has clearly failed. If the private sector had been able to do things on its own, we would not be in a position where only 6 GW of power generating capacity has been built in Africa over the past decade. In China, 8 GW of capacity is built every one to two months.

That brings us to the question why we are putting money into DFIs, which was the particular challenge of the shadow Minister. The shadow Minister and the hon. Members for Glasgow North, for Cardiff South and Penarth and for Edinburgh East focused on the quantity of investment. The response is that I am afraid that some people still confuse stock and flow—in other words, the annual overseas development spend and the creation of a capital fund. The second response is that it is an option, not a commitment. What we are doing is raising the ceiling for what CDC, through rigorous business cases, can request; we are not imposing this on CDC. Over a five-year period, even if the maximum...
were drawn down, we would be talking about about 8% of the total anticipated ODA spend, which is smaller than the amount I calculate the Scottish Government appear to be putting into a similar instrument in proportional terms.

There have been challenges on strategy. The strategy will be produced in line with departmental practice at the end of this year, but this Bill is enabling legislation, so we are putting the horse before the cart. We need the enabling legislation in place—we need the ceilings to be lifted—before we can look at individual business cases that wish to draw down on that money.

That brings us to the overall question why use DFIs at all, and I wish to pay a huge tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who provided perhaps the most powerful explanation of why we go into these mechanisms in the first place. The answer of course is that they bring together the very best of the private sector and the very best of the public sector. They provide the discipline of the private sector in insisting on returns that produce sustainable enterprises and sustainable revenues; and they provide freedom from political interference and they provide leverage. To respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford, let me say that they also allow us, as my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) pointed out, to draw in other forms of capital behind. Some £4 billion of investment from the CDC has drawn an extra £26 billion into our investments in Asia and Africa. In addition, this approach provides good value for money for the taxpayer.

Stephen Doughty: The Minister is talking about the capital that this approach has brought in, but that has not always been in areas where capital has not been available—I think of places such as India. Given that he is about to publish the bilateral aid strategy, will he consider forcing the CDC to look more closely at the lower-income countries in Africa and elsewhere that need the investment the most?

Rory Stewart: I am trying to move towards my 5.20 pm conclusion, but let me deal with that quickly. As I was saying—and this partly answers the point—we are combining the best of the private sector incentives with the best of the public sector, because we are exactly able to prioritise maximising development impact. That is where our development impact grid, which, with respect, the hon. Gentleman is not providing enough focus on, answers his question. Members on both sides of the House should be aware that that grid targets explicitly countries with the lowest GDP per capita, countries where investment capital is not available and countries where the business environment is worse—that is the Y axis of the grid. On the X axis of the grid, we have sectors in which the maximum employment is generated. Every business case since 2012 has been assessed exactly against those criteria, which is why, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield has pointed out, many of the criticisms made today—the idea that somehow the CDC has lost its way—are not appropriate for the CDC of 2106; they are appropriate for the CDC of 2012 or 2010.

Let me deal with a few of the objections. An investment in Guatemala was mentioned, but all investments in Latin America stopped in 2012. An investment in Xiabu in China was mentioned, but all investments in China were stopped in 2012. The issue of pay was raised, but, as has been pointed out again and again, the pay of the chief executive has been reduced by two thirds, to a third of its predecessor. Tax havens were mentioned, but we no longer, in any way, ever invest for reasons of tax or secrecy; we invest only to find secure bases for investment and to pool other forms of capital. All our investment goes simply into locations that meet the highest OECD transparency standards. On development impact, our DFID chief economist, Stefan Dercon, has worked with some of the most distinguished academics in the world, from Harvard and elsewhere, to create exactly the kind of impact that people are pushing for.

That is why right hon. and hon. Members should support this Bill. It is not only because of the history of the CDC, to which the shadow Secretary of State paid such good tribute to in her opening remarks: its experience of 70 years; the culture it has developed; the extraordinary brand that the institution has in Africa and south Asia; and the focus that my right hon. Friend has brought to this institution since 2010—its rigour and its narrowness of focus, which makes it very unusual among DFIs. It is one of the only DFIs in the world to be spending so much in conflict-affected states. It is accountable directly to DFID, which owns 100% of its shares. The examples of its performance today can be seen in the DRC, in places such as Burundi, where off-grid power would not be built without the CDC; and in its investment in energy through Global in Africa.

In conclusion, we should take pride in this institution; it is a very great British institution. In its historic evolution it has gone from a past where it was dominated in the 1950s by ex-military officers interested in building reefs and going into jungles to its current leadership under Diana Noble, a chief executive who exemplifies much of the best in development thinking and some of most progressive intuition in the British Government. She ensures that we are delivering in Pakistan gender-based programming that affects workers’ rights and that we have an institution that is today highly relevant and that faces and solves some of the greatest development challenges in this century.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

COMMONWEALTH DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION BILL: PROGRAMME

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill:

Committal

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 8 December 2016.

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

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

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

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

Other proceedings

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

Question agreed to.

COMMONWEALTH DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION BILL: MONEY

Queen's recommendation signified.
Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),
That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

(1) any increase in payments out of the National Loans Fund or money provided by Parliament resulting from provisions of the Act—
(a) increasing the limit in section 15(1) of the Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 1999 to £6,000 million; and
(b) conferring power to increase that limit to an amount not exceeding £12,000 million;
(2) any increase attributable to those provisions in the extinguishing of liabilities in respect of guarantees under the Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 1999; and
(3) any increase attributable to those provisions in payments into the National Loans Fund or the Consolidated Fund.—(Andrew Griffiths.)

Question agreed to.

New Southgate Cemetery [Lords]
Second Reading

5.21 pm

Mr David Burrows (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This Bill relates to New Southgate cemetery, which serves local residents in my constituency and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers). The cemetery is sited in my right hon. Friend's constituency. She supports the Bill, but she told me that she had a long-standing commitment and could not guarantee her attendance here at a particular time. It is excellent to see her in her place now along with other hon. Friends who have neighbouring constituencies.

The cemetery serves constituencies in the north London area. In particular, it serves the religious communities in the area, including the Greek Cypriot, Roman Catholic and Caribbean communities. It also has a unique section, which is administered and owned by the Baha’i community for their loved ones.

The cemetery was opened in the 1850s by the Great Northern Railway Company as a more cost-effective north London alternative to the better known London Necropolis Railway, which carried corpses and mourners to the cemetery. Indeed, in 1854, the largest cemetery in the world was designed to accommodate all the deaths in London for centuries to come. That has not come to pass, which is why there is a need now for this Bill. In eight or nine years' time, there will not be sufficient space in this cemetery to deal with the demand.

There is a history behind the railway company's involvement. At the time, it set different charges for first class, second class and third class burials. In fact, I am due to go to a public meeting involving Govia, which will address issues of space that will affect the railway, and it is that issue of space that we are concerned about in this Bill. I am sure that, with support from across the House, we can make good progress tonight, which will enable me to get to my public meeting and to see this Bill on its safe passage.

The larger part of the cemetery is administered and owned by the private company, New Southgate Cemetery and Crematorium Ltd, which is the promoter of the Bill. The remaining part, which is administered and owned by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United Kingdom, has particular cultural importance for the Baha’is as their spiritual leader, Shoghi Effendi, is buried there. The cemetery was near the place of his death in 1957, and it therefore has particular importance for the Baha’i community. The cemetery as a whole extends over 60 acres, with well-tended sections dedicated to different faiths.

The issue at the heart of the Bill is simple: there are roughly 44,000 grave spaces in all, and 180,000 interments have been carried out in the 160 years for which the cemetery has been open, which means that there are now only 1,700 available spaces in the main part of the cemetery and a maximum of 100 spaces left in the Baha’i section. There is, however, demand for about 175 burials a year in the main part of the cemetery and about 10 a year in the Baha’i section. Space in both sections is likely to run out in nine or 10 years' time, which causes problems for the local community and for the Baha’is and other groups that use the cemetery.
Attempts have been made to address the issue, and the local authority has not been willing to go down the route of acquiring additional land, which is why there is a problem. The Bill seeks to deal with the problem by allowing the reuse of areas of the cemetery where a burial has not taken place for at least 75 years, enabling the promoters to extinguish existing rights of burial and reclaim graves that have not been used for 75 years. In addition, a method to create extra space known as lift and deepen—that is fairly graphic, but it is the term used in the trade—would also be allowed, through which graves are excavated to their deepest depth, with all the remains placed in a casket and re-interred at the bottom of the deeper grave. That creates additional space above the re-interred remains.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): In the last Parliament, I asked the then Minister about the number of graves for which permission had been considered for lift and deepen. He replied that local authorities were able to do that, but none had. Will my hon. Friend please explain why we need to do this now when we have the London Local Authorities Act 2007, which permits lift and deepen?

Mr Burrowes: My hon. Friend is right. Parliament granted local authority-run cemeteries in London the power to reclaim graves in the 1970s and the power to lift and deepen in 2007. I understand that the City of London has made good use of the powers to reclaim and to lift and deepen in a cemetery in Newham without adverse reaction, while providing a sustainable future. In reality, the powers are available to cemeteries run by local authorities, but not cemeteries in the private sector. This Bill would seek to put the promoters on an equal footing with municipal cemeteries, which I would hope that Government Members supported.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and I am sorry that I was not in the Chamber for the beginning of his speech. Is it not right that the 2007 legislation has not been used by any local authority other than the City of London and that the cemetery in Newham is on consecrated land, where special rules apply? As I understand it, this Bill will not apply to consecrated land.

Mr Burrowes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his interest. Time will tell how many will take up this opportunity; this is a particular issue that affects London, and although successive Governments have not said that it needs to be a universal power across the country, there has been recognition of its critical importance in London. Newham has taken up the power and I understand that Kensal Rise is looking at the progress of this Bill and considering taking the powers further.

My understanding is that most of the land in New Southgate cemetery’s ownership is consecrated and that the safeguards that ensure proper consultation with the diocese will apply. They will be particularly pertinent to this Bill. The difference with municipal land is not whether the land is consecrated but the fact that it is in different ownership, and we want an even hand.

The Bill is critical because the communities that the New Southgate cemetery serves do not generally choose cremation. For the Greek Cypriots, it is not allowed, and in the Caribbean communities burial is the preference of 99%. Burial is also the strong preference of Roman Catholics, who are strongly represented around the area served by the cemetery. The Baha’i community also has a requirement to bury and not to embalm or cremate.

The Bill will enable the creation of more spaces in existing graves and ensure a sustainable future. It provides adequate safeguards; it ensures that there will be notices, that objections from relatives or owners will be heard, and that Historic England and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission will be involved as regards proper respect for the heritage of those sites.

Mr Chope: The Bill does not specify the means by which old graves may be reclaimed. My hon. Friend referred to a process called lift and deepen; is that the specific and only process that the promoters of the Bill have in mind?

Mr Burrowes: Unused graves can be reclaimed by allowing the exclusive right of burial to be properly extinguished. The alternative is through lift and deepen. If there are alternative directions from the Secretary of State, we will no doubt hear them from the Minister. It will reassure my hon. Friend to know that there are powers in clause 4(10) for the Secretary of State to provide additional direction in relation to the powers, if that is considered appropriate.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend may have addressed this at the beginning of his remarks. The predecessors in title of the present company that owns the cemetery sold off vast areas of land that were attached to the original Victorian cemetery. If all that land had not been sold off, the issue would not have arisen. Is this not a case of a commercial organisation, having sold off a lot of its surplus land for housing, trying to use the land it has in a different way, arguing that it has not got enough space?

Mr Burrowes: My hon. Friend is trying to reach into the motivations and the history. At the beginning of my remarks I referred to the history and the involvement of the Great Northern Railway. The original aspiration was that the cemetery would serve the interests of Londoners for centuries, but that did not happen. We can go as far back in history as my hon. Friend wants, but we are where we are now. Although there is inevitably some commercial motivation for a sustainable commercial future, it is undeniable the fact that for the communities that the cemetery serves, there is an interest in ensuring that there are adequate graves available for their burials.

The consultations that have taken place have not led to any petitions. They have led to understanding and support for the in-principle situation. There needs to be a level playing field between the powers available for municipal cemeteries, which have also taken an interest in how much land is available as municipal land, and for privately owned cemeteries, which should have the proper powers available to them. I therefore commend the Bill to the House.

5.32 pm

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is great that we are having a debate about the Bill. If I had not tabled a blocking motion, it would have gone through
Second Reading on the nod. It is undesirable that issues such as this are not open to debate and discussion in this House.

The Bill touches on an area that successive Governments have long avoided. In 2004, the Labour Government held a consultation on the possible re-use of graves. The consultation lasted six months, and after about three years there was a response from the Government in which they said that they were definitely going to do something about it, and quickly. Nothing has happened since. A Minister in the coalition Government, the former Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, Simon Hughes, said that they were definitely going to do something about it, but, again, nothing has happened. Perhaps the Minister on the Front Bench today will seize the moment to tell the House what the Government’s plans are in respect of the cemetery.

The issue is much bigger than is reflected in the terms of the Bill. I do not intend to divide the House on it, but in such a debate it is important to be able to ask a few questions. When my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) comes to sum up, I hope he will be able to respond to them.

The cemetery has a long and interesting history. It was originally some 200 acres. Over a period of time—this is the ninth Bill relating to this land to come before the House, and there have been eight Acts of Parliament since 1855 covering New Southgate cemetery—more and more of the cemetery has been sold off. In 1976, the Great Northern transferred the ownership and management of the remaining parts of the cemetery to New Southgate. Since then, part of the cemetery has been sold off and part has been transferred to the Baha’is.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Is it really unreasonable for land set aside to accommodate the dead to occasionally be sold off to accommodate the living? That does not seem an unreasonable thing for the cemetery to have done, and it is not really a reason to oppose the Bill.

Mr Chope: As I said, I am not opposing the Bill. What is unreasonable is that land retained to bury the dead was disposed of, and now the owners of that land, who profited from the sale of it, are saying, “We have not got enough space. We need special powers to reuse graves.” There is a difference between reusing graves in a municipal burial ground, where a local authority is accountable to local people, and reusing graves in a private burial ground, where there is no such accountability.

What worries me is that the local authority has apparently been unhelpful in allowing an extension to this area so that there is more space for the burial of the dead. More land has been sold than is needed now, but as soon as this organisation seeks to purchase a bit more land, all sorts of problems are apparently put in its way by the local authority—the very local authority that, I suspect, developed the houses on the land that was sold to it originally.

Dr Offord: I would gently urge my hon. Friend to recognise that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers), my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) and I have areas with great religious diversity, and the pattern of burial and cremation has changed in our constituencies over the years. Between 1997 and 2009, the number of cremations in London fell from 48,275 to 36,736, and the nature of our constituencies means that many people, for religious reasons, cannot be cremated, as people would have been previously, when the land was disposed of.

Mr Chope: I take very much the point my hon. Friend makes, and it is symptomatic of the change in the character of large parts of our country and particularly, for the purposes of this debate, of London. There is now a much increased number of members of the Muslim faith, for example, living in the United Kingdom. However, that is surely an argument for the local authority to facilitate the making available of more land to meet the religious needs of this very important part of the community, rather than an argument for saying, “We are so short of land that we are going to reuse the graves of those who were previously buried in the New Southgate cemetery.” I can understand why the Bill is being promoted, but I cannot understand why a sensitive local authority would not help to provide more land.

Mr Burrowes: I appreciate my hon. Friend’s interest in the Bill, but the crucial point is that the promoters are not the company that sold the land before 1976, but the company that bought the cemetery to run it, as set out in the recital. The only sale that has taken place in relation to that company is to the Baha’is.

Mr Chope: As I understand it, part of the cemetery was sold to the Baha’is because one of their religious leaders died while he was visiting London in 1957, and he was buried in the cemetery. That is why it is a place of particular pilgrimage and interest to people of the Baha’i faith. However, as my hon. Friend may have said earlier, it is not just Baha’is who are buried there. Our great hero Ross McWhirter is buried in the cemetery—it is some 40 years since he was cruelly murdered by the IRA. A lot of distinguished people have been buried in this cemetery. If Ross McWhirter has now been buried there for some 50 years, under the proposals in this Bill it will be only another 25 years before his remains can be disinterred. That puts these issues into perspective. I expect that members of the Freedom Association, which was founded by his twin brother, with whom he established the “Guinness Book of Records”, will still be going there for a lot longer than 25 years. It may well be that the grave of Ross McWhirter becomes a place to which people would wish to conduct pilgrimages, in the same way as, I think, many years ago, Ross McWhirter discovered in deepest France the burial site of the person who made the first rugby ball, and following that discovery, that grave itself is now visited by rugby enthusiasts.

We must not deal with these things lightly—I am not suggesting that my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate is doing that—but there is a potential solution to this if there was more co-operation from the local authority.

Mrs Villiers: One of the reasons I support this Bill is that using our existing burial space more efficiently will relieve the pressure to create new cemeteries elsewhere in my constituency—something that is likely to encroach on green-belt land, substantially detracting from and damaging the local environment.
Mr Chope: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. Not only in her constituency or in this area of London, but throughout the country where there is pressure on land, it is important that we have a properly worked-out policy for whether, and if so in what circumstances, graves can be reused.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate said, the London local authorities gave themselves powers in this respect that they have hardly used. With the exception of the cemetery in Newham, no local authority has started to use the powers given to them because of the sensitivity around them. That was indeed the conclusion that the Government reached when they went out to consultation on this issue more than 10 years ago. They accepted that it was a very sensitive issue and there was a lot of public concern about it, but no conclusions were reached. It was said that about 30 years' worth of land was available for burials, and more than 10 years have gone by since then, yet nothing is being done. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will put this in the wider context of what proposals there are to address this problem, particularly in the light of the very significant changes in the character of much of our population and the very significant increase in the number of Muslims for whom burial is a religious requirement that cannot be substituted with cremation.

Like all these things, when one starts to lift the stone and look at a bit more of the detail, one becomes aware of gaps in the proposed legislation. This Bill is defective in that it does not specify the means by which the graves may be reused. As I said, lift and deepen is one method, but there are others that could be much less sensitive.

Under lift and deepen, the remains are removed from the existing grave and put further down in the same grave; in other words, they remain in the same location. Less sensitive methods might be the cause of some offence. Once the decision has been made in a private cemetery, there is limited opportunity for public opinion or any individual to influence what happens.

The problem does not arise with consecrated land, because such land is subject to control by the Church of England authorities. Clause 4(11) and (12) give particular recognition to the status of consecrated land. Quite rightly, the Bill also makes exceptions in relation to Commonwealth war memorials.

It seems to me that a Bill such as this should be tightly drawn and subject to a lot of proper parliamentary scrutiny. My final point is that a commercial organisation is running the process, so how can we be sure that it will comply with all the requirements in the Bill to record the details of the graves that will be disturbed and the memorials that will be removed? Why has the company promoting the Bill not already recorded those details for posterity? Where will those records be kept, and who will maintain them? If this was a publicly owned activity, we might have a bit more control over it. That is why I have concerns about it.

The fact that there have been no petitions against the Bill suggests that people in the locality are content. Perhaps they are content in their ignorance; I do not know whether that is a fair comment. We should cherish the opportunity to debate the matter. The Government have always said that there was no time available to discuss it more generally, but I hope that they will be inspired by this evening's proceedings to think about the public interest in public policy making on the matter.

In the meantime, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate for his great courtesy in dealing with the issue and for keeping me in touch with what has been going on. I hope that some of the concerns that I have expressed will be taken on board.

5.48 pm

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I rise to urge the House to support this Bill to give new powers to the owners of New Southgate cemetery in my constituency. As things stand, within 10 years we will run out of burial space there, or we will come close to doing so. There is now a widely held view that the only way in which the public can continue to have affordable, accessible cemeteries is if we make better use of existing burial space.

As we have heard, public burial authorities in London already have some powers to lift and deepen existing graves that were last used 75 years ago, to create more space. The Bill would simply give to New Southgate cemetery broadly the same rights as those already afforded by Parliament to public burial authorities in London.

Mr Chope: Can my right hon. Friend surmise why those powers have, with one exception, not been exercised?

Mrs Villiers: I surmise that it is because the pressure on burial space is not so great as to require the use of such powers, but it is important that we equip cemeteries for the pressure that they will experience in the future.

Dr Offord: I may be able to help my right hon. Friend because when I was a councillor in the London Borough of Barnet, I was responsible for cemeteries, particularly the one in Hendon. The reason why the legislation was not used when I was the responsible cabinet member is that alternative locations were used. The Victorian planners of the cemetery originally decided that that land would not be used for burial, so we used those alternative locations, as well as other parts of the cemetery that were not originally intended for burials.

Mrs Villiers: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for supplying that information from his experience in the cemetery arena.

The powers conferred by the Bill would create new space for bereaved families. They would mean that a viable and sustainable burial ground could be preserved for the long term in the heart of the community it serves in my constituency. I am sure that the owners of the cemetery would, if they could, deal with the problem by acquiring additional land. However, the adjoining space is already built up with houses or is recreational land. Rightly, Barnet council wishes to preserve its recreational spaces and would be very reluctant for such land to be sold and used for cemetery purposes.

To return to the key point I made in my intervention, unless we reuse cemetery space and use the cemeteries we have more effectively, pressure will rise for the creation of new cemeteries. I have a particular concern about the pressure for new cemeteries in the green belt. There is already a proposal to create a natural burial ground in Arkley in my constituency, which is strongly opposed by the residents. The Bill would be helpful in creating sustainable burial space in pre-existing cemeteries. It will be important in helping to protect the green belt and...
our local natural environment. I urge the House to support the Bill this evening. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrows) for his great work on this legislation.

5.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope), I am pleased to participate in what is nowadays one of Parliament’s less-used procedures. Historically, this procedure has played an important role. Indeed, I understand that more than 37,000 private Acts have been passed since 1539. In the 19th century, most legislation was private business, which typically addressed issues as diverse as transport schemes, public works, permissions for divorce and the settlement of estates. These days, there is little need to use private Bills for such purposes. Like the Bill we are addressing, private Bills are promoted by organisations wishing to disapply or modify the general law in relation to their own powers.

The New Southgate Cemetery Bill does so to address an identified need for additional burial space in the cemetery. I should make it clear from the outset that the Government do not oppose the Bill. As has already been explained, in addition to doing so for the cemetery company, the Bill provides powers for the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United Kingdom. The cemetery, part of which is owned by the National Spiritual Assembly, is an important Baha’i spiritual centre, so it is appropriate that the Bill will facilitate its continued availability as a burial place for Baha’is.

Before I address the Bill in more detail, I want to mention the issue of burial space more generally. There is increasing interest in this issue in the media, in the burial sector and, indeed, among parliamentary colleagues. Burial space is running out in parts of our towns, cities and countryside, but this is not a concern in other areas. Even within Greater London, the picture is not consistent. A 2013 York University cemetery research group audit indicated that there is acute pressure on burial space in parts of London, but that is not true across all of London.

There is already private legislation that, for almost 10 years now, has enabled public burial authorities in London to reuse graves, yet very few have done so. It is therefore not yet clear that pressure on burial space is a national issue requiring central Government intervention. Successive Administrations have kept the situation under review; I and my ministerial colleagues are considering whether that position should continue. Where there is local pressure, however, it is right for local solutions to address it. The Bill addresses the needs of New Southgate cemetery, and the Government do not wish to prevent the cemetery from remaining viable and continuing to serve its communities into the future.

I move on now to Government scrutiny of the Bill. As lead policy Department, the Ministry of Justice wants to ensure that the legislation is fit for purpose, with appropriate safeguards, and that the views of those most affected by it have been fully considered. We have therefore consulted other Departments and arm’s length bodies. I am grateful to the New Southgate burial authority for agreeing amendments arising from that process, including requirements for Historic England to be notified of any proposals and a requirement for remains to be reburied in an earthen grave as opposed to a structure above ground. I am pleased to note that the burial authorities have fully engaged with faith groups using the cemetery. I am grateful for the information provided on that, and having reviewed it am satisfied that the issue has been properly addressed.

Mr Chope: Is the information to which my hon. Friend referred on the public record—is it part of the Bill—and if not, how will it be put on the public record, so that people can be held to account for what they have said?

Dr Lee: As I understand it, the relevant religious groups have all been consulted, where those groups have an obvious representative to consult. I am happy to write to my hon. Friend with further details.

I have written to the Chairman of Ways and Means confirming that in my opinion the Bill’s promoters have fully assessed its compatibility with the European Convention on Human Rights and that I see no reason to dispute their conclusions. However, I have noted two points: first, that the burial authorities will be required to act compatibly with convention rights in carrying out functions of a public nature within the meaning of the Human Rights Act 1998; and secondly that I am satisfied that other methods of developing burial space have been implemented as far as is possible. I therefore agree that the Bill’s powers are both justified and proportionate.

I turn now to the series of questions that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch raised. First, existing burial space can be maximised by something called mounding, which involves new soil being placed over existing graves to allow additional graves to be excavated; by cramming, which is where new graves are created in available spaces such as pathways; and by reclaiming unused space in existing graves. The latter can be applied only to private graves, unless under Church of England authority—so-called faculty. Outside London, only unused graves can be reclaimed. In 2007, the then Government endorsed the principle of reusing existing graves by the lift and deepen method, which saves on the cost on new land, avoids competition for new land, keeps burial local, represents a sustainable use of resources and provides a new income stream for burial authorities, in turn reducing local authorities’ financial liability.

My hon. Friend mentioned the cemetery’s selling off of land. We have dealt with the cemetery as it currently stands throughout. There is a need for additional space now and the Bill proposes all appropriate means of addressing that need.

My hon. Friend asked whether the 75-year period was long enough, referring in particular to the grave of Ross McWhirter. The Bill provides that graves can only be considered for reuse 75 years after the most recent interment. It also provides that relatives of the deceased can object; if they do so, the grave cannot be reused for at least another 25 years. In practice, therefore, a grave in which living relatives have an interest can be protected for 100 years.
My hon. Friend also mentioned accountability. As private providers, the NSC burial authorities are not subject to the same degree of statutory regulation as local authority providers. However, that is already the case regarding their existing management of the cemetery. There is no reason to expect that, as a subsidiary of one of the UK’s leading providers of cremation and burial services, NSC’s standards of operation and service would not continue to be upheld.

Dr Offord: Will the Minister confirm that private cemeteries are regulated and have obligations under the technical guidance on the reuse and reclamation of graves in London local authority cemeteries, as well as in municipal cemeteries?

Dr Lee: I need to consult before I can respond appropriately and will write to my hon. Friend accordingly.

Mr Chope: Do the Government encourage the creation of more private cemeteries, and to what extent are they committed to what was said by the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) in a ministerial statement following the consultation? She said that it was the intention of the then Government to use powers under the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 to enable all parts of the country to have reused graves.

Dr Lee: The Government are conscious of the need to ensure that appropriate burial space is available across the country. My understanding is that need differs from region to region. We continue to consult and I expect to receive further information in the coming weeks.

On NSC accountability, the Bill provides significant recourse to users, NSC must give notice of proposals to extinguish burial rights, disturb human remains or remove memorials. Objection from the owner of burial rights amounts to a veto, and an objection from a third party is subject to directions by the Secretary of State as an independent third party. Objections from relatives to the disturbance of remains amounts to a 25-year veto. An objection from a third party is subject to directions by the Secretary of State as an independent third party. In addition, NSC has a published complaints scheme. I can confirm that the Government secured an amendment to require record keeping on the disturbance of remains and the removal of memorials.

Finally, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch for securing the debate. I am grateful to all who have contributed to today’s proceedings.

PETITIONS

People of Syria

6.2 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I present the petition on behalf of my constituents from the coastal town of Newcastle who are deeply concerned by the humanitarian crisis in Syria. The petition is supported by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Newcastle, County Down,
Declares that the humanitarian crisis in Syria has already resulted in thousands of deaths and shows no sign of a resolution; further that men, women and children are targeted by air strikes and, if lucky to survive, are being forced to leave their homes, tearing families apart and often resulting in further deaths; further that these people do not ask and do not deserve to be in this situation; and further that a peaceful means to end the war should be sought, rather than the continuation of air strikes.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Visa fees for Pilgrimage to Hajj and Umrah by Saudi Arabia

6.4 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I rise to present a petition signed by local residents. The signatures were collected by a volunteer in Leicester East, Sayeed Askari. Hajj is the fifth pillar of Islam, and travelling to participate is a vital tenet of the Islamic faith. Furthermore, Umrah is a holy passage of Muslims across to Mecca and has immense religious value. Mecca is regarded as the holiest city in the religion of Islam and is of course in Saudi Arabia. Travelling to Saudi Arabia for Hajj or Umrah for the first time is free, but visitors will now have to pay an additional surcharge of 2,000 Saudi riyals, equivalent to £450, for any subsequent visit. This represents a very large increase. Quite simply, any restriction to participating in either pilgrimages is of great concern to the Muslim community in my constituency and elsewhere, and I hope that the Saudi Arabian Government will reconsider the increase.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Leicester East,
Declares that the Ministry of Hajj of Saudi Arabia has decided to increase the visa fees for foreign visitors to visit the country in order to complete the Islamic pilgrimage for a second time. Hajj is one of the Pillars of Islam that every Muslim must complete once in their lifetime by visiting Mecca in Saudi Arabia. The increase in
Variant CJD and Surgery

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

6.6 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I am delighted to see the Minister in her place, and I am sure that she is delighted to be here—or at least she is trying to smile under the circumstances. She has probably been made aware of my long-term interest in, and deep concern about, this subject. I am sorry to inflict it on her this evening, but she is bearing up. I also declare a potential interest, as a very part-time dentist.

Variant CJD is a fatal neurodegenerative disease originating from exposure to bovine spongiform encephalopathy-like prions, prions being small particles of protein. Variant CJD prion infections are associated with a very long and clinically silent incubation, but when the disease strikes, it causes a fast, spongy degeneration of the brain, followed by a horrible and untimely death. It is probable, but not certain, that carriers might not produce the disease themselves, but it appears to have a potentially decades-long incubation. The long incubation period means that some will die of other causes first, but, as we live longer, we cannot be certain that in time—after decades—the disease might not strike all carriers, if they survive long enough. Carriers might also unwittingly pass on the prion through blood transfusion and via surgical instruments.

Variant CJD is an appalling disease with no cure. The number of asymptomatic individuals with variant CJD prion infection is unknown, but recent research estimates that the carriers number about one in 2,000 adults, which is a staggering number. The disease poses a risk to others, via blood transfusions, blood products, organ or tissue grafts and contaminated medical or dental instruments. The response of this and previous Governments has been bipolar. To give an exaggerated simplification, the first position of this bipolar response is that as we have not had many recent cases, there is no problem—but considering the long incubation period and some recent changes, this is a dangerous assumption. The second position is that there might be a problem so we should apply the precautionary principle in some areas. We cannot have both. I believe that waiting and an occasional application of the precautionary principle really do not hit the problem. If the Minister takes no action, I hope she will recognise that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

As I have said, research says that one person in 2,000 is a carrier. The incubation period may well be decades, and some individuals appear to be more susceptible and some less so, although in time this could be proven wrong. A death from variant CJD in Edinburgh in January this year showed a potentially deeply worrying change. People are of various genotypes: they can be VV homozygotic, or MM homozygotic or MV homozygotic—and for the sake of Mr Deputy Speaker, I will not explain that. Until this case of the Edinburgh patient, all cases of variant CJD had been MM. The Edinburgh patient was the first MV patient that we have seen. It was thought that being MV or VV might offer some resistance, but this does not seem to be the case. We should bear it in mind that about 45% of the population are MV.
There is still no conclusive evidence, but there is a possibility that patients with the MV genotype may have a longer incubation period, which could lead to a second wave of variant CJD. The recent point is that until recently it was hoped that MV patients might not show clinical signs, but in these early days this appears to have been put in deep doubt.

Research also shows that prions are transmissible by blood products and contaminated surgical instruments, and as the prions resist decontamination from stainless steel, we have a problem. Over the years, a precautionary principle has been applied—it is still being applied, but only partially. Much has been done slowly over many years. Leucodepletion was introduced, and synthesised clotting factors have been provided for haemophiliacs. A prion unit was set up at Queen Square. Single-patient use of stainless steel endodontic reamers was made mandatory, which I find quite interesting and will return to in a few moments. Non-UK blood supplies were sourced for those born after 1 January 1996.

What I found curious about the endodontic reamers is that if a patient requires endodontics, it is possible to use the stainless steel reamer but singly; but if the patient for some reason does not have endodontics, the tooth will have to be extracted using a stainless steel instrument that is used repeatedly, called a pair of forceps.

Very early on the Government established, through Medical Research Council funding, a prion unit at Queen Square under Professor Collinge. This unit was tasked with finding a test, finding ways of stopping or reducing transmission and hopefully even finding a cure. The prion unit with DuPont has produced a RelyOn soak, which deactivates the prion on stainless steel surgical instruments. Following the soak, there is then decontamination and a washing machine—a dishwasher-type machine—and then a full-blown steriliser, particularly a vacuum-based one. These instruments will bring about total sterilisation, from which the prion will be lost.

DuPont is no longer producing the soak, because there is no market. And there is no market simply because hospitals, clinics and surgeries in this country are not required to use it; if they were, there would be a market. That is quite extraordinary considering that this country has the greatest deposit, if I may use that term, of people carrying the prion.

In a surgery washer, the disinfectant would do the job. Recently, Professor Collinge became aware that the Department of Health had announced funds for research into prion-disinfecting stainless steel instruments. I believe the prion unit has applied and will hopefully get a grant. The problem with the wash was that it meant an extra stage, which slowed everything down in the hospital, but if DuPont or another manufacturer could produce it in the form of a tablet, a powder or a liquid that would go into the dishwasher without frothing, that step would be taken away, we would get rid of the prion and there would be no time wasted. Those instruments would be prion-free.

Incidentally, the Minister may be aware that there is some evidence that a protein may—and I stress the word “may”—be responsible for the occasional transmission of Alzheimer’s disease. If she wants a little bit of help on moving with RelyOn, I can tell her that RelyOn would disinfect instruments with this protein as well. Another major failure relates to the sourcing of blood products. People born after 1 January 1996 who needed blood products—for instance, a transfusion—could not get non-UK-sourced plasma that was almost certainly prion-free. Those born before that date would get UK plasma, and would have to pay earnestly that the donor was not the one in 2,000. As a parent, I can imagine having two children born on either side of that date. If for some horrible reason they both needed blood transfusions, one child would get the prion-free plasma and the other would take the risk, as would elderly people like us.

With a test, we could be fairly sure of excluding that one in 2,000. Professor Collinge and his prion unit team have developed such a test. They tried it out in this country and subsequently went to the United States, where they checked it with an extensive research programme to make sure that it produced no false positives. They were successful. They then returned to this country. The final stage of the research needs to be tested on a large batch of anonymised UK blood samples, but the Medical Research Council will not fund it. At least, that is the case so far.

If we had that test, blood donors who were carriers would be sorted out and their blood not used, and special measures could be taken for surgery patients who proved to be carriers. In respect of the latter line, the Minister’s Department introduced new guidance in July this year. I understand that it requires separate instruments to be used on high-risk tissues in the case of patients born before and after 1 January 1997 respectively. That is sensible reasoning, because it is thought that people born since 1997 have had less exposure to prions via the food chain. Those people form a group who are at lower risk of prion diseases, and thus less likely to contaminate surgical instruments with prions.

The instruction from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence on a risk-reduction strategy requires every hospital and clinic to have separate pools of instruments to be used for high-risk surgery. It distinguishes between patients who were born before 1 January 1997 and those who were born on or after that date. The instruments must be kept separately, and noted. Although I consider that instruction to be eminently sensible, it will add greatly to the costs to hospitals of instrument provision, storage, and the required regular re-sterilisation. Tracing and tracking of instruments has also proved costly, and some hospitals are etching all instruments with identification numbers to ensure that they can carry out the process properly.

I have only been able to obtain one figure, but I understand that since, I think, July, observing the new guidance has cost the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery in Queen Square an extra £120,000. A little further down the road, the cost to a hospital specialising in children will be considerably higher. If RelyOn were developed so that it could be used, that difficulty would be removed.

I have three small asks of the Minister. First, we must recognise that all patients need to be treated equally in respect of blood products. As one person in 2,000 is thought to be a carrier, until we have a variant CJD test everyone should receive non-UK plasma. Secondly, rather than chasing a new product for sterilisation, the Department of Health, through whatever means, should fund the
[Sir Paul Beresford]

The manufacturer of RelyOn to produce it in a more user-friendly form. If NICE or the Care Quality Commission made the use of such a product mandatory, there would be a market potential, which might be sufficient to persuade DuPont or some other manufacturer to produce such a user-friendly product without the need for funding, because it would be sold and used every time sterilisation pouches went through the dishwasher. Thirdly, funding the last stage of the testing of the prion unit system for prion detection would enable carriers to be taken out of the blood transfusion pool, and would also ensure a more sensible separation of surgical instruments. The cost savings would be vast.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on making such a compelling case for those with CJD. In 2001, the Government set some money aside for a compensation scheme for UK victims of variant CJD. A trust fund was set up in April 2001 and compensation payments of £25,000 were made to the most affected families. Does the hon. Gentleman feel the Government should reconsider the compensation scheme and upgrade it for 2016 for those who, clearly from what he says, will probably fall into that category—although I hope not—in years to come?

Sir Paul Beresford: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, but what I would really like to do is get the Government to take some action that is sitting, waiting, readily available to prevent it; otherwise, in time to come I believe we are going to have a chance of a considerable flood of variant CJD disease, but we do not know, and if this test was there we would know if the figure of one in 2,000 is right or wrong, or if we can separate patients out, so that those who have it have special instruments and the rest of us are all right, and we can also start using blood products in this country, because we will only be using products that do not have the prion on board.

In effect, the Minister needs to think about this: I do not want my grandchildren to be the generation that sees the re-emergence of variant CJD and for them to turn to me, if I am still around, and say, “Why didn’t we do something about it?” That is not a very big ask.

6.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on securing this important debate on variant CJD and surgery. It is clearly an area on which he has a great deal of knowledge. I recognise that prion disease is the causative agent of transmissible spongiform encephalopathies such as variant CJD. It remains in many ways obscure and there are many aspects of these rare diseases that we are still in the early stages of researching. However, one thing I am confident about is that the UK system for ascertaining CJD case numbers has been for the past 20 years reliable and accurate. Our national CJD research and surveillance unit, which is based in Edinburgh and funded by the Department and the Scottish Government, leads pan-European work and has leadership from expert clinicians and scientists who, in 1996 following BSE, were the first to identify variant CJD as a separate form of the condition.

The Department recognises the potential seriousness of secondary—person-to-person—transmissions of vCJD and has since the late 1990s introduced a series of measures to reduce the risk of such spread, whether by blood transmission or by surgery. We are reassured that there have to date been no cases attributable to surgical transmission and only three cases of clinical disease attributable to blood transfusions, all of which occurred in or before 1999. However, our risk assessment models, which we use in our impact assessments of potential risk reduction measures, continue to take into account the potential for secondary—person-to-person—transmissions by both routes, in people with all genotypes and over potentially very long incubation periods, which my hon. Friend mentioned. This is why the scientific advice we have is that the surgical instrument measures in place are sufficient irrespective of the genotype.

My hon. Friend was right to mention the recent case. It was always anticipated on the basis of a wide body of published scientific work that, following the BSE epidemic, further cases of vCJD, including MV cases, might arise from time to time. We have seen that with similar diseases, such as kuru in Papua New Guinea, and studies suggest MV cases could be seen in small numbers for more than 30 years after exposure. Having reviewed the information about the case of vCJD in a patient with MV genotype, the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens has advised that no changes in the current risk reduction measures are needed at present. It advises that the measures in place are sufficient, irrespective of genotype, although of course the matter will remain under review.

It is important to stress that modern surgical equipment in the UK is very safe and that robust guidance is in place for the NHS on procedures and practices to reduce the risk of contamination of any kind, including the use of single-use instruments where possible and of decontamination practices. Where it is not possible to use single-use instruments in higher-risk procedures, there are processes in place to track the use of specialist equipment. As my hon. Friend will know far better than I do, there is a potential risk of vCJD transmission via dental surgery, and this has been recognised by the UK’s chief dental officers. In 2007, they issued letters to all dentists to advise that endodontic root canal reamers and files should be used as single-patient or single-use instruments.

Sir Paul Beresford: I am a little worried that the Minister appears to accept that surgical procedures are as good as they can be, given that the Department is inviting research to find a RelyOn equivalent, to improve the situation. The Department must therefore see a flaw in what we have at present.

Nicola Blackwood: My hon. Friend anticipates my next words as only an experienced Member of Parliament can do. I think it is right to say that there has so far been no evidence of any secondary, person-to-person, vCJD transmissions via surgery or dentistry. Nevertheless, we are maintaining and updating our precautionary approach. Surgical instruments guidance has recently been refreshed to support health organisations in delivering the required standard of decontamination of surgical instruments and to build on existing good practice to ensure that high standards of infection prevention and control are developed and maintained. My hon. Friend mentioned a number of these points.
The major change in this latest revision takes account of recent changes to the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens transmissible spongiform encephalopathy subgroup’s general principles of decontamination. This establishes a move towards in-situ testing for residual proteins on instruments. Residual protein is important because of the potential risk of the transmission of prions, though vCJD has not been shown to have been transmitted person-to-person in this way. The guidance provides information on how sterile services departments can mitigate the patient safety risk from residual protein with the objective of reductions in protein contamination levels through the optimisation of decontamination processes.

The ambition is that all healthcare providers engaged in the management and decontamination of surgical instruments used in acute care will have implemented this guidance by 1 July 2018. However, providers whose instruments are likely to come into contact with higher-risk tissues—for example, neurological tissue—are expected to give the guidance higher priority and to move to in-situ protein detection methodologies by 1 July 2017.

The chief medical officer has also recently written to NICE supporting the need to update its guidance on patient safety and the reduction of risk of transmission of CJD via interventional procedures, to ensure that it is fit for purpose, appropriately targeted, and can command the confidence of those who use it. We would expect this to take account of available evidence, including decontamination methods that are safe and effective against human prions; the epidemiology of CJD, including data on the prevalence of vCJD infectivity in the UK population from the appendix prevalence studies; and the availability and performance of single-use instruments in high-risk specialties. We would also expect the guidance review to be considered in the context of the latest research on prevalence, particularly for those born after 1996, who are currently considered unlikely to have been exposed to the BSE agent.

My hon. Friend is right, however, to say that adopting the precautionary principle alone is not sufficient. That is why successive UK Governments have been supportive of the development of new measures that might help in vCJD risk reduction. The Department of Health has provided over £70 million for CJD-related research in the last 15 years. That research has focused on infectivity, pathogenesis and transmission risk; decontamination of surgical instruments and the development of more sensitive methods to detect residual proteins to improve instrument cleaning; test development, treatment and diagnosis; and surveillance, screening, epidemiology and case finding.

Sir Paul Beresford: I accept everything that my hon. Friend says. However, a test solution is on the market for research excellence that the UK scientific community for those funds must go through the standard processes. To do otherwise would be to undermine the reputation of our understanding of vCJD infection in the UK population, the development of a test able to detect pre-clinical levels of infection in blood, and the development of decontamination technologies for reusable medical instruments. I understand that Professor Collinge’s laboratory is one application that is currently going through that process, so it would be inappropriate for me to intervene.

I assure the House that the Department recognises the fatal consequences of all forms of clinical CJD and the devastating cost to individual patients, their families and carers, which my hon. Friend described movingly. That is why we set up the vCJD Trust in 2001 in recognition of their wholly exceptional situation and the fact that the Government are their last resort for help. The trust provides a no-fault compensation scheme for vCJD patients and their families, providing payments to be made in respect of 250 cases from a trust fund of £67.5 million. Over £41 million has been paid out by the trust to date.

Jim Shannon: In my intervention on the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), I asked whether compensation should be increased because of the number of years since the agreement was first made. With great respect and humbleness, I ask the Minister whether the Government would consider that.

Nicola Blackwood: That is one reason why the Department has continued in difficult financial times to ring-fence £5.5 million a year for CJD-related research. We are keen to see safe, evidence-based, cost-effective measures to reduce the risk of vCJD. At the moment, however, there is no validated diagnostic blood test that can be used before the onset of CJD symptoms to diagnose whether someone is infected or incubating the disease. We will of course take advice from the ACDP and the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs on the use of any potential test in any proposed Department of Health-funded research study or deployment by UK blood services, but there are established systems for applying for research funds. We have put such funds out there, and any applications for those funds must go through the standard processes. To do otherwise would be to undermine the reputation for research excellence that the UK scientific community has fought hard to establish.

To that end, we recently launched an open competition, inviting proposals for research to further inform our risk-management and health-protection measures, including our understanding of vCJD infection in the UK population, the development of a test able to detect pre-clinical levels of infection in blood, and the development of decontamination technologies for reusable medical instruments. I understand that Professor Collinge’s laboratory is one application that is currently going through that process, so it would be inappropriate for me to intervene.

The ACDP continues to provide independent riskassessment advice on prion disease, informing both research priorities and public health measures to mitigate against risks from healthcare interventions, including the surgical, medical and dental procedures that were raised today. The ACDP is clear that risk to both patients and the general public is extremely low. Nevertheless, the current robust systems of active surveillance for CJD continue, and our experts maintain a close watch on new evidence, reviewing it as it becomes available.
available. I assure the House that neither the Government nor the NHS has drawn back from our responsibilities to ensure that precautionary and proportionate measures are in place to protect patients from the risk of acquiring infection with prion agents during their healthcare. We have put in place robust research investment to ensure that the situation can only improve.

*Question put and agreed to.*

6.35 pm

*House adjourned.*
Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—
Leaving the EU

1. Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the Welsh economy.
   
   [907479]

8. Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his Cabinet colleagues on the potential effect on the Welsh economy of the UK leaving the EU.
   
   [907486]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The Welsh economy approaches EU exit from a very strong position. Since the vote to leave the EU we have seen economic inactivity continue to fall in Wales while employment has risen to a record high. Businesses continue to show confidence in the economy, with new investment across the UK fundamental to prosperity in Wales.

Margaret Ferrier: Wealth inequality in the British state hits Wales hard, with Welsh gross value added just scraping 71.4% of the UK average. EU structural funds have been key to combating this home-grown unfairness. Will the Minister guarantee today continued future UK funding to replace in full the lost EU regional money?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady raises an important issue, and I would say that Wales has been the fastest growing part of the UK outside London since 2010. She makes an important point in relation to the future of structural funds. She will also appreciate that they are meant to be a short-term boost to the economy, but after 16 years and after £4 billion has been spent, west Wales and the valleys have 64% of UK GVA. I am sure we need to use this opportunity to be positive and do something better with similar structural support.

Wayne David: Does the Secretary of State’s answer to that last question imply the Government intend to change the agreed priorities for the spending of the structural funds?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate both that his constituency has experienced some significant falls in unemployment since 2010 and that after all that money has been spent those areas voted in the strongest numbers to leave the EU. The point I am making is that the current programme has not worked and has not fitted those communities. Exiting the EU presents an ideal opportunity to revisit this and look to see what we can do better for the hon. Gentleman’s constituency and other communities in Wales in need.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the people of Wales voted clearly for Brexit and they do not need to be represented by the SNP or the Welsh Assembly Government who are ignoring their views, but will be pleased to have a Conservative Government and an excellent Secretary of State for Wales who will carry out their wishes?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. For his kind comments, but of course we have a close and constructive working relationship with the Welsh Government and all devolved Administrations because it is in our interests to get the strongest deal for the whole of the UK. After all, as my hon. Friend will recognise, the most important market for Welsh business is the UK market, and getting the best deal for the whole of the UK is in all our interests.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The automotive and aerospace sectors are of enormous strategic importance for the Welsh economy. Given that Brexit probably will not mean retaining full membership of the single market, will my right hon. Friend nevertheless commit to do everything he can to retain full single market-style benefits for those critically important sectors in the Welsh economy?

Alun Cairns: My right hon. Friend raises an important point. He recognises the strength of the automotive and aerospace sectors, and I would point to some significant major investments the UK has landed. We are all familiar with Nissan investment in Sunderland, but it is equally important to the Welsh economy—Calsonic Kansei in Llanelli is a supplier to Nissan in Sunderland. We want to maintain the most open market arrangements, and the confidence shown by Nissan demonstrates it understands the priority we are placing on that.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): This week Hybu Cig Cymru, the Farmers’ Union of Wales and NFU Cymru have all made the overwhelming case in favour of tariff-free access to the EU for our world-class Welsh red meat. What is the Minister doing to ensure the voice of agriculture is heard in government?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point and the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb), was at the winter fair in Builth Wells yesterday in Llanwelwedg where he met the FUW and the NFU. We are in close dialogue with the farming unions in Wales and across the whole of the UK. Clearly Welsh agriculture is an important part of the Welsh economy and of our export market, and we want to maintain the most open trading relationship possible in its interest.

Hywel Williams: Welsh agriculture is spectacularly successful in EU markets; 93% of our excellent Welsh beef and lamb exports go to EU countries. What steps...
is the Secretary of State taking to ensure French, Italian, Spanish and German people continue to eat Welsh meat in the future?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I too want to ensure that those across the European Union and elsewhere have the opportunity to benefit from the excellent produce that comes from Wales, including Welsh beef and Welsh lamb. We want to be global leaders in free trade. We also want the most open trading relationship with Europe that we can possibly get, and that is our determination and focus in our negotiations.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I ran a manufacturing business in south Wales for 13 years, and it is a great place to do business. We manufactured and sold all over the world. Does the Secretary of State agree that the fall in the pound as a result of the Brexit vote makes it much easier for Welsh exporters to increase their sales?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, because it gives me the opportunity to highlight the fact that Wales now has 37,000 more manufacturing jobs than in 2010. That demonstrates the strength and vibrancy of the Welsh economy. Clearly we want to do all we can to support our manufacturers. The value of the pound will have positive results for some businesses and perhaps present challenges for others, but those exporters who want to grow are clearly in a stronger position.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State referred earlier to the importance of the automotive industry in Wales. Ford announced in September that it would guarantee around a third of the jobs in its 1,800-strong workforce at Bridgend. Those jobs are vital to the local community and to the supply chain in Wales, but we are still concerned about the lack of commitment post-2020. The lack of any plan from the Government for Brexit is exacerbating the uncertainty and causing doubts about the plant’s future, so will the Secretary of State today commit his Government to giving Ford the same deal that they gave to Nissan in order to secure the future of the Bridgend plant and Ford’s presence in the UK post-Brexit?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady has raised an important point. My understanding of the situation is that Ford is continuing with more than £100 million-worth of new investment in the plant. That demonstrates the confidence that Ford has, not only in the Bridgend plant but in the UK economy. This builds on the strength of the automotive sector, which is extremely important to the Welsh economy and to the UK economy as a whole.

3. [907481]Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on foreign investment in Wales.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The Welsh economy remains fundamentally strong, highly competitive and open for business. We are part of a strong United Kingdom, and leaving the EU offers Wales an unprecedented opportunity to forge a new role for ourselves in the world, to negotiate our own trade agreements and to reap the benefits of foreign investment.

Alex Cunningham: What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the First Minister about the potential loss of links and connections that have been built up through organisations such as the European Committee of the Regions, and how will he seek to maintain those connections after Brexit?

Alun Cairns: The Welsh Government and I have a warm working relationship. Only last week, two Secretaries of State met at the British-Irish Council that took place in my own constituency of Vale of Glamorgan. Of course we have strong bilateral relationships, and it is right that we use the Joint Ministerial Council to form the basis of the negotiations as we exit the European Union. I want to maintain the warmest and most constructive relationship possible with the Welsh Government, with all the devolved Administrations and with the Crown dependencies.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): But does my right hon. Friend accept that this is not just about manufacturing, and that it is not only the exporters of Welsh Black beef who are important? One of the biggest exports for Wales is tourism. People tell me that, with the lower value of the pound, there are more foreign visitors in Snowdonia than ever before and that overseas companies are making more inward investment in Welsh hotels and marketing.

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. Wales has a fantastic record of attracting inward investment projects. He has focused on tourism, which gives me the opportunity to highlight the fact that north Wales has been named by Lonely Planet as the fourth top place in the world to visit in 2017. It is the only part of the United Kingdom to have been chosen, and that is something that we should celebrate and market to ensure that more people come not only to the UK but to north Wales.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Inward investment is a key driver of decisions to invest in particular areas, and the manufacturing powerhouse of north-east Wales needs inward investment not only from the private sector but from the Government. Will the Secretary of State put his money where his mouth is and commit the UK Government to matching Welsh Government investment in new infrastructure, including road and rail, in north-east Wales?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman shows a close interest in the Mersey Dee area and has shown particular interest in the north Wales growth deal, which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor mentioned in the autumn statement. We are keen to progress it and are waiting for details of the bid. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will recognise the major success of that part of the world being chosen for the global F-35 repair centre, which will inject billions of pounds over decades into north-east Wales and MOD Sealand. We should recognise and celebrate that.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): More than £2 billion of capital investment has been made over the past decade across Wales in social housing, transport, energy,
water and education through the European Investment Bank. What plans has the Secretary of State put in place to mitigate the potentially disastrous consequences of leaving the EU on pre-existing EIB loans to organisations and public bodies in Wales? Crucially, what plans does he have to replace the funding that the EIB has been able to provide?

Alun Cairns: Our negotiations with the EIB will run in parallel with our negotiations with the European Commission. The hon. Lady has a responsibility to try to instil confidence in investment in Wales, not to undermine it. Only last week, the Chancellor announced a further capital injection of £436 million. I would hope that the hon. Lady would want to welcome that, not undermine investment in Wales.

Alun Cairns: Our negotiations with the EIB will run in parallel with our negotiations with the European Commission. The hon. Lady has a responsibility to try to instil confidence in investment in Wales, not to undermine it. Only last week, the Chancellor announced a further capital injection of £436 million. I would hope that the hon. Lady would want to welcome that, not undermine investment, employment and jobs—it really does not become her.

Inward Investment

4. Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): What assessment he has made of recent trends in the level of inward investment in Wales.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): Wales is an attractive destination for overseas investment, and the UK Government remain committed to providing certainty and stability for businesses in Wales. Our country has a tremendous opportunity to forge stronger relations with international partners. I am passionate about selling Wales to the world and continuing to increase global investment in Wales.

Alberto Costa: Does my hon. Friend agree that recent announcements of investment in Wales, such as the F-35 global repair and maintenance hub in north Wales, represent a vote of confidence in the UK’s economy as a whole?

Guto Bebb: I could not agree more. Such investment is welcome, and I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for Defence for his part in ensuring that that investment came to north Wales. North-east Wales is an engineering powerhouse in the UK economy, and the investment in the F-35 project is welcome and further enhances engineering opportunities for young people in north-east Wales.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): At the beginning of this year, FieldMaster Tractors Ltd, a tractor assembly company in my constituency, signed a joint venture agreement with Longhua, a Chinese company, that would have created 40 jobs in my constituency with aims of expanding. Last week, the owner received notification from China that the deal was off due to uncertainty about our future trading relationship with the European Union. Does the Minister recognise that the UK Government’s dithering over Wales’s future relationship with the single market and the customs union is costing jobs now?

Guto Bebb: I am disappointed to hear that news and would be more than happy to discuss it with the hon. Gentleman—any loss of investment in Wales is to be regretted. He is wrong, however, to talk about dithering. The Government are clear that we want strong trade relations with the European Union and with the rest of the world. Any Chinese investor looking at the UK knows that this country is friendly to investment from all parts of the globe.

13. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will my hon. Friend update the House on the discussions that were taking place to bring inward investment to Wales and to create more jobs and opportunities for young and old alike, and to allow new firms to develop in Wales?

Guto Bebb: I agree with my hon. Friend; investment in Wales is most welcome. We need to diversify the Welsh economy. Manufacturing jobs in Wales have increased and the engineering sector is second to none in the United Kingdom. That is based on attracting inward investment. On a recent visit to Deeside, I saw again how Airbus is acting as a catalyst for small business development in north-east Wales. We need a combination of inward investment and home-grown companies that are able to build on the expertise provided by companies such as Airbus.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Some businesses may not invest inwardly in Wales because they would have to pay two apprenticeship levies: the UK Government levy and the Construction Industry Training Board levy. Under the Barnett formula, that will not result in extra funding for Welsh apprenticeships. Will the Minister reassure potential investors that they will be able to claim all levies for training and will be able to use the money for workforce development with local further education providers?

Guto Bebb: I am surprised to hear that question from the hon. Lady; the apprenticeship levy is important, but the settlement between Her Majesty’s Treasury and the Welsh Government has been welcomed by the latter as both fair and comprehensive. It is therefore essential that she and other Members call on the Welsh Government to make sure that the money allocated through the apprenticeship levy is spent where it is needed.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Given that the UK Government and, in particular, senior Ministers are currently doing their best to offend the international community, it falls to Wales and the Welsh Government to promote inward investment. So will the Minister join me in congratulating the Welsh Government on the role they have played in promoting Wales and securing the highest level of inward investment on record? Furthermore, what support will he give to ensure that this success is sustained following the UK’s exit from the European Union?

Guto Bebb: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the question. It is important to state that the relationship between the Welsh Government and the UK Government on this issue is very productive. I recently visited Wales with a Minister for International Trade, and the Secretary of State for International Trade will be in Wales on Friday. We work constructively with the Welsh Government to ensure that we sell Wales and the United Kingdom as a good place to do business. We have a strong relationship, which the hon. Gentleman should welcome.
Prison Estate

5. Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of recent changes in the number of prison officers on the prison estate in Wales.

[907483]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): We are committed to transforming prisons into places of safety and reform. We recently announced a major overhaul of the prison system, and in the autumn statement we announced funding for 2,500 extra front-line officers across the UK.

Mrs Moon: The Minister will be aware that it is not just numbers of prison officers, but the skill base they bring with them that is important. Parc prison has a wonderful record with its “invisible walls” scheme in building links between prisoners and their families. More than 500 children a week visit their fathers, and 69% of inmates have contact with their families. Will he work with me to get the Treasury and the Ministry of Justice to provide funding so that the scheme carries on after 2017?

Guto Bebb: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the work she does with Parc prison in Bridgend. The relationship she has with Parc prison is indicative of the way an MP should work with such a facility. I pay particular tribute to Parc as a prison that has highlighted the importance of ensuring that family ties are maintained while prisoners are serving a sentence. The good practice shown in Parc should be repeated across the prison estate, and I would be delighted to co-operate with her in pushing this issue forward.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): Over the past five years, the number of violent attacks on prison officers in Welsh prisons has risen by more than 138%. What discussions have Ministers had with the Justice Secretary about tackling violence in Welsh prisons?

Guto Bebb: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has regular discussions with the Department in question on this issue. No member of staff working on behalf of the state should be threatened or subject to violence in their workplace, so it is essential that we support prison officers in that context and crack down hard on anybody who is responsible for violence within or outside the prison sector.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I speak as the co-chair of the cross-party justice unions parliamentary group. HMIP Berwyn is due to open in less than three months’ time. Given that the National Offender Management Service is committed to ensuring that it gives equal treatment to English and Welsh in Wales, will the Minister tell the House how he is monitoring the language skills of staff in Wrexham? The MOJ has told me that:

“Data on the number of bilingual Welsh and English speakers...is not collected centrally.”

Guto Bebb: First, I hope that the hon. Lady welcomes the fact that the prison in Wrexham is being built, as it is a significant investment in north-east Wales and a significant opportunity for the north Wales economy. On the Welsh language issue, it is fair to say that the Department responsible has made it clear that the number of jobs being created at Wrexham will reflect the demographic realities in north Wales, and as a result there will be Welsh-speaking staff in the prison at Berwyn. That will be a great improvement on the current situation, where Welsh-speaking prisoners end up in the estate in England.

Mr Speaker: Order. A lot of very noisy private conversations are taking place. I must advise the House that we have many distinguished visitors here today, not only from across the country, but from Iraq and Egypt. We wish to show them that in our ancient democracy we can, when we try, conduct ourselves with due decorum, which will now be brilliantly exemplified by Mr Nigel Huddleston.

Leaving the EU

6. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with key stakeholders on the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on Wales.

[907484]

10. Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with key stakeholders on the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on Wales.

[907488]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): Since the referendum in June, I have had discussions with a wide range of stakeholders across Wales, from the Wales Council for Voluntary Action, to the farming unions, the CBI Wales and the Institute of Directors in Wales, to hear their views on how to secure the best deal for Wales and the UK as we leave the EU. Those conversations are informing my discussions with Cabinet colleagues, as well as with the Welsh Government.

Nigel Huddleston: Does the Secretary of State agree that we should not just focus on businesses as we leave the EU? We should also consider the implications for the third sector, charities, local authorities and universities in Wales.

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. I have already talked about my warm relationship with the Welsh Government, but of course the UK Government should also have a warm relationship with universities, charity groups and environmental groups, as well as with businesses directly in Wales. The Welsh Government have an important part to play, but we also have a direct relationship with those key stakeholders.

Karl McCartney: Does my right hon. Friend recognise that there is more than one voice in Wales and not simply the voice of the Welsh Government, who still cannot accept that the majority of Welsh people voted to leave the European Union? We must therefore engage with all Welsh stakeholders and partners who are key to ensuring that Brexit will be a success for everyone in the UK.

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Of course we engage positively with the Welsh Government, and we will continue to do so. I have
already had scores of meetings with key stakeholders in Wales. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Wales was at the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society’s winter fair yesterday doing that very thing—engaging with Welsh farmers and with Welsh farming unions.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Given the uncertainty over the single market and the Prime Minister’s failure to raise steel when she met the Indian Government recently, what steps will the Secretary of State take in the near future when he meets trade unions representing the steel industry to discuss the impact of the loss of the single market?

Alun Cairns: I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will do all he can to instil confidence in our ambitions to gain the most open trading relationship possible. He rightly raises steel. I am sure that he will recognise that we are in a much stronger position now than we were back in March. That is a result of reduced energy costs for the sector of £109 million. We have changed the procurement rules, offered flexibility in environmental packages and implemented strong pan-EU anti-dumping measures, which will reduce the threats of imports by more than 90% in a whole range of sectors.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): The success of the Welsh red meat sector has meant that £225 million has been ploughed back into some of the most fragile rural communities in Wales. In his meetings, has the Secretary of State heard that message, and will he push the case for access to the single market to protect those very communities?

Alun Cairns: Like the hon. Gentleman, I have a lot of confidence in the Welsh red meat sector. I am sure that our European nations do not want to go without our high-quality Welsh red meat. We are determined to support our farmers in gaining the most open trading relationship possible, so that European nations can continue to enjoy the quality of Welsh produce.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the potential effect of the UK exiting the EU on businesses and employees in Wales.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): I recognise that many businesses in Wales have an important relationship with the EU, but, as a whole, Welsh businesses export more to countries outside the European Union. In leaving the EU, we will seek new opportunities for businesses across the UK, including in Wales, as we build on our strengths as an open, dynamic trading nation.

Susan Elan Jones: The Minister will know full well that he has not really answered my question. Can he tell us whether his officials have made any estimate of how many jobs in Wales will be lost if the UK leaves the single market and what he and his Government are planning to do about it?

Guto Bebb: I am somewhat disturbed by the hon. Lady’s comments. Time and again, I hear Opposition parties talking down the Welsh economy. I want to talk up the Welsh economy, as do the Welsh Government. As we start this process, we have fewer people out of work in Wales now than since 2010, and our economy is growing faster than many parts of the UK. She should be talking up Wales, not talking it down.

Mr Speaker: I am happy to hear the voice of North East Hampshire on question 7. Mr Jayawardena, get in there.

9. [907487] Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): North Wales, which is home to the wings of the Airbus A380, has significant opportunities for trade with Europe and the rest of the world. Will my hon. Friend reassure the House that efforts will be dedicated to ensuring that north Wales and its northern powerhouse links will be trumpeted by this Government?

Guto Bebb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. North Wales has a huge contribution to make in terms of employment not just in North Wales but throughout the UK. The Government’s emphasis on having a north Wales growth deal is dependent on linking north Wales to the northern powerhouse. To develop that link, I was pleased to visit north-east Wales and Chester recently with the Minister responsible for the northern powerhouse. There is an appetite in north-east Wales to work on a cross-border basis for the benefit of our local economies.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm the completion date of the rail electrification and all the work that needs to be done between Cardiff and Swansea, please?

Guto Bebb: My understanding is that the work is progressing well. Again, I highlight the contrast between the situation under this Government and the lack of investment in any railway infrastructure between 1997 and 2010.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): What is the Minister going to do with preposterous suggestion that the priorities for future support for farmers in Wales should be decided on the basis of the UK, where there are many millionaire and billionaire farmers, rather than on the basis of Wales, where there are small farmers? Will he stand up for Welsh priorities, made in Wales for Welsh small farmers?

Guto Bebb: I was at the winter fair yesterday in discussions with farming unions and other interested parties in relation to the Welsh agricultural sector. The agricultural sector in Wales wants a settlement that will be good for the sector in Wales and good for the UK. We know that we can produce the best food in all the world, and we need to ensure that we have opportunities to sell it not only to the rest of the European Union but on a global basis. We are confident we can do that with support from this Government.

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [907564] Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 30 November.
The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing people across the United Kingdom and, indeed, the whole world a very happy St Andrew’s day.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others, and in addition to my duties in this House I shall have further such meetings later today.

Caroline Lucas: May I suggest to the Prime Minister that “having your cake and eating it” is not a serious strategy for Brexit and that Britain deserves better that having to rely on leaked documents to know the Government’s plans? How on earth can she expect MPs to vote to trigger article 50 when she refuses to give any clarity on what kind of Brexit she is pursuing and whether it will involve us still being members of the single market? Is it arrogance, or is it incompetence?

The Prime Minister: I have answered this question many times in this House. The hon. Lady asks specifically about the single market and trading with the European Union, and I have been very clear that we are ambitious in getting the best possible deal for trading with and operating within the single European market.

Q2. [907565] Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I welcome last week’s autumn statement announcement of £556 million for infrastructure in the north of England, but despite that and years of hard work, the M55 Lytham St Annes link road is still not assured. Will my right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Transport this afternoon to discuss this in more detail.

The Prime Minister: I commend my hon. Friend on the hard work he has put in in relation to this project. I understand that there is to be a significant sum of funding from a developer and that my hon. Friend has been working with the developer and the county council on this issue. The local enterprise partnership has submitted a linked bid to Highways England that is being actively considered, and I understand that my hon. Friend is meeting my right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Transport this afternoon to discuss this in more detail.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister did tell us that the deficit would be eradicated by 2015. That was then advanced to 2020, and now it has been advanced to whenever in the future. The right hon. Lady quotes the IFS, but she is being a little selective. It went on to say that the prospect for workers over the next six years was “dreadful”, creating “the worst decade for living standards certainly since the last war and probably since the 1920s”.

Is it not fair to say that those who are just getting by are suffering all the pain for no gain?

The Prime Minister: Given that the right hon. Gentleman cannot distinguish between the IMF and the IFS, it is probably a good job that he is sitting there and I am standing here. Let me tell him what we are doing for those people, and let us think about those people who do find life difficult, who are struggling to get by, who have a job but worry about their job security, who have a home but worry about paying the mortgage, and who are worried about their children’s education and whether their children will be able to buy a home. What measures have we taken? We have increased the national living wage—we introduced the national living wage. We are increasing personal tax allowance, taking more people out of paying tax altogether. We are increasing the number of affordable homes being built. But we can only do this if we have a strong economy, and it is our plan that delivers that strong economy.

Jeremy Corbyn: Wages have stagnated; home ownership is falling; homelessness has doubled; and queues at food banks are rising every day. If the Prime Minister really believes the economy is doing well, why are her Government forcing through £2 billion of cuts to in-work support, cutting the incomes of working people and leaving many households over £2,000 a year worse off?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman starts his question by talking about home ownership. Let us be very clear what is happening in respect of housing. House building starts fell by 45% under Labour in 12 years. They have increased by over two thirds since the Conservatives were in government. Yes, we are making changes to the welfare system. He and I have a fundamental difference of opinion about the welfare system. I think what is important in the welfare system is that we remember those who are benefiting from it and we remember those who are paying for it. The universal credit system is there to ensure that work will always pay. I believe in a welfare system that does help people to get into work, that does encourage people into the workplace. He believes in a welfare system where people are able to live on benefits.

Jeremy Corbyn: The last Labour Government took 800,000 children out of poverty. Under the right hon. Lady’s Government, child poverty is rising and now covers 4 million children across this country. Our people are suffering because of the policies of her Government. People are paying the price for her failed economic experiment. The Government have even now abandoned the previous Chancellor’s pledge that their so-called national living wage would be paying at least £9 per hour by 2020. What is the new pledge on living wage?
The Prime Minister: The pledge on living wage is set out in the autumn statement and is as it always has been. The right hon. Gentleman talks about poverty. Actually, we are seeing fewer families in absolute poverty and fewer families in relative poverty. I come back to the point I have been making in answer to his previous questions: it is only possible to do these things by having a strong economy. The one thing we know is that the policy that would not deliver a strong economy is Labour’s policy to increase borrowing by £500 billion. He talks about the impact on people in work. Let me remind him of what the former shadow Treasury Minister said: Labour’s policy to increase borrowing would lead to double the income tax, double council tax, double VAT and double national insurance. That will not help anybody who is in the workplace and just about managing.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am not entirely sure where the Government’s credibility lies on borrowing, since they are borrowing even more, the deficit is increasing and people are suffering. When the Prime Minister talks about children in poverty in response to my question, I simply remind her her 4 million children are living in poverty—children going hungry to school in this country because their parents do not have enough money to feed them properly. It is a disgrace and should be addressed.

In the autumn statement last week, the Chancellor spoke for over 50 minutes. During that time, he did not once mention the national health service or social care. Some 1.2 million people are lacking the care they need. Why was there not one single penny more for social care in the autumn statement?

The Prime Minister: There is absolutely no doubt that the social care system is under pressure; we recognise that. If we just look at the fact that there are 1 million more people aged over 65 today than there were in 2010, we see the sort of pressures on the social care system. That is why the Government have already acted to put more money into the social care system: more money through the better care fund—£3.5 billion extra through the better care fund—and more money through the social care precept. But it is also important that local authorities and the NHS work together to ensure, for example, that people have the social care they need, so they are not ending up blocking beds in hospital. There is some very good practice up and down the country, and sadly there is some not so good practice. What we need to do is make sure everybody is giving the best possible service to people who need it.

Jeremy Corbyn: There is a tragic parallel going on between an underfunded NHS and an underfunded social care system all over the country, and the Prime Minister knows it. Indeed, she might care to listen to the Tory leader of Warwickshire Council, Izzi Seccombe, who says that her council has been “cut to the bone”, and who says on social care: “right now we have a £1.3 billion gap which is not being funded.” It is a real crisis in every social services department all over the country and, indeed, in almost every NHS hospital.

Next year, this Government are handing back £605 million in corporation tax cuts, rising to £1.6 billion the year after that and £7.5 billion over the next five years. So could the Prime Minister explain to the more than 1 million elderly people not getting the care they need, to the 4 million people on NHS waiting lists and to the millions of pensioners worried about losing the protection of the triple lock why there is not one penny extra for the NHS or social care? Just what is this Government’s real sense of priorities?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about funding social care and funding the national health service: £3.8 billion extra is going into the national health service this year. Under Labour’s plans, we would have seen £1.3 billion less going into the national health service. Social care funding is going up under this Government. At the last election, the shadow Chancellor—lately of “Strictly” fame—said local authorities would get not a penny more. Conservatives are putting money into the NHS and social care—Labour would deny it.

Q4. [907567] Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): On a cross-party basis, Jo Cox and I were establishing the National Commission on Loneliness when she was brutally murdered. This work is now being continued by the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and me. Does my right hon. Friend agree that loneliness is an issue for all our communities, and will she urge her Ministers to engage with the commission as it carries out its work and reports next year?

The Prime Minister: First of all, may I just say that I am sure the whole House would want to join me in commending Jo’s family for the very dignified way in which they dealt with matters as the court case was going through. It must have been very harrowing for them.

I am very pleased that my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) are taking forward the work of the commission on loneliness. Earlier this week I was able to support the “Good Morning Britain” 1 Million Minutes campaign, which is encouraging individuals to give 30 minutes of their time to help—to be with—somebody who is lonely. We have, over the years, I think, failed to understand the impact that loneliness has on people’s psychological health but also their physical health. Ministers will look forward to receiving the results from the commission and to working with my hon. Friend and others.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): A very happy St Andrew’s day to everybody celebrating in Scotland and throughout the world.

There is literally nothing to celebrate about the humanitarian catastrophe befalling the people of Syria at this time. The situation in the besieged city of Aleppo is described as so bad that it “could be one of the biggest massacres of civilian population since World War II”.

What can the UK and the international community do to end the suffering of the people of Syria?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the appalling situation in Syria, and particularly the indiscriminate attacks that we see on civilians in Aleppo. The United Kingdom has been working with France to bring forward an emergency discussion on this issue at the UN Security Council; that will take place later today. We want to see a
cessation of hostilities. We want to see an opportunity for humanitarian aid to have access to Aleppo, and we will be pressing for that at the Security Council.

Angus Robertson: It is extremely welcome that the discussions are taking place in the United Nations, and we wish success to all those who are supporting a humanitarian solution to the crisis. However, things are so bad that the agencies are saying that in Aleppo the situation is a “descent into hell”. Time is absolutely of the essence. I know the Prime Minister is seized of this matter; we are in agreement. Can I please appeal to her: can absolutely everything be done now to alleviate the situation of the poor people of Aleppo and of Syria?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right about the horrific situation in Aleppo. I can assure him that the Government are pressing hard and we are doing everything that we can in relation to this. We have consistently looked at what the possible solutions might be, to see whether there are other avenues that we can press for. I think the Security Council debate is very important. There is an important message to send to Russia: that it use its influence with the Assad regime to stop these appalling atrocities in Aleppo and let humanitarian aid through.

Q5. Fiona Bruce (Con): Comments this week by the equalities commissioners about not being worried about talking about Christmas at work were important, because many Christians are now worried, even fearful, about mentioning their faith in public. Will the Prime Minister therefore join me in welcoming the recent Lawyers’ Christian Fellowship publication “Speak Up!”, which confirms that in our country the legal rights of freedom of religion and freedom of speech to speak about one’s faith responsibly, respectfully and without fear are as strong today as ever?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue which matters both to her and me. I think the phrase that was used by the Lawyers’ Christian Fellowship was “the jealously guarded principle” of that ability to speak freely, as she says, respectfully and responsibly about one’s religion. I am happy to welcome the publication of this report and its findings. Of course, we are now into the season of Advent. We have a very strong tradition in this country of religious tolerance and freedom of speech, and our Christian heritage is something we can all be proud of. I am sure we would all want to ensure that people at work do feel able to speak about their faith, and also feel able to speak quite freely about Christmas.

Q3. Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Thirty years ago, I conducted my first funeral as a young curate. It was for a young teenage boy who was an enormous fan of Paul Simon, so, as the crematorium curtains closed, we listened to “The Sound of Silence”, and many people cried. The average cost of a child’s funeral today is £3,675. Some councils do not charge anything, but some charge a lot, and the social fund is means-tested. I ask again: will the Prime Minister please listen to the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), sign up to her campaign and put an end to both the means-testing and the postcode lottery, so that no parents who lose a child have to deal with the fear of hardship as well as their grief?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. I know that the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) spoke very movingly from personal experience in the debate that she called on this issue. I do not think that anybody who has not been through the death of a child can possibly understand the pain that that brings, not just immediately but thereafter, as parents see others grow up while their child will not.

I recognise the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised about the cost of children’s funerals. As he has said, there are measures in place for families who have particular hardship cases, where money can be given. It is open to local authorities to waive fees, and some local authorities do that. We have left this as a decision for local authorities, and some do, indeed, waive those fees.

Q6. Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Grammar schools across the Medway towns have provided good education and opportunities for hard-working young people from a range of backgrounds, helping social mobility and intervening to improve recent Ofsted results in local primary schools, particularly in Rochester and Strood. Does my right hon. Friend agree that our current grammar schools’ contribution to education ought to be valued and given every support, as part of the educational mix up and down the country, to help children to achieve their full potential?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. I believe that there are now nearly 11,000 more children in good and outstanding schools in my hon. Friend’s area than there were in 2010. We want to provide a good school place for every child. She references the good work being done by grammar schools in her area to improve the quality of education in primary schools, which is one of the issues that we are looking at in our consultation on education. We want to remove the legal ban on expanding or opening new grammar schools, but we also want to see grammar schools working to improve standards across the education system generally.

Q7. Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The sustainability and transformation plan for Cheshire and Merseyside aims to develop accountable care organisations. It is a model from America, where it is used to deliver private, insurance-based healthcare. Can the Prime Minister assure me that STPs will not be used as a means of introducing insurance-based private healthcare into the NHS?

The Prime Minister: The STPs are about local people determining the shape of health services in a local area, to deliver the best service for local people. Obviously, every area will be looking very closely at the plans that are being brought forward. It is important that we see, in those STPs, health services increasingly working with local authorities to ensure that they are providing the right, holistic level of care for people in their area.

Q8. Claire Perry (Devizes) (Con): As the Prime Minister leads us towards a smart and smooth Brexit—as I like to call it, a “smexit”—I am sure she shares my
view that the flexibility of Britain’s labour market is one of this country’s great strengths. However, she will be aware that the growth of new business models as part of the so-called gig economy is causing real concern that employment rights could be eroded. Indeed, the news that Uber is seeking a licence to operate in my constituency has left local people concerned about what their jobs could look like in the future. What reassurances can the Prime Minister give to me and my constituents that the Government are working to make sure that employment rights and employment regulations keep pace with this sort of innovation?

The Prime Minister: As I mentioned earlier, we have seen a significant rise in the number of people in employment in this country, and that is because we have got the strong economy that we have. However, I recognise that employment and types of employment are changing. Technology is the driver in many cases. That is why I have asked the chief executive of the RSA, Matthew Taylor, to conduct a review of and report on modern employment practices, so we can ensure that the legislative framework is absolutely the right one for the economy of the future and the jobs of the future. That shows that it is now the Conservative party that is the party of working people.

Q10. [907573] Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Conservative election manifesto promised to halve the disability employment gap by 2020. Ministers justified their plan to cut the benefit from next April by promising to recycle some of the savings into improving employment support for benefit claimants. It has now become apparent that funding for employment support is not being increased; it is being cut. The target for halving the gap—2020—has been completely abandoned. Surely the only honourable course now is for the Government to abandon the benefit cut as well.

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased to say that, over the past three years, nearly 600,000 more disabled people have got into the workplace. I think that is very important. Of course, we want to ensure that all those disabled people who are able to get into work are given the support needed to do that. That is why we have been ensuring not just that this is about benefits, but that this is about the support package in total that people are given. They do have individual support through the personal independence payment for the particular long-term costs that they have incurred because of their disability. It is also the support package that is provided to people in the work group in employment and support allowance that enables them to get into work. Nearly 600,000 more disabled people in work—that is something the right hon. Gentleman should be celebrating.

Q9. [907572] Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s eagerness to give EU citizens living and working lawfully in this country the assurance that they will be able to remain here after Brexit and to obtain reassurances for British citizens living and working in the EU. Does she therefore share my disappointment that Mr Tusk, in response to a letter from 80 Members of this House about resolving this issue speedily, has intransigently put EU processes ahead of common humanity?

The Prime Minister: I can assure my right hon. Friend that, as I said earlier, I would hope this is an issue we can look at at an early stage in the negotiations, and of course there will be two years of negotiations. I think it is right that we want to give reassurance to British citizens living in the EU and to EU citizens living here in the UK, but I think the reaction that we have seen shows why it was absolutely right for us not to do what the Labour party wanted us to do, which was simply to give away the guarantee for rights of EU citizens here in the UK. As we have seen, that would have left UK citizens in Europe high and dry.

Q12. [907575] Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): I know the Prime Minister is handed happy briefs to read out, but can I tell her that she has been wrong on the national health service for weeks now? If she came to South Tyneside hospital, she would see services closing, she would see patients worried and she would see staff demoralised, so why is she going to get a grip of those bean counters who are committing criminal damage on the people’s cherished service in her name?

The Prime Minister: There are nearly 30 more doctors and over 950 more nurses in the South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust compared with 2010. This year, the South Tyneside clinical commissioning group will be getting increased funding. Health funding in the hon. Gentleman’s area is going to be £2.7 billion this year, and that will be increasing by 2020-21. It is this Government that are putting more money into the national health service; it is the Labour party—a former shadow Health Secretary from the Labour party—who said that more money for the NHS was “irresponsible”.

Q11. [907574] Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): Warwick and Leamington contains many of the elements of a successful industrial strategy—great schools, a skilled workforce, strong infrastructure, manufacturing, creative industries and being surrounded by world-class research and development facilities, to name but a few. Will the Prime Minister outline the Government’s progress in developing this policy, which is so important to our nation’s prosperity?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right in what he says about his own constituency and the midlands engine in relation to the development of jobs and for the strong economy of the future. That is why we will be developing the industrial strategy for the whole of the United Kingdom, which is an important part of the Government’s plan for the future. It is looking at issues such as infrastructure and skills, ensuring that we can build on the best and encourage the growth that we need for the economy of the future. The Midlands engine and the part of the country that my hon. Friend represents will be an important part of that growth for the future.

Q14. [907577] Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Guests from the Hyderabad diocese have twice been refused visas to visit the Church of Scotland presbytery of Glasgow as part of a twinning initiative, the suggestion being that the visit was not genuine, despite the paperwork being correct and the Church bearing the costs. When I raised this with the Leader of the House, he spoke of the need for people to return home
after visits, and then the Immigration Minister told me in a patronising letter how to apply for a visa. Will the Prime Minister tell the Church why its visitors are not welcome and what messages she thinks it sends to our faith communities?

The Prime Minister: We have a very clear visa system, and decisions are taken according to its rules, but as the hon. Lady will have seen, the Home Secretary has heard her comments. I suggest that if she sends her the details, she will look at the case.

Q13. [007576] Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, once the will of the British people, including the residents of Fareham, is delivered and we break free from the shackles of the EU, Britain stands to benefit from the fantastic opportunity to forge new trade deals with countries such as India and the USA, and will she meet me and members of the Legatum Institute special trade commission, which has projected a 50% increase in global world product over 15 years as a result of Brexit, which will enable trade to boost jobs, growth and hope?

The Prime Minister: I am interested in the results of the Legatum Institute commission’s report on this issue. I believe absolutely that free trade is the right way to go—it is through free trade that we increase growth and prosperity—which is why I have said I want this country to be a global leader in free trade and why we will not just look to forge new trade deals with other countries as we leave the EU but see how we can improve trade with other countries before we leave it, so that we will continue to strengthen our economy. I am sure that the Secretary of State for International Trade will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the results of the commission’s report.

Mr Speaker: I warmly welcome the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell) back to his place.

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I’ll be able to tell you more about it next week, when I meet my consultant.

What plans does the Prime Minister have to make super-economic zones? The Blyth estuary was given an economic zone by the last Tory Chancellor, as we have acres and acres of land around that river. I hope that that is in her mind.

The Prime Minister: I join you, Mr Speaker, and others in welcoming the hon. Gentleman to his place. It is good to see him back in his usual position, and I wish him all the very best.

As part of our industrial strategy, we are looking around the country at where there are opportunities for economic growth and how we can encourage them to be taken up. It is important that economic growth and prosperity be spread across the whole country to ensure an economy that works for everyone.

Q15. [007578] Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): The digital and creative industry is an important part of the UK economy, and Leeds is an important hub in the sector. In welcoming the £1 billion investment in better broadband in the autumn statement, may I urge my right hon.
be brought to bear so that the family can get answers and understand who brought this terrible crime against their family member?

The Prime Minister: I understand the concern that the hon. Lady rightly shows for her constituent, and obviously her constituent’s deep concern to find out what happened in this terrible tragedy. I understand that the appropriate Minister in the Foreign Office is actively working on this question. I will ask him to respond to the hon. Lady and to meet her to discuss what more can be done and to set out exactly what the Foreign Office is doing on this issue.
Mr Peter Bone presented a Bill to require Her Majesty's Government to notify the European Council by 31 March 2017 of the United Kingdom's intention to withdraw from the European Union.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 December, and to be printed (Bill 104).

Football Supporters (Access)

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require football clubs to provide tickets to matches at a discount for persons under a specified age; to require local authorities to consider the needs of match going supporters when approving kick off times; to require football clubs to set aside a proportion of transfer fees paid for the development of football facilities for local clubs and young people; and for connected purposes.

Football is our national sport. We invented the modern game and we have the most popular league in the world, viewed by millions around the globe. I grew up playing and watching the game, and loved every minute of doing so. Although I still play and watch when I can, I have less time to do so now, and when I play I do not move quite so quickly around the pitch, but I still enjoy it and score the odd goal. As a supporter, however, I find that the difference between the game I grew up watching and the game now is incredible. I remember being able to turn up just before kick-off and pay on the gate. If I did not manage to see the match in person, that usually meant that I would not see it at all, because at that time televised games were the exception rather than the rule.

While there were plenty of good players then, nowadays we have many of the best players from all over the world. There are fantastic modern stadiums, there is huge media coverage of every millisecond of every Premier League game, and of course there is more cash in the sport than it has ever seen before. Despite all that glamour and cash, however, there are things we could be doing better. Our teams, by and large, still flatter to deceive on the international stage, and the proportion of young home-grown talent breaking through each year appears to be less and less.

Not only are there fewer youngsters out on the pitch, but there appear to be fewer in the stands as well. During the 1980s, a much higher proportion of match-going fans were younger. Surveys undertaken at the time suggested that about 20% of match-day fans were in the 16-to-20 age group. I suspect it is no coincidence that the average age of a match-going supporter now is in the 40s: those same fans have grown up with the match-day experience being a part of their life that they have retained. However, the proportion of young people going to games now is much lower, and some surveys even suggest that it is considerably less than 10%. Cost plays a huge part in that, with ticket prices far outstripping inflation at most clubs. If we do not make more provision for younger supporters, we shall risk empty stadiums in 20 or 30 years' time, because the fans of the future will have been driven away by sky-high prices.

I believe that it is time to make provision for our younger fans. The first element of my Bill will require all football clubs to provide 10% of their tickets at discounted prices for young people under the age of 22. We have a lower minimum wage for people under 22, and many of them are in full-time education or apprenticeships. The price of a match-day ticket is beyond the reach of many young people, and when our prices are compared with others around Europe, we know that there is an awfully long way to go. That criticism is not levelled...
solely at Premier League clubs; far too many Football League prices are too high as well. The match-going ritual was part of growing up for my generation, and I do not want to see the next generation miss out on that.

A second measure in the Bill would require local authorities to consider the needs of match-going supporters when approving kick-off times. They are currently required to take account of safety and police advice, but I believe that the needs of the supporter should be considered as well. A number of high-profile games have been moved to times that make it impossible for travelling supporters to attend via public transport. There are countless examples of matches being moved at short notice, in particular to accommodate the demands of television companies. The money that television coverage has brought into the game is of course welcome, but that should not mean that the interests of the match-going fan are entirely subservient to the needs of the TV scheduler.

One high-profile example was the occasion on which Everton and Manchester United played in the FA Cup semi-final in April this year. A late 5.15 pm start meant that fans risked being left with no train back home to the north-west from Wembley after the match, particularly if there was extra time or penalties. However, that does not count as a big game. At the other end of the scale, at the start of the season in the non-league, Eastleigh football club’s game against Barrow was moved to a 12.30 pm kick-off to accommodate television broadcasting, which left fans with a 10-hour, 600-mile round trip. How could anyone seriously expect supporters to travel sensibly to and from that game on public transport?

The Bill requires councils to make an assessment of the availability of transport links before a final kick-off time can be approved, so that travelling fans have a realistic chance of being able to get to the game. That is particularly relevant as we approach the traditional Christmas fixture list, when public transport options are more limited. Games are currently scheduled to kick off at midday on Boxing Day and 5.30 pm on New Year’s Eve. How can either of those times be remotely sensible on those days?

There are also the fans who have gone to considerable trouble and expense to make travel arrangements well in advance of the game, only for the time and, on some occasions, the day of the game to be changed at the last minute. What about the shift worker who has made various commitments when the fixture list is released at the start of the season, only to find that the original fixture list becomes increasingly worthless as the season progresses?

The third part of the Bill would require football clubs to set aside a proportion of transfer fees for the development of football facilities for local clubs and young people. That would apply only to fees paid by Premier League clubs, which, during the last transfer window alone, spent £1.2 billion on players. A levy of just 0.1% could raise an extra £1.2 million for grassroots football. I know that money does go to support grassroots football, but it is not enough. Given the cash washing around the Premier League at the moment, I believe we could take further steps to ensure that a little of that unprecedented wealth helps to secure the future for our players and to improve facilities for all.

A study of the amount paid in agents’ fees by Premier League clubs showed that £46.5 million was paid in agents’ and intermediaries’ fees in the four months from October 2015 to January 2016. That is money leaving the game. Much as I would like to, I am not suggesting we outlaw agents’ fees all together; I am merely using these figures to demonstrate that huge sums are going through the game that are not benefiting players or clubs, and certainly not the fans.

We should be concerned about the declining number of home-grown players coming through the leagues. Last season, 35% of Premier League players were English—a huge decrease since the opening 1992-93 campaign of the Premier League, when 69% of the players were English. A survey last month showed that just four Premier League teams had given more than half their game time to home-country players, compared with 11 teams in Spain and 17 in France.

There are huge questions about how professional clubs operate and how our younger players can hope to get a chance against the imported superstars, but one thing we can do is improve the standard of facilities for younger players of all abilities, and indeed everyone involved in grassroots football. We know the pressure that local authorities are under to balance the books, and there is little left for discretionary spending on improving sporting facilities. Often pitches are in poor condition, with poor drainage—there are areas where there is more mud than grass—and many pitches have few or no changing facilities connected to them.

That really hit home with me recently, when I saw for myself a local pitch used for kids’ football, where the goal at one end of the pitch was smaller than the other because of vandalism. We cannot expect the superstars of tomorrow to emerge if we do not invest in them, and we should not tolerate second-rate facilities for our national sport. There are plenty of distractions and reasons why kids might find something to do other than play football. We should do what we can and make sure that at least a little of the wealth flowing through the game trickles down to support the grassroots.

Football is more than just a game. It is certainly more than just a business. It is an integral part of our culture and it needs to be nurtured and protected. The fruits of this golden age in the sport should be used to help secure its future for everyone. I believe that this Bill will achieve that aim.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Justin Madders, Alan Brown, Carolyn Harris, Stephen Kinnock, Ian C. Lucas, Christian Matheson, Jason McCartney, Karl McCartney, Ian Mearns, Paula Sherriff and Jo Stevens present the Bill.

Justin Madders accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February 2017, and to be printed (Bill 103).

Mr Speaker: Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February—

Neil Coyle (Bermudsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Will it be televised?

Mr Speaker: We have no intelligence on the question whether it will be televised—well, actually we do, and it very likely will. [Laughter.]
Opposition Day

Chilcot Inquiry and Parliamentary Accountability

12.49 pm

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House recognises that the Chilcot Inquiry provided substantial evidence of misleading information being presented to the public, and that the Chilcot report was what to do with both the amassing evidence, and what to do in terms of parliamentary accountability if, as we believe, this House and the public were grievously misled into that disastrous conflict.

The hon. Members representing seven political parties in this House commissioned a report from Dr Glen Rangwala of Trinity College, Cambridge. I put the report in the House of Commons Library this morning. All Members would do well to give it a good reading. The report considers, in exact terms, the statements made over a period to this House—not just in the March 2003 debate—and takes into account Chilcot’s findings from the wider canvas of information now available, and contrasts and compares the two. It might help the House if I make a few remarks on Dr Rangwala’s general findings.

In summary, from late 2001 to March 2003, Tony Blair repeatedly made three interrelated statements to the House of Commons: no decision had been taken to use military force against Iraq; military action could be avoided by Iraq’s disarmament of its nuclear, chemical and biological weapons; and regime change was not the goal of Government policy. The report of the Iraq inquiry, published on 6 July, demonstrates conclusively and authoritatively that each of those three statements was untrue, and that their falsity was known to Mr Blair. Mr Blair backed up his claims about the need for Iraqi disarmament by asserting there was conclusive evidence of Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction and that these weapons were a threat to the UK’s national security. On both points, those statements contradicted the intelligence assessments put to Mr Blair.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that Hans Blix, the arms inspector carrying out an inquiry at the time of the vote in March 2003—I was present and voted against intervention—believed at that time that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction?

Alex Salmond: I am aware that Dr Hans Blix asked for more time to complete the process of inspection and was denied that by the then Prime Minister and President of the United States of America.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): It was not just Hans Blix who thought that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Even countries that thought we should not go to war—Russia, France and Germany—thought Saddam had weapons of mass destruction, too. In fact, the only way Saddam Hussein was able to enslave the people of Iraq was by leading them to believe he had weapons of mass destruction.

Alex Salmond: And those countries the hon. Gentleman mentions voted against the war in Iraq for very good reasons.

Rather than speculate on that, thanks to the Chilcot report we now know what evidence the Prime Minister had at his disposal from the Joint Intelligence Committee, which on 15 March 2002 stated:

“Intelligence on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction...and ballistic missile programmes is sporadic and patchy... We continue to judge that Iraq has an offensive chemical warfare (CW) programme, although there is very little intelligence relating to it. From the
evidence available to us, we believe Iraq retains some production equipment, and some small stocks of CW agent precursors, and may have hidden small quantities of agents and weapons... There is no intelligence on any BW agent production facilities.” That highly qualified assessment from the Joint Intelligence Committee was presented to the House of Commons as a certainty that Iraq possessed weapons that were an immediate danger to the United Kingdom.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the right hon. Gentleman share my concern that if we do nothing following the seven-year, £10 million inquiry and take no steps towards accountability for the clear evidence that the former Prime Minister was fixing the evidence around the policy to go to war, it will be almost impossible to begin to restore the faith that has been lost in our political system?

**Alex Salmond**: Yes. The loss of faith in the political system is another dramatic consequence of the disastrous events in Iraq.

**Mr David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Alex Salmond**: Let me finish this point, before I give way to the right hon. Gentleman. This point was raised in the Liaison Committee, when Chilcot was asked about weapons of mass destruction. He was asked repeatedly whether a reasonable person could have come to the conclusion the Prime Minister had come to. The best exchanges were between the Chair of the Committee and Sir John Chilcot on the well understood test of a reasonable man. The Chair asked:

“Would a reasonable man—an other human being—looking at the evidence come to that conclusion?”

**Sir John Chilcot** replied:

“If you are posing that question with regard to a statement of imminent threat to the United Kingdom”—
The Chair said: “I am.”

**Sir John Chilcot** went on:

“In that case, I have to say no, there was not sufficient evidence to sustain that belief objectively at the time.”

Given the length of time the Chilcot inquiry spent considering this exact point, it may be the opinion of many hon. Members that Sir John Chilcot’s expression of this carries rather more weight than that of hon. Members desperate to defend the indefensible.

**Mr Hanson**: Did not Sir John Chilcot, when asked this question in the Liaison Committee, say:

“I absolve him from...a decision to deceive Parliament or the public”.

We cannot have it both ways. We have had the Chilcot report and parliamentary accountability: Chilcot said that the former Prime Minister did not deceive this House or the public.

**Alex Salmond**: The trouble with that intervention is that the right hon. Gentleman does not go on to read the next sentence in that exchange, which I shall read for his erudition:

“However, he also exercised his very considerable powers of advocacy and persuasion, rather than laying the real issues, and the information to back the analysis of them, fairly and squarely in front of Parliament or the public. It was an exercise in advocacy, not an exercise in sharing a crucial judgment”.

**Mr Kenneth Clarke** (Rushcliffe) (Con): As the right hon. Gentleman is aware, I agree with his description regarding the catastrophic nature of the invasion of Iraq. I agree with him that the former Prime Minister has a lot to answer for. He will no doubt continue to do so, although he was cleared by Chilcot of deliberate misbehaviour. Does the right hon. Gentleman not accept that if we turn post-Chilcot debates into an attempt to pursue and hound Tony Blair, the whole thing turns into a party political argument, with Labour Members trying to defend the position of their Government?

Will the right hon. Gentleman go on to address—he is entitled to go on for a bit—the most important matter: how do we ensure that the system of Cabinet government, handling intelligence, and taking on board and properly communicating defence advice to all members of the Cabinet and to Parliament, cannot be repeated, so we do not have another catastrophic foreign policy decision? By personalising the issue we will, if we are not careful, lose the point, which is whether we are satisfied that everything possible is being done to ensure that cannot happen again.

**Alex Salmond**: As the Chilcot report concluded, this was very much a personal campaign by the Prime Minister in doing things unknown to both Cabinet and certainly Parliament. I am going to address the point the right hon. and learned Gentleman makes, but the question of parliamentary accountability is in my estimation central to this case. Committees of this House have been examining the conduct of the processes of government. If he reads the minutes of the meeting that the Committee to which we intend to refer the question of parliamentary accountability held with the Cabinet Secretary, I do not think he will find much reassurance that there has been a tremendous advance in the process of government. The overwhelming impression is that a headstrong Prime Minister could still create a situation where sofa government drove a country into an illegal war. I suggest that parliamentary accountability and an examination of statements made to Parliament and public against the facts as we now know them would be a valuable additional sanction and tool in restraining future Prime Ministers from any such course of events.

**Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I was here in 2003. I was a frequent visitor to Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurds believed prior to 2003 that chemical weapons were going to be used against them again. The Iraqis were in the Gallery; it is a pity we are not having this debate in front of them, because they could point out their concern at the time, and their pressure for this country to help them in their action to overthrow Saddam Hussein. It was not simply an idea that Tony Blair had in his head; we had a full debate in this Parliament in 2003 and I, among others, voted for the action.

**Alex Salmond**: The right hon. Lady’s position on that issue has been consistent through the years, but that was not the case presented to this Parliament. The case presented to this Parliament was that there was a real and present danger to the United Kingdom that required the abandonment of diplomacy internationally and the immediate process to war.

**Several hon. Members rose**—
Alex Salmond: I say this to Labour Members, and correct a point made by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke): it is not all Labour Members. Many Labour Members, throughout this whole sad story, have been prepared to vote with their conscience in condemning their own Government. Indeed, we are all well aware that the leader of the Labour party would, if he was free to do so, be joining us in the Lobby this afternoon.

Several hon. Members rose—

Alex Salmond: I say again to Labour Members that I am not really interested in the civil war in the Labour party; I am interested in the real war that took place and resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. Therefore, it is reasonable and important to consider whether parliamentary accountability can be a major weapon of this House in making sure such events do not happen again.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I wish the right hon. Gentleman and Scots everywhere a very happy St Andrew’s day. He mentioned seven parties; none of my party’s MPs in this House has signed this motion. I do not for one minute doubt the sincerity of many Members who have signed the motion and their desire to get to the truth, but is he not, following on from the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), in real danger of turning a very important issue into a party political issue—the SNP trying to attack the Labour party—rather than making it an issue of real national concern, drawing the lessons that need to be learned? That is one of the reasons we did not sign up to his motion.

Alex Salmond: I would have been very pleased if the right hon. Gentleman had made it Members from eight political parties signing the motion, but the whole point of the cross-party group, which has been working on this issue for months, is to make it not a straight party political issue. As for attacking the Labour party, I think it is more that Labour Members wish to attack me in this debate, but I do not mind that because I am driving on to make the points of parliamentary accountability and the information we had from the Chilcot report that make it unsustainable to argue other than that this Parliament was grievously misled.

The report in the Library—

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab) rose—

Alex Salmond: If the right hon. Lady will forgive me, I will make some progress.

The report in the Library from Dr Glen Rangwala analyses this in enormous detail and I hope Members read it, although even that report is not exhaustive. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) in the Chilcot debate in July listed five, as he put it, clear instances of misrepresentation in a single speech from the Prime Minister—indeed, that speech, the greatest speech of his life, in March 2003. I want to look at just three of the key things that have arisen and that we now know about from the Chilcot report.

The first of those things is the question of prior commitment. Through the long debates on Iraq, many of us suspected that the Prime Minister had given commitments to the American President which were unrevealed to this House and to the public. The Chilcot report outlined these in spades. The famous phrase “I will be with you, whatever” will go down in infamy in terms of giving a commitment. Chilcot says that after giving such a commitment it would be virtually impossible for the Prime Minister to withdraw from it.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): My constituent Mr Matt Walton, an ex-serviceman, contacted my office several months ago regarding the Chilcot report. Matt is clear that Mr Blair’s actions ensured that many of his colleagues’ tragic fates were already decided before they left the UK. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is an outright scandal that ex-members of the armed forces are even thinking this way, and that the then Prime Minister has utterly let down those who were allegedly sent out to protect us?

Alex Salmond: I very much support the view of my hon. Friend.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making a fascinating case, but I do not think he does himself a favour when he refers to this communication with President Bush and says that it was a commitment to military action come what may. There were in fact specific areas where the Prime Minister said that progress would need to be made before he could commit to military action, and he also said that there was a need to commit to Iraq for the long term. I simply say that because, if we are going draw appropriate lessons from history, yes, absolutely, draw critical lessons, but please put them in context.

Alex Salmond: The right hon. Gentleman will understand that my point was that no evidence or information about these commitments was ever presented to this House or to the general public. Indeed, it was not, as we know from Chilcot, presented to the Cabinet. Only Downing Street officials saw that letter and advised the Prime Minister, apparently, not to send it, which he did anyway. The Foreign Secretary, Mr Straw, saw it after the event. It has been said by some that that phrase did not mean what it clearly seems to mean. I just point out that after the Foreign Secretary did see the letter to President Bush, he himself wrote in a memo to the Prime Minister on 11 March 2003, when things at the United Nations were not going well:

“We will obviously need to discuss all this, but I thought it best to put it in your mind as even[s] could move fast. And what I propose is a great deal better than the alternatives. When Bush graciously accepted your offer to be with him all the way, he wanted you alive not dead!”

The Foreign Secretary was referring to being politically dead, not really dead like the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. That point shows with absolute seriousness and clarity that there was no doubt in the mind of the then Foreign Secretary of the extent of the commitment that had been made, and there was no doubt in the mind of the Chilcot inquiry when it commented on the range of letters and correspondence to the President of the United States, which it said would have made it very difficult for the UK to pursue any independent policy after the commitment had been made. That is what the inquiry says on the question of prior commitment.
Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): It is a matter of regret that this is being turned into a party political debate. It is worth remembering that 139 Labour MPs voted, against a strong three-line Whip, against the war, including Members who are present now. The great majority of Conservative MPs did not, but with honourable exceptions—half a dozen of them. Three Select Committees of this House were gung-ho for the war, and what is on trial today is the reputation of Parliament. It is Parliament who voted for an unnecessary war that ended in the deaths of 179 British soldiers, as we have been reminded. The loved ones of the British soldiers need the truth and they need a debate, and a serious debate, not a party political row, which this is turning out to be.

Alex Salmond: I very much welcome the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. As I have been trying to point out, that is why Members from seven parties in this House have put their names to this motion.

There is a real argument, which has been put forward by the hon. Gentleman, me and others who voted against the conflict, that if we suspected there was something grievously wrong with the Prime Minister’s case, why did other people not come to the same conclusion as the late Robin Cook—that in his estimation weapons of mass destruction did not exist in respect of a clear imminent threat being commonly expressed? Why did other people not see that? The hon. Gentleman and I have to understand that when the Prime Minister went to the Dispatch Box in March 2003 and told the House conclusively that a real and present danger to the United Kingdom existed, it was reasonable even for those with misgivings to think that he must be seeing something that they were not seeing and that he must know something that they did not know. Those Members were thereby misled into the Lobby to vote for the conflict.

Joan Ryan: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Salmond: No, I am making progress.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) has been trying to intervene for ages.

Alex Salmond: No doubt, but I think I have been more generous in giving way to Labour Members than they have ever been to me in any Committee or debate that I can remember. I say this reasonably gently: when I first came to this House, the Scottish National party had three Members here and the Labour party in Scotland had 50. I was used to taking constant interventions, and that was entirely legitimate. It did not faze me at all when I was a young Member, and it certainly does not faze me now. So let us make some progress.

On the question of the imminent threat, Chilcot said after assessing all the evidence that the then Prime Minister was engaged in advocacy, not in presenting the facts. On the question of a prior commitment, the Chilcot report is full of expressions from the Prime Minister to the President of the United States of America that were not known to Members of this House or to the general public. That information gives a totally different view of the reasons for conflict that the Prime Minister was then presenting to this House. For example, back in December 2001, the then Prime Minister said in a letter to President Bush that “at present international opinion would be reluctant, outside the US/UK”—

I do not know how he read opinion in that way—“to support immediate military action though, for sure, people want to be rid of Saddam. So we need a strategy for regime change that builds over time.”

The Prime Minister said repeatedly and consistently in this House that regime change was not the objective of Government policy. He stated that the Government’s objective was to stop a clear and present danger to the United Kingdom. I have yet to see a more clear example of misleading people.

Lastly, and I think most pertinently, Chilcot identified the damage done to the authority of the United Nations. These were among the clearest and most resounding points in his report. In this troubled world, we have never needed an effective United Nations more than we do at this moment. That undermining of the UN was clear in the actions of the Prime Minister and in his presentation of why the second resolution was not to pass. Such a resolution would apparently have gone down by 11 votes to four. The Prime Minister repeatedly told the public that the only circumstances in which there would be a war without a second resolution were if one country expressed an unreasonable veto or stood out against international opinion and was not prepared to sanction action in Iraq. We now know beyond question from Chilcot that that was not the case.

We know that the then Prime Minister was misrepresenting the views of the Government of France and of President Chirac, for example. Even on the day of the debate, he continued to misrepresent the French position. The damage to the authority of the United Nations Security Council and to the consistency of international relations is inestimable. In a radio programme last year, as I recall, Sir Stephen Wall was asked specifically whether the Government had lied about the intentions of the French and withheld information on that matter. His answer was yes. The damage to international relations and the question of the unreasonable veto, as the then Prime Minister put it, are at the heart of this misrepresentation.

In recent weeks we have heard a great deal about checks and balances in political systems, particularly as people across the world are crossing their fingers and hoping for the best in the White House. We have been hoping that the institutions of office have a restraining effect and that the mad tweeter will become a sensible President.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is right to talk about prime ministerial accountability to this House, and he is making a powerful case, but is not the real lesson from Chilcot the need for a policy response from the Government to ensure that this kind of thing does not happen again? For example, the creation of the National Security Council was a policy response from the Government to ensure that we have better information sharing and that decision making in Government is improved. Is that not the critical point in this debate?

Alex Salmond: It is certainly an important point, and it is one that is being pursued by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and other Committees of this House. When the Cabinet Secretary was repeatedly challenged on whether the changes to the flow of information to the Intelligence and Security
Committee would make a decisive difference to a Prime Minister who was hellbent on pursuing a particular course of action, answer came there none. It is not enough to say that we are going to change the institutions of government or that we are going to learn the lessons of post-conflict analysis, although we have been promised a paper on that in the near future. There has to be an essence of parliamentary accountability.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I was the Chair of the Committee when the Cabinet Secretary was asked that very question, and I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that my Committee does not necessarily take the advice of the Cabinet Secretary on our recommendations. We will be making recommendations that we are confident will prevent such events from happening again. Should this motion be carried, we will respect the view of the House and extend our inquiry in order to respect that view. I do not know, however, whether we can satisfy the rather less reasonable terms in which the right hon. Gentleman has presented his reasonable motion. That will be for the House to judge.

Alex Salmond: The motion speaks for me and for the other Members who have signed it. I welcome that intervention from the Chairman of the Select Committee. I looked at his robust questioning of the Cabinet Secretary and I am now filled with more confidence that significant recommendations will come forward.

What Iraq demonstrates is that there are currently no effective checks and balances in our system, that the Prime Minister had the ability to create the circumstances in which this House followed him into an illegal conflict, and that all the memos from the higher echelons of the civil service will not mean a thing—rather like the Cabinet Secretary's evidence to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. That should be of little surprise to us.

Joan Ryan: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. According to my reading of Chilcot, the report states that there was “no falsification or improper use of intelligence”, there was “no deception of Cabinet” and there was “no secret commitment to war whether at Crawford Texas in April 2002 or elsewhere”.

As we have been told, Chilcot made it clear to the Liaison Committee that Tony Blair had not deceived Parliament. Sadly, I think the only deception is in today’s motion. Its opportunistic nature does not serve this issue or this Parliament well.

Alex Salmond: In relation to the right hon. Lady’s intervention, I have already corrected one of her hon. Friends and suggested that they carry on to the next sentence after the ones they have cited from Chilcot. Also, the Liaison Committee’s questioning of Sir John Chilcot found explicitly that a reasonable person could not have drawn the conclusions that the then Prime Minister did, and that he presented those conclusions to the House as an advocate rather than as a conveyor of information. I ask the right hon. Lady to go back and look at those points, because they concern every Member of this House regardless of their political party.

Chilcot shows that we have a system of non-accountability. We waited six years before establishing a proper inquiry and, as we found out in The Observer a week past Sunday, it was structured in such a way as to avoid blame. It was deprived of judicial expertise and could not even pronounce on the legality of the conflict. It was wrestled with over the release of the diplomatic correspondence with President Bush, which more than any other factor provides the Prime Minister’s motivations. It was seven years before it reported. After all this time, some people in the press and elsewhere say, “These things are in the past. Let the dead bury the dead.” Many dead people have been buried, the carnage continues, and the real issue, to quote the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), is how to stop it happening again.

Memories will fade. A whole generation has grown up and reached adulthood since the war in Iraq. Soon, less than a quarter of Members—perhaps none—will have lived through the experience of the vote on Iraq and that fateful decision in March 2003. The motion presents an opportunity to introduce another check and balance into a system that is clearly deficient. It would start a process to create a precedent so that any future Prime Minister will know that he or she will have to account for their actions not only to history, but to this House of Commons. A long time ago, I made a speech in this House in which I suggested to Mr Blair that he might answer to a higher power than this House. I understand that he found it offensive, but I absolutely believe it to be the case none the less. In the meantime, in the here and now—here on earth—is it not important for us to find a parliamentary process by which a Prime Minister who grievously misled this House and the people into an illegal war can finally be held to parliamentary account?

1.22 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): Let me start by expressing my condolences and sympathy to those who lost loved ones in Iraq and to those who still bear the scars of the conflict. Whatever our views on the conflict, we can surely all agree on one thing: the bravery and courage of British servicemen and women in Iraq was exemplary. We owe it to all those who died or were wounded in Iraq—be they servicemen or civilians, British, Iraqi or any other nationality—to learn lessons from the conflict.

There can be little doubt that Sir John Chilcot’s report is detailed and forensic, and for that we should all be thankful to Sir John and the other members of the inquiry panel. At the inquiry’s outset, the Government of the day committed to provide the fullest range of information and to give it unhindered access to Government documents. Sir John confirmed in his appearance before the Liaison Committee that the inquiry had total access to all UK Government material right from the start, including the most sensitive categories. The inquiry saw more than 150,000 Government documents and an unprecedented amount of previously classified Government information has been released. Some 7,000 documents were referenced in the inquiry’s report, and more than 1,500 documents were published alongside
it. The papers include records of key Cabinet discussions, notes from Mr Blair to the US President, records of conversations between the then Prime Minister and other Heads of Government, records of meetings between senior UK and US officials, and Joint Intelligence Committee assessments.

The inquiry concluded that mistakes and failings were made that could have been avoided at the time and for which hindsight is no defence. The inquiry’s report is a salutary tale of what happens when not enough opportunity is given to challenge and debate a policy or approach. When asked by the Liaison Committee to sum up one key lesson of the report, Sir John Chilcot said:

“If you press me very hard, I will say it was a failure to exert and exercise sufficient collective responsibility for a very big decision, and then to scrutinise and supervise its conduct and implementation.”

As the then Prime Minister, the former Member for Witney—it is good to see the present hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) in his seat about to make his maiden speech—said in his statement to the House on 6 July:

“On the issue of misleading Parliament, there is nothing in the Chilcot report that I can see that points to deliberate deceit, but there were clearly occasions when more information, or better information, could have been presented.”—[Official Report, 6 July 2016, Vol. 612, c. 907.]

He also said:

“As for how people should account for themselves, it is for them to read the report and explain why they did what they did.”—[Official Report, 6 July 2016; Vol. 612, c. 902.]

At his appearance before the Liaison Committee on 2 November, when considering whether Mr Blair had misled Parliament and the public, Sir John said that he absolves Mr Blair

“from a personal and demonstrable decision to deceive Parliament or the public—to state falsehoods, knowing them to be false. That I think he should be absolved from.”

He also made the following point about the legal basis for military action, saying:

“The way in which the legal advice about—the basis for it was highly unsatisfactory, but that is not the same as saying it was illegal, and therefore that something should follow or some effect should be procured. One can’t say that.”

He also reminded the Committee that before the invasion of Iraq

“the whole intelligence community, and not only in the United Kingdom, were strongly of the belief—and had, they thought, sufficient intelligence to support it—that Saddam did have weapons of mass destruction available for use.”

The decision to go to war in Iraq has had a profound and lasting impact on politics in this country, on the families of those who lost loved ones in Iraq and on those who were injured. Clearly, it was a tragic and seismic episode in our nation’s history. Lessons should be learned and that process is ongoing. The Government are considering the lessons identified by the Iraq inquiry, many of which had already been recognised with changes made before Sir John published his report. The Prime Minister’s National Security Adviser is currently leading a process with our national security Departments to consider further improvements. We fully recognise that ensuring that lessons are properly learned and embedded will be a long-term process.

Alex Salmond: The Minister mentioned Sir John Chilcot’s evidence to the Liaison Committee. The passage in which Sir John concludes that a reasonable man could not have come to the conclusion that Mr Blair did about weapons of mass destruction was followed by the Chair saying:

“So he misled the House, or set aside evidence in order to lead the House down a line of thought and belief with his 18 March speech.”

Has the Minister read that passage in the evidence?

Chris Skidmore: The important thing to recognise is that the Chilcot report—in paragraph 537 of the executive summary—explicitly does not question Mr Blair’s belief at the time that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction. Paragraph 533 states:

“There is no evidence that intelligence was improperly included in the”

September 2002

dossier or that No.10 improperly influenced the text.”

In paragraph 491, the report is explicit that

“Cabinet was not misled on 17 March”

2003.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): One of the lessons we can learn is that there was no plan for reconstruction. If we are to learn that lesson, we should bear that in mind when considering reconstruction in Syria or Iraq.

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman is right that there are lessons for modern-day conflicts. I hope that this debate will give Members the opportunity to put their views across on which lessons should be learned. We had three days of debate on the Chilcot report itself, and I hope that we can move forward by coming up with proactive, positive recommendations.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister mentioned the establishment of the National Security Council as one thing that followed from the situation in Iraq. I draw to his attention the recent report of the Foreign Affairs Committee on events in Libya in which we were critical of Prime Minister David Cameron’s failure to use the NSC properly and of the lack of detailed input into the situation in Libya, that was considered by the Government at that time.

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman has put his comments on the record. I understand that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will formally respond to the Committee’s recommendations, so I will leave it at that.

The National Security Council is a dedicated, standing Cabinet Committee that meets regularly at both ministerial and senior official level and has the right range of information to take forward informed decisions and to hold collective responsibility at the highest level. It provides collective strategic leadership on national security and crisis situations, with a built-in challenge function, making clear recommendations to Cabinet on military interventions, and formally recording both decisions and operational actions. The Attorney General attended the NSC regularly until April 2016, when he became a full member, and formal written legal advice is now
provided and discussed at relevant NSC meetings and presented to Cabinet before any decisions on military intervention are taken.

The Government have integrated their overarching strategic approach, with pragmatic, costed delivery mechanisms, including for military equipment, in a national security strategy, and strategic defence and security review, which is refreshed and adjusted in the light of developments every parliamentary term. The SDSR and refreshment of the national security strategy in 2015 brought this work together in a single integrated document. Cross-Whitehall working continues to improve, with creative policy making designed and delivered collectively across national security Departments and agencies to ensure that we understand, as far as is possible in dynamic and evolving threatening situations, what we want to achieve, and the implications for and impacts on ourselves and others. In support of this work, we set up joint units and taskforces where issues cut across several departmental responsibilities.

The Government are committed to understanding and acting on the important lessons drawn by Sir John Chilcot and his colleagues, but we recognise the need to continue to improve, whether working across the national security community or the wider civil service, hence the importance being given by the collective senior leadership to civil service reform and learning.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: I am grateful for the Minister’s remarks about the improvements being made, and the Cameron Government did make improvements by introducing the NSC, but—I say this with hindsight—we still invaded Libya after too cursory a discussion in Cabinet, and somehow we did not look properly at what the consequences would be. We talked only about the imminent threat of a massacre in Benghazi, which took everybody in to the intervention.

The Minister says the Government are considering further improvements, so will he invite my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to consider setting out some principles: about the amount of notice the NSC has of such decisions, the length and fullness of discussions—that applies to Cabinet, too—and the right of individual members of the Cabinet to have access before a meeting to security advice and defence advice if they wish to prepare themselves for the discussion?

Chris Skidmore: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his recommendations. I am sure the National Security Adviser will be listening closely to this debate, and the fact they have been put on the record means it will be important for him to have regard to them. I am sure my right hon. and learned Friend will understand that at the time he mentions we were facing a bloodbath in Benghazi, that intervention was vital and that we would not now row back on that intervention.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I do not wish to add to any difficulties in this respect, but one problem is insufficient military input to the NSC; it all comes in through the voice of one man, the Chief of the Defence Staff. The Defence Committee has suggested that one way to strengthen the NSC would be to constitute the Chiefs of Staff Committee as a sub-committee of the NSC. In that way, a Prime Minister with a bee in his bonnet would not be able so easily to sweep away military concerns.

Chris Skidmore: I thank my right hon. Friend for his separate recommendation and note that the Minister for the Armed Forces is in his place and listening carefully. That is not a new recommendation, but we will consider closely all recommendations from this debate.

Although it is right to learn the lessons identified by the Chilcot report, we should ensure that we avoid learning the wrong lessons. As the then Prime Minister said on the day the report was published, “it would be wrong to conclude that we should not stand with our American allies when our common…interests are threatened” and that “it would be wrong to conclude that we cannot rely on the judgments of our brilliant and hard-working intelligence agencies”. He said that it is ”wrong” to question the capability of our military, who “remain the envy of the world”.

Perhaps most crucially, he said that it is wrong to “conclude that intervention is always wrong.”—[Official Report, 6 July 2016; Vol. 612, c. 888.]

This has been a long and exhaustive inquiry. Sir John and his colleagues have had access to thousands of official documents and reached their conclusions—

Mr Jenkin: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Skidmore: No, not now.

Lessons are being learned and will continue to be learned from what happened in Iraq, and so the Government can see no merit in undertaking any further inquiries into the Iraq war.

1.34 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I am grateful for the contributions made so far, especially the Minister’s. When we reflect on the matters we are debating this afternoon, it is very important that we first pay tribute, as the Minister did, to the hundreds of British servicemen and women and civilian personnel who lost their lives during the conflict in Iraq and that we send our thoughts to all the thousands of others who are still living with the injuries they suffered when serving in our armed forces.

We must never forget the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians who died during the conflict, and subsequently as a result of the sectarian violence and terrorist outrages that have followed. They must all be uppermost in our minds when we talk about learning from the mistakes that were made in Iraq and ensuring that future Governments do not repeat those mistakes.

No matter whether we are one of those Members who voted against the war, as I did, or one of the many, on both sides of this House, who in good faith and good conscience voted in favour of the invasion, it is incumbent on us all to learn the lessons about what went wrong and, indeed, to apologise for what has been exposed by Sir John Chilcot as the collective failing of our institutions.
It is a little over four months since this House spent two full days debating the contents of the Chilcot report, and a week after that debate we spent several hours asking questions about it to the then Prime Minister, David Cameron. Much has changed since that debate, but in terms of the arguments we have heard about the evidence presented in the Chilcot report, I would say, with great respect, that we have, thus far, heard nothing new today.

The right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) has a long-standing contention—we have heard him set it out again just now—that, first, Parliament was deliberately misled by Tony Blair and his Government in the run-up to war; secondly, that intelligence allegedly known by Ministers to be false was deliberately presented to this House and to the public; thirdly, that this was all designed to deliver on a private pact that Tony Blair had made with George W. Bush to go to war with Iraq; and that the evidence for those contentions lies mainly in the six words written in a memo from the then Prime Minister to the then President.

Although I have listened very carefully again to the argument made by the right hon. Member for Gordon, we all know that those were exactly the contentions that Sir John Chilcot spent several years looking into, alongside all the evidence from memos and records of conversations, and from his many interviews with hundreds of witnesses. So let me say once again that Sir John deserves our thanks and our praise for conducting that vast but vital task with great care, diligence and objectivity.

The Chilcot report was the fifth, and hopefully the final, inquiry into the Iraq war. The first was published on 3 July 2003, before the tragic death of Dr David Kelly, before the capture of Saddam and while the search for weapons of mass destruction was still going on. That inquiry was undertaken by the Foreign Affairs Committee, on which I served at the time. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) is the only other member of that Committee still sitting in this House. On looking back at the conclusions of that report, I note that on chemical and biological weapons we said:

"we have no doubt that the threat posed to United Kingdom forces was genuinely perceived as a real and present danger and that the steps taken to protect them were justified by the information available at the time."

We were critical of the prominence and emphasis given to the 45-minute claim in the September 2002 dossier, saying that greater uncertainty should have surrounded the presentation of that and other claims. However, we concluded that those claims were "well founded on the basis of the intelligence then available" and that "allegations of politically inspired meddling cannot credibly be established".

We were highly critical of the February 2003 dossier—the so-called dodgy dossier—and the fact that Tony Blair had inadvertently presented it as "further intelligence" on the Floor of the House without realising its true provenance. However, that was 13 years ago. Four inquiries later, with the benefit of millions of pages of documentary evidence and hundreds of key witnesses to which my colleagues and I did not have access at the time, the conclusions have remained fundamentally the same.

There are many serious lessons to learn from the Chilcot report, and I will address them in a moment. However, on learning those lessons, we will do ourselves and future Governments no favours if we spend even more time in this House and in the Committee Rooms examining contentions that the Chilcot report and four other inquiries—at exhaustive length—have already found to be incorrect; nor will any of us benefit if we continue to try to turn a collective institutional and international failure in Iraq into an attempt to pillory and scapegoat one individual. Let me be clear: I totally disagreed, as many other people did, with Tony Blair on the Iraq war. I voted against our Government because I thought that our then Prime Minister was simply wrong, but never for one second did I believe that he was acting in bad faith, and I do not do so now.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I rise to support my hon. Friend. Like him, I voted against the war at the time. Nothing has happened since then to make me think that I was wrong to do so, but I did not for one minute think that Tony Blair lied to this House, or attempted to mislead me. I just came to a different judgment. The problem is that in the minds of those who believe that we were misled, there is no report that will ever convince them otherwise, but it is time to learn the lessons for future generations and to move on.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, because he captures the mood that was prevalent at the time. Many of us wanted to vote against that war and we did so with a clear conscience because we felt that it was the wrong approach to resolving the problems in Iraq. I will go on to say a bit more about what should be done now.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I was a Member when that vote was taken. I suspect that, with hindsight, many people would look again at the way they voted. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, whether the commitments to the House were made in good faith or bad faith, the central point of being able to hold the Executive to account for the basis on which they go to war, for their actions afterwards and for the way in which they prepare our troops for battle is important? It provides an important role for this House, which is to scope out ways in which it can avoid mistakes in the future.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The important words he used were "in the future". We must be held to account by the people who elected us—by the public of this country—and we must hold our Government to account for the decisions that they bring to this House for approval. It is very clear, as Sir John Chilcot said, that this was a collective and institutional failure.

Caroline Lucas: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise the results of the freedom of information requests a few weeks ago that demonstrated precisely that the Chilcot inquiry had been designed to "avoid blame". Sir Gus O’Donnell has been quoted as saying that he recommended using the inquiry’s terms of reference to prevent it reaching

"any conclusion on questions of law or fact"
or to attributing any blame. If we look at the Glen Rangwala report, which simply puts the evidence in front of us—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. May I make a plea to those who are looking to catch my eye later on to keep their interventions to the minimum, as there are a very large number of people wishing to contribute to this debate?

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but no, I do not recognise those results, because I do not know the context in which those words were said. All too often speeches and phrases are taken out of context. I do not believe for one minute that Sir John Chilcot and his whole report and all the years and the time that he spent were there simply to mislead the public.

Let me try to make some progress. As I have said, I never for one second believed that the then Prime Minister was acting in bad faith, and I do not do so now. For those reasons, I will be urging my Labour colleagues to vote against today’s motion. I will urge them to do so to enable the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to focus properly on the real job of its inquiry, which is to analyse the conclusions that Sir John has actually reached, based on the evidence that he gathered, and to look at the lessons that he says should be learned from his report.

Mr Jim Cunningham: One factor that has not been fully explored in this debate is the Attorney General’s role. Many of us who had doubts about this war were told that it was legal. Has my hon. Friend had a look at the Dispatch Box in relation to civilian casualties in Yemen, or to attributing any blame. If we look at the Glen Rangwala report, which simply puts the evidence in front of us—

Fabian Hamilton: At the time, the Foreign Affairs Committee did look into that matter. I have not examined it since then—in the past 13 years—but I believe that Sir John Chilcot does make reference to it in his report.

If there is one serious risk that we now face, it is to assume that all the lessons from Iraq have been learned and that the mistakes made there could never happen again. That is particularly important now, while we have in place a relatively new Prime Minister, who may in due course face her own decisions over peace and war, and who may herself need to come and make a case before this House.

Listening to the former Prime Minister’s response to Chilcot back in July, I understood that, although he acknowledged that lessons needed to be learned, his clear implication was that that had already been done. He said that by establishing the National Security Council and the conflict and stability fund, the reality of what has happened in Libya and elsewhere over the past five years—this is what my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) pointed out—does not give confidence that they are working in practice. It suggests even more clearly that the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has an important job to do over the coming months in ensuring that the real lessons of Chilcot—for Whitehall, for Ministers and for Parliament—are truly being learned.

Let us consider for a moment what Chilcot discovered in relation to civilian casualties as a result of coalition action. The Chief of the Defence Staff predicted that casualties would be in the “low hundreds”. When the reality became clear, the then Foreign Secretary said: “We need to find ways of countering the damaging perception that civilians are being killed needlessly, and in large numbers, by coalition forces.”

When the truth became overwhelming, a private secretary to Tony Blair told him that casualty data must be suppressed because “any overall assessment of civilian casualties will show that” the coalition is “responsible for significantly more than insurgents.”

Chilcot concludes:

“The Government’s consideration of the issue of Iraqi civilian casualties was driven by its concern to rebut accusations that coalition forces were responsible for the deaths of large numbers of civilians, and to sustain domestic support for operations”.

When we hear Ministers say exactly the same from that Dispatch Box in relation to civilian casualties in Yemen, is it possible to argue that anything has changed or that any lessons have been learned? I do not believe that that is the case. The mistakes of Iraq are being made all over again. We need to ensure that the National Security Council and all the other measures adopted are working, because I do not believe that they are at the moment.

In conclusion, I believe that the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee needs to examine the Chilcot report, not for what it tells us about the past but for what we can learn from it for the present and the future. Whether in relation to Yemen, Libya, Syria or the ongoing battle to restore stability and end sectarian conflict in Iraq, we must look forward and learn the lessons that have practical consequences for us all today. With instability growing throughout the middle east, eastern Europe and beyond, we may face even bigger challenges tomorrow, and that is why I cannot support the motion. I understand why its proposers have tabled it, but they are fighting an old war and raising once again contentions that have already been dismissed by five—five—separate inquiries. How many more do we need? In doing so, they risk distracting the attention of this House and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee from what should be their true objective, which is to learn the real lessons from Chilcot and ensure that we never need such an inquiry again.

1.51 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): From time to time, Members of this House of Commons have the burden of debating whether to send our finest young
men and women into harm’s way, and sometimes to their deaths. I do not believe that any Member of this House, on either side, ever takes that decision lightly, and we need always to take that decision based on the best possible information.

At the start of the second Iraq war, my young constituent Lieutenant Marc Lawrence, serving on a Sea King helicopter, was killed. That in itself is possibly a matter for a further inquiry, but I know that that loss was devastating to Marc’s parents and I believe that they have a right to know that their only son lost his life in a just cause and that his sacrifice was worth while.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I voted to send that young man to his death. On the eve of the vote, a significant number of Members then on the Opposition Benches, including myself, had grave disquiet about the cause on which we were due to embark. I and about a dozen colleagues met the then Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), and the shadow Foreign Minister, the then Member for Devizes, Michael Ancram. The Leader of the Opposition told us on Privy Council terms that he had been informed on Privy Council terms by Mr Blair that the Iraqis had weapons of mass destruction and that there was a 40-minute threat to UK interests and that therefore our support for the motion before the House the following day was vital.

I am afraid that I cannot concur with the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton). I sat on those Benches and listened to the tone of the debate as well as to the words that were said. I have to say that I believe that the House was deliberately misled. Whether it was deliberate or not—the expression “sincere deceivers” has been used in the United States about what happened in that war—we know that after that debate 139 of my colleagues on the Labour Benches voted against the war, and we need always to take that decision based on the most serious way after the most searching inquiries are carried out. We owe them that. I believe that another inquiry is necessary, and that is one on the decision to go into Helmand province in 2006 at a time when only six members of the armed services had been killed in the war. We went in in the hope that not a shot would be fired and 450 of our servicemen died as a result. That is what we must do now—that is what we should be taking on, not a tribal party row in this place. It is not appropriate; it is not right. We must look to the reputation of Parliament.

As has been said, we were misled. Whether it was deliberate or not—the expression “sincere deceivers” has been used in the United States about what happened in that war—we know that after that debate 139 of my comrades on the Labour Benches voted against the war, which was a very courageous thing to do as we were under great pressure, but 50 others had grave doubts about the war. They were, in my view, bribed, bullied or bamboozled into voting the wrong way and many—

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Bribed? You can’t say bribed; that’s outrageous.

Paul Flynn: They were induced—

Ian Austin: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for a Member of this House to allege that other Members of this House were bribed—paid—to vote a particular way? Should he not produce evidence for it? What a disgrace.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) did not accuse a specific individual of taking a bribe. The hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) is perfectly entitled to ask him in an intervention whether he will withdraw what he has said, but this is not a matter for the Chair.

Paul Flynn: I am not suggesting that anyone took any money. There are such things as political bribes, with inducements and offers, of which we are well aware in this place. There was a very heavy operation here to convince Members to vote for war. We must look at the situation then.

One Back Bencher wrote to Tony Blair—I speak of Tony Blair with no animus against him. I campaigned for him to be Leader of the House. I have congratulated him again and again on the work that he has done for the Labour party, but it is not the case that there was
one failure. It was a failure of the three most important Select Committees in this House, who were all cheerleaders for the war. There were all those who went around saying, “If you knew what we know—we’ve got this secret information—you would certainly vote for war to go ahead.” I believe it was in that circumstance that the decision was taken.

One letter to Tony Blair warned in March:

“Our involvement in Bush’s war will increase the likelihood of terrorist attacks.”

It said that attacking a Muslim state without achieving a fair settlement in other conflicts in the world would be seen by Muslims from our local mosques to the far corners of the world as an act of injustice. I believe we paid a very heavy price for seeming to divide the world between a powerful, western, Christian world which was taking advantage of its other side, who were Muslims.

I am certain that in his mind Tony Blair was sincere. He was proved to be right on Kosovo when many people criticised him, and on Sierra Leone he was right. He was convinced that the others were wrong and he was going to prove it. One of the pieces of information that he quoted was an interview with Hussein Kamel, who was the son-in-law of Saddam Hussein. It was quoted in the document as evidence of weapons of mass destruction. According to the interview, Saddam Hussein had chemical weapons, biological weapons, nuclear weapons, which he did say in the evidence. But in the same interview, which was conducted in 1995 and was already old news, Hussein Kamel said, “Of course, we got rid of them after the Gulf war.” What was in that dodgy dossier was half the story—evidence, yes, that Saddam had had such weapons, but also evidence that he no longer had them, and that was never published.

What Chilcot said in his report was not the absolusion that people believe it to be. He said that the decision to invade was taken

“before the peaceful options for disarmament had been exhausted” and that military action was

“not a last resort”. According to the strictures of modern philosophy, that means it is not a just war. Chilcot said that Saddam posed no “imminent threat”. In effect, he declared the war needless.

Colin Powell has confessed that he was fooled and lied to, and that he regrets bitterly that he did not follow his natural instinct and avoid the war. Strangely enough, most of the people who were advising him at the time have said that they were wrong and the war was a terrible mistake.

I believe that this House must accept what Chilcot is saying and not take an aversion to it that pleases our political point of view. The issue is one that the loved ones of the 179 have been following. They have gone through years of torment asking themselves, “Did our loved ones die in vain?” Chilcot has reported, and his report was that the decision was taken not just by a Prime Minister but by all those who were gullible enough to believe that case. There were a million people who walked the streets of this country and demonstrated. It was not a clear decision.

We fall into the trap time and again of believing that our role in Britain is to punch above our weight militarily. Why should we do that? Every time we do, we die beyond our responsibilities.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I obviously was not here in 2003, and as a student at the time, was part of that anti-war generation that my hon. Friend describes. I am troubled by his language in describing colleagues, some of whom are still here today, as “gullible” in voting for the Iraq war. I never agreed with it then and with hindsight I certainly do not agree with it, but I never doubted either the integrity or the intelligence of the people who took a different view then and continue to take a different view today.

Paul Flynn: I am not questioning their good faith in any way; I am sure that they voted that way.

Wes Streeting: You said earlier that they were bribed.

Paul Flynn: I will stick to the word “gullible”. Three Committees of people who are great experts—the Intelligence and Security Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Defence Committee—all took the same view. They were all told stories about the weapons of mass destruction. The evidence was, and the evidence is there now, that those did not exist, and there was a very selective choice of evidence—as in the quotations of the son-in-law of Saddam Hussein—that the Committee members believed and chose to believe.

If we do not recognise that as a problem for this House, we will make the same mistakes again. We are going to face such decisions in future. The House will have to decide whether we are going to order—that is our power—young men and women to put their lives on the line, on the basis of what? Faulty evidence, ineffective evidence. That was the conclusion of Chilcot.

I am on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and I look forward to taking part in the inquiry, but I do not welcome the kind of debate that we have got.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman makes a compelling case, to which I am very sympathetic, but I wonder, given the case that he is making, if he agrees that it is a matter of some disappointment that a majority of his colleagues in the parliamentary Labour party have decided to set themselves against the motion before the House today, and that this will look like they are closing ranks to protect their former leader?

Paul Flynn: There is a great deal that I regret about things that are happening within the Labour party at this moment. In the brief cameo appearance that I had on the Front Bench, I called for this debate. I called for a debate to take place on these lines. Of course I want to see the debate. We cannot pretend that after all these years of investigation, the Chilcot inquiry is a trial without a verdict at the end. We must take that responsibility ourselves and we must reform this House to make sure that we can never again take such a calamitous decision, which led to the loss of 179 British lives and uncounted numbers of Iraqi lives. That was a terrible, terrible mistake and we must not repeat it.
2.7 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Mr Speaker, thank you. It is a great honour to catch your eye this afternoon and to follow so many distinguished speakers.

There is an important link between west Oxfordshire and the debate we are having this afternoon. As Colonial Secretary, Mr Winston Churchill was in great part involved in the setting up of modern Iraq. I think it is also right to say that Mr Churchill was responsible for the setting up of the Chilcot inquiry—or perhaps it just seems that way.

We are speaking this afternoon of past Prime Ministers. I wish to speak of a great Prime Minister. David Cameron represented Witney for 15 years. He was a great Prime Minister and a brilliant MP for west Oxfordshire. He found the Conservative party bleeding after three successive election defeats. He picked it up, restored it in itself, and returned it to government. I know at first hand the effect that his leadership had upon the party, the country and its fortunes, because I was there, on the streets, and I felt the turning of the tide. There is perhaps no greater tribute that I could pay David Cameron than to say that he made the Conservative party believe in itself again. He made it fresh, dynamic, and able to communicate with modern Britain. He created a new generation of Conservative politicians, and I am one of them. The record in this House speaks for itself—1,000 jobs a day created while he was Prime Minister and an economy rescued from the brink of ruin. The party and, if I may say so, the country, will forever be in his debt.

In west Oxfordshire, it did not matter who someone was, where they lived or how they voted; if there was a local issue, he was always happy to help them. It is, of course, always the case that we attend with alacrity to constituents’ concerns, but when I see a letter from “D. Cameron, Outraged, of Dean” complaining about his dustbin collection or myriad other issues, it may be one letter that I do not leave until the end of the day.

It is a daunting task to sit in this House. Some weeks ago, I was in private practice at the Bar. I am now surrounded by great experts in law, the military, social justice, the economy and the constitution. The range of talent and experience in this House is awe-inspiring. But I do have ties to this House and an example that I can draw upon. In 1945, Albert Stubbs won the seat of Witney for the Labour party. [Laughter.] He was a famous trade unionist, and he won his seat by a majority of 44 by getting out on his motorcycle, riding around the villages of Cambridgeshire and signing up the workers to the union. He was known for his hard work for the people of that area and his interest in rural issues.

That record is one that I aspire to when I look at the people of west Oxfordshire. Hon. Members need not worry: I am not about to execute the fastest defection in political history. I mention Mr Stubbs because he was my great-grandfather. I must watch my words carefully at this point, because his daughter—my grandmother—will be watching on the television, and if I put a foot out of line I am afraid to get a very strongly worded letter. I do therefore acknowledge at this stage that Mr Stubbs would be horrified by my politics, but I hope he would at least approve of my work ethic.

I have spoken to the House of my admiration for Winston Churchill, and I thought it would be a good idea if I went back to the records to see whether there was perhaps an exchange between my hero and my forebear. I went to Hansard and I searched for an exchange, and I expected the contrast of the famous parliamentary wit and the working-class warrior. I was thinking of a combination of Pitt the Younger and Charles James Fox, and I found in the “Thanks to Services” debate from 1945 just such an exchange. The great man—speaking from the Opposition Bench, of course—paused in his speech, took an intervention from Mr Stubbs, told him he was “ignorant” and went back to his speech. I do not know who was right or wrong in that exchange; I merely hope that I will manage to avoid such a rebuke in the course of my career.

West Oxfordshire is a landlocked constituency, but it is perhaps best toured by taking a look at its rivers. If we were charting the course of the Windrush downstream, we would start at the beautiful town of Burford—stonewalled, slate-roofed and a glowing gateway to the Cotswolds. The proclamation of Edward IV; the home of Speaker Lenthall, the most famous protector of this House; and the execution of the Levellers—it shines with history.

We could travel downstream to Witney, the famous market town. My predecessor, in his maiden speech, noted that there was only one blanket factory left in Witney and that most of the beer was brewed elsewhere. Sadly, there are now no blanket factories, although the Blanket Hall is well worth a visit. But the Wychwood brewery has an astonishingly high market share of real ale, and there are wonderful ales. It supplies many of the wonderful pubs in west Oxfordshire, where one can go to enjoy a pint or watch the world go by—I will just have to be careful I do not leave my children behind. [Laughter.]

Alongside the Evenlode, we see the beautiful town of Charlbury and, at Cornbury Park, a world-beating charity, SpecialEffect, using video games and technology to enhance the quality of life of people with disabilities. Alongside the Evenlode, the Dorn and the Thames, we see a wealth of wonderful wildlife—for example, at Chimney Meadows—that inhabits the stunning countryside of west Oxfordshire.

But it is the thriving market towns of Witney, Burford, Chipping Norton, Charlbury, Carterton and Eynsham, and the villages that connect them, that give west Oxfordshire its distinctive character. These are filled with clever, industrious, creative, hard-working people creating world-beating industries in IT, Formula 1, travel and clothes, and each year hosting thousands of visitors from across the world. If the rivers are the lifeblood of west Oxfordshire, the market towns are the beating heart.

I pause at this stage to fly, as it were, to proud, modern Carterton and nearby Brize Norton—home of the Royal Air Force’s transport fleet and centre of transport operations. It is, of course, from there that so many flew to Iraq, and, sadly, many have flown back having given everything. Their sacrifice is remembered in the moving repatriation garden at Carterton.

My grandfather and my great-uncle were Bomber Command veterans, and the care of elderly veterans is a particular concern to the people of west Oxfordshire, and particularly those in Carterton, whose very lifeblood is tied up with the wellbeing of that thriving airbase and the people who have served in it. Such veterans are...
people who have asked for little but given everything; they are the people to whom we owe our freedom, and the care we give them now tells us much about not only our compassion but our sense of duty, and we must not let them down. I also pause to pay tribute to the men and women of today’s Royal Air Force. They are the heirs of those who fought in canvas and wood machines above the trenches of Flanders 100 years ago. They are the heirs of those who formed the few in 1940. They, together with the Army and Royal Navy, are the people whose strength and bravery make possible the civilised debate that we have in this House.

We must not forget that those who defend our freedom now are no less requiring of our care than their forebears. Sometimes the scars are visible, and I commend the charities that do so much to help those whose injuries are physical, but we should not forget that, so often, the wounds are not visible—that a person may lose the conflict, but the conflict will never leave the person.

I have met many people in my work at the Bar whose lives are blighted by psychiatric illness, and I urge all Members to remember all those who need a little more understanding, both in the armed forces and in the wider public. That underlines the importance to everyone of the health services that underpin this care: the surgeries in our towns and, in my constituency, the hospitals in Witney and Chipping Norton.

I have spoken of rivers that seem to surge with history, and it is perhaps the Glyme that has the most fame—flowing down through famous Woodstock, royalist-garrisoned in the civil war and now with the world heritage site of Blenheim Palace.

Lastly, at the close of our tour, I come to the quiet little village of Bladon, where I live. The sun climbs slowly to illuminate the village in the shallow valley, as it has for 1,000 years. The local red kite floats lazily over the church tower. The river flows through Blenheim Park, round past the yellow sandstone cottages. It is an attractive but typical small west Oxfordshire settlement, with one pub, an active pop-up shop and the thriving church community of St Martin’s, which is where I was married and where my son, Henry, was baptised. But it is also the reason why this small Oxfordshire village is world-famous. I rise for the first time in this House on the birthday of Sir Winston Churchill. He now lies in State and with the Army and Royal Navy, are the people whose journeys we should remember. He talked about his own family’s political journey in having a Labour grandfather. My family has had a political journey in the opposite direction: of my two grandfathers, one was Liberal and one was Conservative. I observed, however, that he did not talk about the political journey of his predecessor but one—an interesting journey that took place rather more recently than his grandfather’s. I thought that what he said about his predecessor was absolutely right, at a time when a lot of people are saying not very nice things about the previous Prime Minister. I am really pleased that the hon. Gentleman said what he did and put it on the record. I thank him for that.

Before addressing the motion itself, I would like to consider what we might be debating today instead. We could be debating the crisis in the national health service and social care. We could be debating the devastating impact on living standards of the Government’s autumn statement. We could be debating what the Scottish National party Government in Scotland might be doing with the powers they have, but resolutely refuse to use, to mitigate that. Or we could have used this precious debating time to put pressure on the Government to drop food and medicine to the people of Aleppo, who, as the French Government said today, are facing the worst massacre of civilians since the second world war.

But no, we are debating the motion before us—and why? SNP Members are furious, livid and incandescent with rage that Sir John Chilcot did not find that Tony Blair lied. After seven years and five independent inquiries, the lie that our former Prime Minister lied has finally been laid to rest, and SNP Members cannot stand it. The motion, of course, does not talk about lying. However, the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), who supports the motion, let the cat out of the bag when she told The Observer on Sunday

“The Chilcot report confirmed Tony Blair lied to the public, parliament and his own cabinet in order to drag us into the Iraq war.”

She has clearly not read the Chilcot report; it did no such thing.

Without going over the detail as we did in a very full debate on this back in the summer, let me remind the House briefly of what the Chilcot report did say. Volume 4, paragraph 876, says clearly that there was no falsification or improper use of intelligence. Volume 5, paragraph 953
says that there was no deception of Cabinet. Volume 1, paragraph 572 onwards, says that there was no secret commitment to war either at Crawford in April 2002 or anywhere else. Although outside the body of the report, as a number of hon. Members have pointed out, Sir John Chilcot himself, in his appearance before the Liaison Committee, said:

“I absolve him”—

Tony Blair—

“from a personal and demonstrable decision to deceive parliament or the public—to state falsehoods, knowing them to be false.”

Some people just cannot give up. Some people do not seem able to accept the possibility that reasonable people can come to different views on a difficult subject but do so in good faith. Some people cannot accept—

Alex Salmond: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Bradshaw: No, the right hon. Gentleman had half an hour and a lot of Members want to speak.

Some people cannot accept that however much one disagrees with a decision taken, it can still have been taken in good faith. So here we are debating a motion that seeks to distort and rewrite Chilcot and, in effect, put Tony Blair back in the dock. I am delighted that my own party is having none of this nonsense and that we will be voting against this mendacious opportunism in an hour and a half’s time.

I think there may be another reason why some people persist in trying to claim falsely that there was deliberate deceit in all this. They are more than a little nervous that as we look at what has happened in Syria, and is still happening in Syria today, where there was no intervention and we left a brutal dictator to continue to slaughter his own people, history will prove our former Prime Minister right.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I am going to suggest an informal limit of six minutes and see how we get on. It may be necessary to put a time limit we have been given.

2.25 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is a pleasure to begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on an outstanding maiden speech. I have a history of sometimes disagreeing with hon. Members from Witney, but on this occasion it was fantastic to be able to nod in agreement and pleasure at every remark he made. He has got off to a tremendous start in this House, and I am sure he can tell from the reactions of Members on both sides of the House the good wishes that flow to him today. Make the most of it!

I welcome the fact that Scottish National party Members and other parties’ Members have chosen to bring forward this subject for debate today. I speak as somebody who voted and spoke in the way I did: first, because I believed what I was told about weapons of mass destruction; and, secondly, because I had a naive view that if Saddam Hussein were removed we might see something like the emergence of democracy in Iraq—and of course we saw nothing of the kind.

Mike Gapes: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Lewis: I will, but I am conscious of the informal time limit we have been given.

Mike Gapes: I am extremely grateful. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that if Saddam Hussein had not been removed, it is very likely that his son Uday, or someone else of a similar nature, would have inherited, and that the problems we have seen writ large in Syria since 2011 would have been even worse in Iraq?

Dr Lewis: I accept the first part of what the hon. Gentleman says. It is highly probable that if Saddam Hussein had not been removed, things would have gone on in Iraq in the brutal, dictatorial way in which they had gone on previously. The problem is, as we have learned from what happened in Iraq and in Libya, that one can remove these brutal dictators, but instead of seeing democracy emerge one sees re-emerging a deadly conflict, going back more than 1,000 years, between different branches of the Islamic faith. The hon. Gentleman knows my view on this because, as I hope he remembers, in the arguments we had when the same proposition was put forward to deal with President Assad as we had dealt with Saddam Hussein, I made the same argument then as I make now—that in a choice between a brutal, repressive dictator and the alternative of a totalitarian Islamist state, I am afraid that the brutal dictator is the lesser of two evils. If we have not learned that from what happened in Iraq, then we truly have not learned any lessons from Iraq at all.

At the Liaison Committee meeting on 2 November, we had the opportunity to speak to Sir John Chilcot in person and to ask him directly to interpret the results of his own inquiries. I was particularly struck by the fact that of the two arguments I mentioned earlier—the one about the weapons of mass destruction and the one about the naive belief that democracy would emerge if we got rid of the brutal dictator—he was more censorious on the latter than on the former. He said that if the Prime Minister of the day had not exaggerated the certainty of his claims about weapons of mass destruction it would have been completely clear that he had not misled the House in any way. Sir John said:

“Exaggeration—placing more weight on the intelligence than it could possibly bear—is a conclusion that we reached on the Butler committee and reached again with even more evidence in the Iraq inquiry.”

He went on to say something rather curious. I put it to him that one argument that I had found convincing was when Mr Blair had said that there was a real danger of the weapons of mass destruction that were believed to exist in the hands of dictators getting into the hands of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda. Sir John went on to say:

“On the other hand, I do not know that, in putting forward the fusion argument, Mr Blair related it very directly and specifically to Saddam passing weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups.”
I was surprised that Sir John made that statement. In the debate in March 2003, Tony Blair had said that “there are two begetters of chaos: tyrannical regimes with weapons of mass destruction and extreme terrorist groups who profess a perverted and false view of Islam... Those two threats have, of course, different motives and different origins, but they share one basic common view: they detest the freedom, democracy and tolerance that are the hallmarks of our way of life. At the moment, I accept fully that the association between the two is loose—but it is hardening. The possibility of the two coming together”—that, I think, is what Sir John meant by fusion—"of terrorist groups in possession of weapons of mass destruction or even of a so-called dirty radiological bomb—is now, in my judgment, a real and present danger".—[Official Report, 18 March 2003; Vol. 401, c. 768.]

We discussed in the debate on the Chilcot report the fact that there were plenty of references in the documents of the Joint Intelligence Committee and other intelligence organisations to the intelligence services’ real belief that Saddam still retained some weapons of mass destruction. I share Sir John’s conclusion that Tony Blair was guilty of exaggeration of the certainty with which knowledge was held about Saddam’s supposed possession of WMD, but that he was not guilty of lying to the House about that belief.

I have real concern with regard to the second argument, and it is on that argument that I believe the then Prime Minister Tony Blair will be held to have rather seriously misled the House. I revert to my exchange with Sir John Chilcot on 2 November, in which I said to him:

“...I would like you to tell us to what extent Mr Blair was warned of the danger that, far from democracy emerging, Sunni-Shi’a religious strife would follow the removal of the secular dictator, who gave these warnings, and how and why they were ignored. In particular, I would just quote back to you a briefing note from your report which Mr Blair himself sent in January 2003 to President Bush.”

I ask the House to pay particular attention to this note, which Mr Blair sent to President Bush before the war began. The quote is as follows:

“The biggest risk we face is internecine fighting between all the rival groups, religions, tribes, etc. in Iraq when the military strike destabilises the regime. They are perfectly capable, on previous form, of killing each other in large numbers.”

I put this to Sir John:

“Mr Blair knew that and he said it to President Bush, so why did he ignore that terrible possibility that he himself apparently recognised?”

This is Sir John’s reply:

“I cannot give you the answer as to why. You would have to ask him. But what is clear from all the evidence we have collected is that this risk and other associated risks of instability and collapse were clearly identified and available to Ministers and to Mr Blair before the invasion. I can cite all sorts of points, but you will not want me to go into that detail now. It is in the report.

There were other signals, too, from other quarters. Our ambassador in Cairo, for example, was able to report that the Egyptian President had said that Iraq was at risk—it was populated by people who were extremely fond of killing each other, and destabilisation would bring that about.”

Mr Kenneth Clarke: Was my right hon. Friend present when I intervened on the then Prime Minister in a debate on Iraq and asked him what he thought about the risk of causing great instability across the middle east by invading Iraq? My recollection is that he laughed at me from the Front Bench and asked me what sort of stability I thought Saddam Hussein represented.

Dr Lewis: I believe that that is the most serious charge against Tony Blair. It was not that he did not believe that there were weapons of mass destruction, but that he knew—better than did those of us who did not have the advice of experts to give us a wiser steer—that if we removed the dictator the result would be internecine, deadly, lethal chaos, exactly as we saw it. I am not reassured when I hear from Members on the Front Bench that the National Security Council will prevent the same thing from happening again. When the same prospect came up over Libya, and when the Chief of the Defence Staff put it to Prime Minister Cameron that there would be the same consequences in Libya as there had been in Iraq, he was brushed aside. Until the Chiefs of Staff are properly integrated into the National Security Council, we can have no assurance that those deadly errors will not be replicated.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to everybody who served their country during the war in Iraq, and to those who tragically lost their lives. It was a pleasure to listen to the maiden speech by the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) and to the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw). I am afraid I cannot say the same about the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn)—oh, he has gone—or the speech by the right hon. Member for Moray, neither of whom could find a word to say about Saddam Hussein; there was not a word about his use of chemical weapons against the Kurds, not a word about his brutal repression of his opponents and not a single word about his brutality. What a disgrace!

The right hon. Member for Moray was completely wrong when he blamed the conflagration in the middle east on the war in Iraq. The truth is that Libya was already in a brutal civil war before western air forces prevented Gaddafi from killing innocent people in Benghazi. Toppling Saddam did not fuel the rise of Isis or cause the conflict in Syria. As Martin Chulov, The Guardian’s middle east correspondent and expert author of a definitive study of ISIS, says:

“The Syrian civil war was not driven by Isis. It fed directly out of the Arab awakenings and was a bid to oust a ruthless regime from power.”

That is what started the conflagration in Syria, and for the right hon. Gentleman to blame it on Britain is completely wrong.

Alex Salmond: First, I am not the hon. Member for Moray. Secondly, I did not mention Libya in my speech; I think that the hon. Gentleman is confusing me with other people. Will he address the point about Sir John Chilcot’s clear statement that Tony Blair acted as an advocate in terms of the evidence for weapons of mass destruction, as opposed to giving the House the facts?
Ian Austin: I apologise for getting the name of the right hon. Gentleman’s seat wrong. I have obviously not paid him the huge respect that his sense of self-satisfaction, to which we are all so frequently treated, deserves. I want to say—he has asked his question about three times—that it is perfectly in order for a Prime Minister to set out his case and to try to persuade people in this House and elsewhere that the course of action he is advocating is the right one.

I want to put this debate into context. Last week, we had the autumn statement, which is a disaster for working people in Scotland, and yesterday we learned that Scottish councils face a £553 million black hole. SNP Members do not want to debate any of that. They do not want to debate the educational attainment gap between the richest and the poorest that is growing in Scotland. They do not want to debate the fact that Scotland has the lowest percentage of university entrants from the poorest families. They do not want to debate any of that. They do not want to be held to account on their record. They do not want to discuss any of that. Despite all of that—all the problems faced by the people of Scotland, whom they are sent to this House to represent—they do not have a word to say about it. If we look at their recent Opposition day debates, we can see that they chose to debate this today. House of Lords reform in October and Trident last year, instead of the issues that people in Scotland worry about day in, day out—education, the health service, housing. They come here to score party political points, choosing motion after motion to divide the Labour party. That is what this is about—[Interruption.] That is what this is about, and they should be treated with the contempt—[Interruption.] Look at him laughing, as if Iraq was a subject for humour, as if it was a joke.

Alex Salmond rose—

Ian Austin: Sit down! We’ve heard enough from you. Sit down! I want to say this: the Chilcot report—

Sir Roger Gale rose—

Ian Austin: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Sir Roger Gale: The hon. Gentleman is doing the House no service. This is a very serious issue. Those of us on the Government Benches who have lent our names to the motion did so in the interests of our armed forces. That is what we are here to discuss.

Ian Austin: I accept that, and I paid tribute to the armed forces right at the outset. I now want to discuss the Chilcot report.

The Chilcot report will clearly never settle arguments about whether the war in Iraq was right or wrong, but it should lay to rest allegations of bad faith, lies or deceit. It finds, first, that there was no falsification or misuse of intelligence by Tony Blair or No. 10 at the time; secondly, that there was no attempt to deceive Cabinet Ministers; and thirdly, that there was no secret pact with the US to go to war. That means there is no justification for saying, as the co-leader of the Green party did at the weekend:

“Tony Blair lied to the public, parliament and his own cabinet in order to drag us into the Iraq war.”

That is not true. Whether SNP Members like it or not, the truth is that Chilcot rejected allegations that Tony Blair said one thing in public and another in private. People can be for or against the war, but it is not true to say that Tony Blair lied about it. We have heard repeatedly this afternoon Sir John Chilcot’s response to the question when he absolved Tony Blair of any attempt to mislead or lie.

Let us be honest about this: the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmon)—I think I have got that right—has many skills, achievements and attributes, but I do not think that even the most sycophantic member of the SNP fan club would claim that self-efficacy modesty or the capacity for self-examination are among them. Let us look at his record and judgment on international issues. In 2014, as Putin’s tanks massed on the border of Crimea and after NATO had warned that Russia “threatens peace and security in Europe” and had criticised “President Putin’s threats against this sovereign nation”, he said he admired “certain aspects” of Putin’s leadership and that it was a “good thing” he had restored Russian national pride—

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is the hon. Gentleman in order to pursue these particular matters when we are in fact having a very serious debate on Iraq? [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. This debate is about the Chilcot inquiry and parliamentary scrutiny. I have given the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) quite a lot of leeway, but I would be very grateful to him if he got back to the subject we are debating.

Ian Austin: This debate is also about judgment, and the right hon. Gentleman’s judgment has been found completely wanting at every stage. It is also about intervention—whether Britain intervened rightly or wrongly—and about the consequences of that intervention. For example, when Britain was intervening to save lives in Kosovo, he said it was an action of “dubious legality” and condemned it as “unpardonable folly”. He demanded a ceasefire and urged the urgent start of talks with Milosevic. When challenged, he said that “we shall see if I am right”. History has proved him completely wrong—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. This is not a debate about the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmon); it is about the Chilcot inquiry. I would be grateful to the hon. Gentleman if he moved back to that subject.

Ian Austin: This is the final point I want to make: of course we should learn lessons from the invasion of Iraq, but we must also learn lessons from successful interventions, such as those in Kosovo, but the right hon. Gentleman ought to show some humility and apologise for his mistakes and lack of judgment over the decades.

2.45 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I have to tell my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) that the House is at its best when listening to a maiden speech, but I am afraid it went rather downhill after
that. He made an absolutely brilliant speech. He commanded the House, and he brought in a great sense of humour. He was set a very high bar, in following a former Prime Minister, but who knows what will happen in the future. I am very jealous that he lives in the wonderful village of Bladon.

I rise, with pride, to support the motion. It is rather unfortunate that there is bad blood between the Labour party and the SNP—no doubt, if the Liberal Democrats were in the Chamber, there would be bad blood between them and the Conservatives—but I wish to concentrate solely on the lessons to be learned following the Chilcot report.

There are only 179 of us left who were in the House that fateful night in March 2003. To my utter shame, I did not follow my 15 colleagues in voting against the war, so the one lesson I have learned is not always to accept at face value everything that is said at the Dispatch Box. That is a big lesson I have learned. I pay tribute to all Members, including those from other parties, who were much wiser than I was. I genuinely thought that the weapons of mass destruction were targeted on our country and that they could reach here in 40 minutes. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) had a briefing with 11 colleagues, but I was not privy to that. I regret the way that I voted. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his speech, with which I entirely agree, and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) on his speech. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) intervened, and I congratulate him on everything he said.

As we have heard, the Chilcot report took seven years and cost £13 million. It found that military action had been taken before peaceful options had been exhausted; that the reliability of evidence on Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction was overstated; that the legal justification was far from satisfactory; that rather than bolstering the UN, the UK helped to undermine it; that UK armed forces were poorly prepared; that warnings about the consequences of removing Saddam were not taken seriously; and that the UK overestimated its ability to influence the US. I would have thought that was pretty damning.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkins), who is not in his place, did an excellent job with his inquiry. He put it to the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Jeremy Heywood:

“Chilcot actually says, ‘Most decisions on Iraq pre-conflict were taken either bilaterally between Mr Blair and the relevant Secretary of State or in meetings between Mr Blair, Mr Straw, and Mr Hoon, with No. 10 officials and, as appropriate, Mr John Scarlett and Sir Richard Dearlove and Admiral Boyce’.”

In further questioning, he put it to him:

“Yes, but when the Prime Minister sent another letter to the President of the United States, using those now very famous words ‘I will be with you whatever’, he was advised by officials that this position should be shared with other Cabinet colleagues before he sent the letter and he refused to do so.”

The Cabinet Secretary replied:

“I certainly agree with you that private memos from the Prime Minister to the President of the United States setting out...the...position...should have been subject to collective approval”.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe also said that.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I was not in the House at the time of the vote, but I was a civil servant, and I wonder whether my hon. Friend would comment on the fact that the proper involvement of officials, rather than sofa government, could have prevented some of the excesses in 2003.

Sir David Amess: My hon. Friend makes a wise point. It is yet another lesson to be learned.

On 13 July, there was an exchange between my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe. My right hon. Friend said:

“It seems from the Chilcot report that, at some point between December 2001 and possibly March 2002 but certainly by July 2002, Mr Blair effectively signed Britain up to the American military effort... Under American law, to go to war on the basis of regime change is entirely legal. They do not recognise the international laws that render it otherwise, so for them regime change is a perfectly legitimate casus belli.”—[Official Report, 13 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 360.]

My right hon. and learned Friend intervened and said that

“with hindsight...given that Hans Blix was perfectly willing to carry on with inspections, if the Americans could have been persuaded to delay for another month, all this could have been avoided... The Americans dismissed Blix, however, and regarded him as a waste of time; they were trying to get him out of the way.”

My right hon. Friend replied:

“That is exactly right. That should have been the stance that Mr Blair took, but he did not. He chose instead to come to Parliament to misrepresent the case... Finally, Mr Blair was asked by Tam Dalyell”—

a great parliamentarian—

“about the risks of terrorism arising from the war, but the Prime Minister did not give him an answer—despite having been told by the JIC and by MI5 that it would increase both the international and domestic risk of terrorism and would destabilise the states in the area.”—[Official Report, 13 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 362.]

I am grateful that my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex has said that whatever the result of today’s debate his Committee will look at this issue again. In six years, the former Prime Minister involved us in wars in Iraq, Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan. I am very concerned about that record. With hindsight, I should not have been partisan. Instead, I should have listened more carefully to the wise words of Robin Cook and Clare Short. We owe this to all those British servicemen and women who lost their lives as a result of the Iraq war. The world has been completely destabilised by the disastrous decision that Parliament took, and the general public will not understand if, after spending all that time and money on the Chilcot report, we do not put in place a mechanism by which lessons can be learned. I also think that the former Prime Minister should be brought before a Select Committee.

2.52 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I also congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on his maiden speech, although I note that he had 12 minutes, while I had only six for mine. I have a feeling of déjà vu.

As I did in the two previous debates on this issue, I start by declaring an interest: my brother served on the
frontline in Iraq and served two terms of active duty in Afghanistan. I do not therefore participate lightly in this debate.

Many in this Chamber and outside never thought we would reach this point in placing a motion before the House with cross-party support calling on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to conduct a further specific examination of this contrast between public and private policy and to report to the House on any actions it considers necessary. It was a disastrous series of events that still dogs the path to peace in the middle east and has played a part in undermining unity in the western democracies against an expansion in non-democratic forces both near and far. It was the former Member for Sedgefield who stated the obvious. We need only look at a section of a note from him to the then President of the United States headed “Extending War Aims”:

“There is a real willingness in the Middle East to get Saddam out but a total opposition to mixing this up with the current operation. All said: we know what you want, you can do it, but not whilst you are bombing Afghanistan....I have no doubt that we need to deal with Saddam. But if we hit Iraq now, we would lose the Arab world, Russia, probably half the EU and my fear is the impact of all that on Pakistan. However, I am sure we can devise a strategy for Saddam deliverable at a later date.”

It would seem that the soothsayer whispering a self-fulfilling prophecy in the ear of the then President of the United States had a clear picture of the outcome of the decision to invade Iraq: Saddam removed—done; losing support in the Arab world—done; allowing the Government of the Russian Federation to cast themselves as a defender of state sovereignty—done; a divided Europe—done; undermining the stability of the state of Pakistan—done; inflaming a sectarian divide—done; undermining the credibility of liberal democracy—done. Therefore, to restore the integrity of our sense of democracy it is critical that the House recognises that the inquiry has substantiated the fact that the former Member for Sedgefield and others misled Parliament on the development of the then Government’s policy towards the invasion of Iraq.

This position cannot and will not—at least not in this debate—go unchallenged. Even the former Member for Sedgefield’s advisers suggested in their evidence to the inquiry that a decision to support regime change in Iraq had been made by the time of, or at, the Crawford Ranch summit in April 2002. For example, Sir David Manning, foreign policy adviser to the former Prime Minister, gave evidence to the inquiry, stating:

“On the one hand the prime minister was very clearly urging the president—
“to go back or adopt the UN route and coalition strategy but was absolutely prepared to say that at the same time he was willing to contemplate regime change if this didn’t work.”

Fundamentally, as far as I and my SNP colleagues are concerned, this undermined the credibility of the UN and its ability to play its true role in delivering peace.

In May 2005, The Sunday Times published a leaked classified document written by the Cabinet Office’s defence and overseas secretariat, entitled “Iraq: conditions for military action”. It stated:

“When the Prime Minister discussed Iraq with President Bush at Crawford in April, he said that the UK would support military action to bring about regime change, provided that certain conditions were met”.

Then in a memo dated 28 March, ahead of the summit, Colin Powell himself told the president:

“On Iraq, Blair will be with us should military options be necessary.”

If we can achieve anything in this debate, surely, as I have stated previously, it must be to enhance the debate about the nature of our constitutional democracy and the duties of the Government in their attitude to war and peace. I will reiterate again, as I did on the publication of the report, that the words,

“I will be with you, whatever”,

will be forever associated with the former Member for Sedgefield and will be his political epitaph. They will forever live, too, in the scars of those who were casualties of the war, whether members of our armed services or Iraqi civilians, and of our democracy itself. That is the true legacy of

“I will be with you, whatever.”

2.58 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on his maiden speech.

The central accusation in the motion is not a rerun of whether anyone was for or against the Iraq war. As we heard eloquently from my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) and for Eltham (Clive Efford), many Members who voted against the Iraq war will vote against the motion, because they know that that is not what it is about. Instead, the central accusation is that the former Prime Minister lied in making the case for it. The motion does not use that word, but that is the implication.

Sir John Chilcot made some serious criticisms of the decision making in the run-up to the war and in the aftermath, but he did not say that the decision was taken in bad faith. In fact, his report says of the intelligence presented:

“The JIC accepted ownership of the dossier and agreed its content. There is no evidence that intelligence was improperly included in the dossier or that No.10 improperly influenced the text”.

In paragraph 806 of the report, he says:

“There was nothing in the JIC Assessments issued before July 2002 that would have raised any questions in policy-makers’ minds about the core construct of Iraq’s capabilities and intent.”

In March 2002, the JIC said that it was “clear that Iraq continues to pursue a policy of acquiring WMD and their delivery means”.

These views on Iraq’s capability and intent were not purely British; they were shared by intelligence services throughout the world, including in those countries that were vehemently opposed to military action.

Of the meeting with President Bush at Crawford, the Chilcot report said that Mr Blair said that it was important to go back to the UN and that he sought to persuade Mr Bush to act within a multilateral framework, not a unilateral one. At paragraph 802, the report said:

“Mr Blair and Mr Straw sought to persuade the US Administration to secure multilateral support before taking action on Iraq; and to do so through the UN.”

So the accusation of lying is not true and is not backed up by the Chilcot report.
Ian Austin: Other countries, not just Britain and America, believed not only that Saddam Hussein had WMD, but that he had actually used them, perpetrating the largest chemical weapons attack against civilians in history and killing thousands in a brutal attack on his own people.

Mr McFadden: That is absolutely true, and it is a great shame that the Iraqi MPs who were watching from the Gallery earlier on cannot be heard in today’s debate, because I am sure that they would make that point.

What is true is that the Iraq war and its aftermath raised major questions about military intervention, post-conflict responsibility and our capacity and willingness to act in the future. To go to war is a heavy responsibility and perhaps the most difficult judgment that any leader can make.

There is a temptation to think that history in Iraq began with our intervention. In his opening statement, the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) said that everything could be traced back to the 2003 intervention, but history in Iraq and the use of violence in the country and in the wider middle east did not begin in 2003. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) said, chemical weapons were used in the Anfal campaign against the Kurds, which began long before then, as did the brutal repression of the Shi’a uprising following the first Gulf war.


Mr McFadden: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I believe that there is a new imperialism afoot, which seeks to trace everything to western decisions to intervene or not intervene. Until we understand that violent Islamism jihadism has an ideology of its own, we will never be able properly to confront it, let alone overcome it. We have to understand that, despite our history, it is not always about us.

Alex Salmond: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr McFadden: I have already given way twice.

The controversy over the Iraq war and its aftermath has coloured every decision this Parliament has made on military intervention since—most notably, the vote in August 2013 not to take military action in Syria, following President Assad’s use of chemical weapons against his own people. Who can say for sure what the consequences of that vote were, but we have a duty—do we not?—to reflect on them as we watch Aleppo being blown to bits night after night on our television screens. We can tell ourselves that because we did not intervene in 2013, we do not bear responsibility for it, but that is of little comfort to the children of Aleppo, as the bombs rain down on their heads in a horror seemingly without end. There will not be a Chilcot report on Syria because we did not take the decision to intervene, but are the consequences for the victims any less real?

There are certainly lessons to learn from the experience of Iraq and Syria, but they lie not in the sort of detective hunt based on false accusations of lying set out in the motion, but in asking ourselves serious questions about when we should intervene and when we should not and how we live up to the responsibilities that come from intervention. Perhaps most seriously of all, is it really a morally better position never to intervene if the consequences are encouragement for dictators and no defence for their civilian victims?

In the aftermath of the Chilcot report—we have heard a lot about it in today’s debate—there will be a process to learn lessons. Committees will be formed; processes will be changed; the National Security Council might be changed in one way or another—and it might do some good, because we need the best processes that we can, but this is not the heart of the matter. Nothing—no process; no Committee; no Council—will remove the responsibility of a Prime Minister and of MPs to make a judgment on military intervention. In the end, it is a judgment. That is what leadership is all about.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I am going to drop the time limit down to five minutes.

3.5 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Since we debated the publication of the Chilcot report in July, I cannot be alone in hearing constituents express their doubts about the likelihood of any action on its findings—recalling previous occasions where evidence of failures was debated in this place, only to see the issues disappear without trace as the months and years moved on. Since the time when the matters on which Chilcot reported took place, we have watched the Arab spring rise and fall, Daesh has taken large swathes of the middle east back to the dark ages, and a resurgent Russia provokes NATO—just as the hammer-blows of an ill-thought-out Brexit and the rise of Trump threaten to destabilise the relationships on which the alliance depends.

Already, those of us who believe the public still need answers see others characterise the Iraq war and the events that led up to it as ancient history. This is not a new phenomenon. In the 2010 Labour leadership race, David Miliband said: “While Iraq was a source of division in the past, it doesn’t need to be a source of division in the future. I said during the election campaign that I thought it was time to move on.”

But, of course, as the Chilcot report makes clear, it is decidedly not time to move on.

The exchanges in July’s debate showed that the route to military action was settled directly between Bush and Blair. One of them was driven by a determination to finish the job left unfinished by his father, while the other was convinced that if he said yes to each step along the road to war, he could drag America back from the brink at the 11th hour.

“I will be with you, whatever”, wrote Blair, as he subcontracted to Bush the decision on whether the war would go ahead. He committed UK troops to go, if that was what Bush decided. The report is damming on this point. Sir John said in launching his report:

“We have concluded that the UK chose to join the invasion of Iraq before the peaceful options for disarmament had been exhausted.”

It might have taken many years and millions of words for the UK to catch up on what its Prime Minister did, behind the scenes, in our name. In the US, the
verdict was arrived at long ago and the conclusion was clear: the Iraq war was not an innocent mistake; there was no need to argue over flawed intelligence; and the Bush Administration wanted a war and everything else was pretext. Blair’s decision to hitch the UK armed forces to that wagon of deception is not something that we can allow layers of events to silt over.

The public have long demanded—and deserved—an explanation and action. The families of the servicemen and women killed in Iraq deserve to know the truth, and deserve to know that the policy that led to their loved ones being marched to war behind a dodgy dossier that was designed to mislead. Those with family members in the UK armed forces expect to see military intervention used to root out injustice and instability. Instead, that is what the Iraq war left in its wake.

On top of the dishonesty about the reason for going to war, the consequences appear to have received no thought from those leading the charge. If there was any post-invasion plan, it was the Bush Administration plan—to leave behind an Iraq deliberately weakened, politically and militarily. The result of that flawed policy was the first appearance of Daesh, growing from the ashes of the discarded Iraqi army—an Iraqi spark that became a flame in the war in Syria and threatens to engulf communities across the middle east, Europe and beyond.

Some right hon. and hon. Members would like us to move on. I was struck in July by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) who drew attention to the need to learn the lessons of Iraq in advance of the intervention in Libya, only to be told: “We are not putting boots on the ground, so it isn’t an issue for us.”

However, if we move on from Iraq now and leave the drawing of lessons from these events for another day, how many more Iraqs, Syrias and Libyas will there be?

In July, in response to the hon. Member for Bridgend, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said that he had voted for intervention in Libya because he was “terrified that people would be killed.”—[Official Report, 14 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 489.]

But, of course, people were killed, and are still being killed, in each of those countries and many more. They are dying as they flee once-thriving communities. Much of the destruction is still rooted in that flawed pact between Bush and Blair, and until we understand how we got here, it is not clear how we will find our way back. Why does that matter now? There are many reasons. Two of them are the largest aircraft carriers ever purchased by the UK Government. They are designed to project UK power across the globe, but to what end? If the policies driving the use of those vessels are not open to democratic scrutiny or review, will they and their associated air power add to our security or undermine it?

Since the launch of the Chilcot report, we have seen an increasing number of appearances by the former Prime Minister. He has read the runes and believes that scrutiny is over for him. However, I know that Members in this Chamber believe that the armed forces’ sacrifice means that any decision to send them to war must be made with integrity and based on fact. In this case it was not, and we must scrutinise that further.

3.10 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I rise to address a misapprehension that seems to have developed that the report of Sir John Chilcot’s inquiry has cleared the then Prime Minister of misleading the House. As the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) said earlier in an intervention, papers released recently as a result of a freedom of information request—after quite some resistance from the current Government—have shown that the Iraq inquiry was designed from the outset to avoid blame and to reduce the risk that individuals and the Government could face legal proceedings.

The hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) is shaking his head. I can give him copies of the civil service memos that were released as a result of that freedom of information request. My point is, however, that not having been charged with investigating blame or accountability, or indeed the legality of the war, Sir John Chilcot—for whom I have the greatest respect—is in no better a position to absolve the then Prime Minister of blame for misleading the House than anyone else who has carefully considered the evidence and the analysis of it that Sir John has set out.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) indicated that he had placed in the Library a detailed report that carries out that analysis and suggests that the House was misled. I am not saying that; it was said by an independent expert who has looked at the evidence set out by Sir John Chilcot. Gordon Brown, the former Prime Minister, said that the inquiry would help us to learn lessons that would strengthen UK democracy, foreign policy and the military forces, but how is democracy strengthened if the House does not scrutinise the evidence and consider issues of blame and accountability when so many people have died?

I am conscious that I do not have much time, but I want to talk briefly about what those memos—the memos that were released after the current Government had fought so hard to prevent their release—show us. They show the thinking and advice at the highest level of government prior to Gordon Brown’s announcement of an inquiry. They show that many officials who took part in the events that the inquiry investigated—including the former spy chief Sir John Scarlett—were involved in setting it up. They reveal that senior civil servants, under Gordon Brown, went against Whitehall protocol when they appointed a civil servant with significant involvement in Iraq policy during the period covered by the inquiry to the key role of inquiry secretary.

The documents, a series of memos from Whitehall officials, cover a four-week period in May and June 2009, and they show that the officials favoured from the outset a secret inquiry to be conducted by Privy Councillors. In a memo to Gus O’Donnell, the Cabinet official Ben Lyon advised that the format, scope and membership of the inquiry could be designed to “focus on lessons and avoid blame”.

It was noted that a parliamentary inquiry of the sort suggested by the former Foreign Secretary, Lord Hurd, would “attract a daily running commentary”. like the Hutton inquiry, Gus O’Donnell also advised against appointing judges or lawyers who would adopt a “legalistic” focus. Indeed, as we know, there was no legalistic focus. The inquiry did not look at issues of
blame and accountability. That is the reason for this cross-party motion: it is intended to enable the House to look at those issues now.

**Neil Coyle:** Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

**Joanna Cherry:** I will not, because I do not have much time.

**Neil Coyle:** It is not a cross-party motion.

**Joanna Cherry:** The motion is supported by members of seven parties. It has been made clear this afternoon that Labour Members do not support it, and I think that that speaks for itself, as does the behaviour of some speakers. My point is that the purpose of the motion, which has the support of seven political parties, is to ensure that the House does the job that the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, said the inquiry would do—namely, to ensure that democracy was properly served.

If the House does not examine the outcome of Sir John Chilcot’s findings properly and if it does not look at those issues of accountability, democracy and justice will not have been served. That is the point of the motion.

3.15 pm

**Phil Wilson** (Sedgefield) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on his maiden speech. I know how difficult it is to make a maiden speech when your predecessor was Prime Minister, and the hon. Gentleman did an excellent job.

I want to make a couple of points about why the motion is about more than just Chilcot, and about how divisive it actually is. My predecessor was Member of Parliament for Sedgefield for a quarter of a century. For 13 of those years he was the leader of the Labour party, and for 10 he was Prime Minister. I have known Tony Blair for more than 30 years, probably longer than anyone else who is in the House today, and I am proud to say that he is a friend of mine. When I am called a Blairite, which is sometimes seen as a term of abuse, I wear that term proudly as an accolade.

I met Tony Blair in 1983, when he first became the Labour candidate for Sedgefield, in the community bar in Trimdon village. He believed then, as he does today, that the Labour party had a great ability to do good, and his opponents are angry about what he achieved. What he did achieve were great things, from the minimum wage to devolution in Scotland and the creation of the Scottish Parliament, which I would like to say the SNP used a bit more than it does at present. We also became, under Tony Blair, the party that was patriotic. It became “cool” to be British under his leadership and premiership. There is a reason why Conservative Members, in particular, do not want to see another Tony Blair. Given that he kept the Tory party out of power for the longest period since 1762, I understand their disquiet about those years.

Our opponents want to put as much distance between Tony Blair and the Labour party of today as they possibly can. My message to my colleagues today is, “Do not fall into that trap”, and I am pleased to note that Labour Members will oppose the motion. There is another reason why it is wrong. It is not about the rights and wrongs of the war in Iraq; it is essentially about calling Tony Blair a liar, and continuing to do so. That is mendacious, and it is an attempt to second-guess Sir John Chilcot, who said:

“I absolve him from a personal and demonstrable decision to deceive parliament or the public—to state falsehoods, knowing them to be false.”

The SNP motion is part of a strategy to divide the Labour Benches. It is party political, divisive and cynical.

**Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): My hon. friend is making an excellent argument exposing the mendacity of the SNP’s motion. Does he agree that the legacy of our former Prime Minister involves a commitment, ongoing to this day, to peace in the middle east, making him a figure that Labour Members should be proud of?

**Phil Wilson:** We should be proud of Tony Blair. We know about the efforts he is putting into the middle east and interfaith dialogue around the world. He spends most of his time with his charities trying to achieve those aims.

Some people want to define themselves against Tony Blair and the 1997 to 2010 Labour Governments. To them I say, “Be careful, because it is not useful or a good idea to define yourself against success.” Like all Governments, Labour did things that generated criticism, disagreement, frustration and anger, none more than on Iraq. I sincerely accept that people outside and Members of this House have strongly held views on the rights and wrongs of the Iraq war, but let us disengage from this witch hunt pursuing a line of criticism abandoned by the Chilcot inquiry. Tony Blair did not lie.

My message to the SNP is this: “Use your Opposition days to talk about the issues that affect Scotland. You use such debates to deflect from your own weaknesses. You have no vision; your policy platform is absent. Labour gave you a Scottish Parliament. Use it. Look to yourselves before you start criticising others.”

3.21 pm

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): The Iraq war is one of the great disasters to befall the world in this century. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed and injured—men, women and children, the culpable and the innocent alike, the invading forces and the often unwilling defenders. Saddam’s vile tyranny was replaced by endless war. Here in the United Kingdom families grieve for their loved ones, lost forever, and survivors who served their country so faithfully suffer terribly. Terrorism spreads across northern Africa and Europe and is indeed a menace worldwide. Today the threat level here in the UK is again at “severe”; an attack is highly likely.

Compared to all that, misleading the House of Commons and the damage done to our reputation might seem to rank somewhat lower, but it is significant none the less, and damage has been done. Trust in Parliament, in Government and in individual MPs has declined disastrously, which is coupled with at best scepticism, and at worst widespread cynicism, about our democratic processes.
I was a Member of this House at the time of the march to war and I have a particularly vivid memory of Mr Blair presenting the House with the so called "dodgy dossier". Even on first reading, it seemed to me it was a cut and paste exercise. I also took part in the enormous protest against going to war and was astonished by the variety of people joining in—not just the usual suspects but a true cross-section of society. There are many causes of the steep decline of trust in politicians and in our work, but some of the blame can be traced back to the way we were taken to war in Iraq, to subsequent disastrous events there, and to the public perception that no one has really been held to account.

As The Observer revealed last Sunday in a report concerning this debate:

“A spokesman for Blair declined to comment. But, privately, his supporters say similar motions have been tabled before without gaining significant traction among MPs.”

Paul Flynn: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Hywel Williams: I will not, as time is short.

Unsurprisingly, there is much cynical public resignation. Last summer, we had a two-day debate and there was a debate in the other place. On 26 October, the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) asked the Prime Minister for reassurance that, in respect of the Chilcot report, she had, as he put it, “a cunning plan to ensure that action is taken”.

In reply, the right hon. Lady said that the National Security Adviser was leading an exercise to learn the lessons from the Chilcot report, before adding:

“There is much in it, and we need to ensure that we do learn the lessons from it.”—[Official Report, 26 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 277.]

Although that is most assuredly the case, for me there is a further question: who is this “we”?

I know nothing of the National Security Adviser. I have no doubt that he is a capable, industrious and conscientious public servant, but he is appointed by the Prime Minister and he reports to the Prime Minister. The House of Commons decides its own ways of working and of holding the Government to account, hence this proposed referral to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

“to conduct a further specific examination of this contrast in public and private policy and of the presentation of intelligence, and then to report to the House on what further action it considers necessary and appropriate to help prevent any repetition of this disastrous series of events.”

Given that the Prime Minister’s answer of 26 October is only partially relevant, I will refer to two more recent matters on the presentation of intelligence information. First, on the basis of that information was it reasonable to conclude that Iraq posed an imminent threat to the UK and so go to war? In evidence to the Liaison Committee on 2 November, Sir John Chilcot said in respect of the alleged imminence of the Iraqi threat to the UK:

“As things have turned out, we know that it was not.”

That is, the threat was not imminent, but he seems to be saying that a correct judgment on the matter is only possible with hindsight—“as things…turned out”. Significantly, he concluded by saying:

“As things appeared at the time, the evidence to support it was more qualified than he”—

Mr Blair—

“in effect, gave expression to.”

That prompted a further question from the Chair, referring to the “test of whether a reasonable man would conclude that this evidence supported going to war.”

Sir John replied:

“If I may say so, that seems an easier question for me to answer, because the answer to that is no.”

The second point I would have liked to make is on the question posed by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) of absolving Mr Blair, but unfortunately I have no time.

Mr Blair said, famously:

“I think most people who have dealt with me, think I’m a pretty straight sort of guy and I am.”

Referral of this matter to PACAC will give him yet another opportunity to convince the world of his “pretty straight” credentials.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): We will have to drop the time limit to four minutes.

3.26 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I am delighted finally to be speaking in this most important of debates.

From the outside looking in, many people assume that this place is corrupt. Let us be honest: politicians do not have a good reputation. I know the vast majority of MPs are hard-working, diligent and honest, but every example of corruption, perversion, laziness, greed or dishonesty does not just taint the perpetrator; it casts a shadow over all of us and this place. The only way to convince the citizens of the UK that they have a Parliament to be proud of is through ruthless honesty, even when it hurts. The alternative is an electorate who are dissatisfied and feel disfranchised, and so disengage from politics and politicians. We have a duty to support the mechanisms of a democracy. We must respect, cherish and protect them. We do not own them; we are simply guardians who pass them on to future generations. That is why we must investigate thoroughly any possibility that the principles we claim to hold so dear have been abused.

The Chilcot inquiry highlighted serious shortcomings and misgivings. The report stated that the UK invaded Iraq before all peaceful options had been investigated. We now know that there was no imminent threat from Iraq or Saddam Hussein, and that the reasons for our invasion were predicated on flawed intelligence. Crucially, this flawed intelligence was not challenged as it should have been. Quite astoundingly, there is no formal record of the decision and the grounds on which it was made that led to the invasion that started on 20 March 2003.

The rush to war was so fast that our troops did not have time to stockpile the necessary equipment—uniforms, boots and body armour. A lack of helicopters and armoured vehicles made it more dangerous for our forces. By July 2009, 179 members of our armed forces had died. We will never know how many Iraqis died, but Conservative estimates suggest at least 150,000, with millions more displaced from their homes. How did this come about? How did this place get it so wrong? How were so many MPs misled?
In 2003, it was already US policy to change the regime in Iraq. Five years earlier, in 1998, President Clinton had signed into law the Iraq Liberation Act. It was “the policy of the U.S. to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq”.

In 2003, Prime Minister Tony Blair threw his hat in with the US. Chilcot demonstrated clearly that Tony Blair bypassed his Cabinet, instead relying on his so-called “sofa government”. Key decisions on the future of the country were made in informal meetings, sometimes involving only a couple of the then Prime Minister’s friends, and without the input of senior members of the Cabinet. That is not how to solve a problem. The invasion of Iraq was an object lesson in how to escalate a problem. If the mission was to perpetuate instability in the middle east, it is mission accomplished.

The last line of the motion we are debating today is crucial. It calls on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to “report to the House on what further action it considers necessary and appropriate to help prevent any repetition of this disastrous series of events.”

As I deliver this speech, our forces are involved in the battle of Mosul, so we can see that the ramifications of decisions made back in 2003 are still with us today.

In conclusion, we are voting today to instruct the Committee to “conduct a further specific examination of this contrast in public and private policy and of the presentation of intelligence”.

I would say to any Members who were here in 2003 that, with all due respect, their responsibility to the future should outweigh their duty to the past. Supporting the motion today can only enhance the reputation of this place. It should be welcomed by all fair-minded elected Members.

3.29 pm

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): I must apologise to the House for being absent during part of this debate. I was called to participate in a delegated legislation Committee upstairs.

It is a great privilege to speak in the same debate as my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), who gave an outstanding maiden speech and paid appropriate tribute to his predecessor. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) for the generous words he said about his predecessor.

Talking of distinguished party leaders, the debate was opened in fine style by the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), a former First Minister of Scotland. He laid out his case, as he does always, with passion and verve and commitment. Unfortunately, skilled as an advocate though he is, as he was laying out the prosecution case against the former Member for Sedgefield, he did not have the evidence to sustain his case. The truth is that the Chilcot report makes it clear that at no stage was there a deliberate attempt by Tony Blair to mislead the House. More than that, the Chilcot report makes it clear that there was a proper legal basis—a Security Council resolution—for the decision to go to war.

Joanna Cherry: The right hon. Gentleman has been out of the Chamber, so he may have missed my contribution. I made the point that papers recently released, as a result of a freedom of information request, clearly show that the inquiry was not charged with looking at issues of blame, accountability or legality. Does he accept that?

Michael Gove: It is clear from what was published in the report that a decision was taken by Sir John Chilcot—I will not have any criticism made of him or any of those responsible for the report—that there was no deliberate misleading of this House. It is quite wrong to suggest otherwise. More than that, the right hon. Member for Gordon sought to suggest that the note passed from the former Prime Minister to President Bush saying that he would “be with you, whatever” was the equivalent of a political blank cheque. It was no such thing. When Mr Blair wrote that note he made it clear that there needed to be progress in three key areas: the middle east peace process; securing UN authority for action; and shifting public opinion in the UK, Europe and the Arab world. He also pointed out that there would be a need to commit to Iraq for the long term.

In judging Mr Blair—I think history will judge him less harshly than some in this House—we need to recognise that his decision to join George W Bush at that time was finely balanced. In reflecting on when this House decides to send young men and women into harm’s way, we also need to reflect not just on the consequences of acting but the consequences of not acting—the consequences of non-intervention.

Alex Salmond: The right hon. Gentleman will remember Chilcot’s findings on page 112 of the report. The note was not discussed or agreed with any colleagues and led to the possibility of “participation in military action in a way that would make it very difficult for the UK subsequently to withdraw its support for the US.” Does he not accept that Chilcot found the note to be of huge significance in binding the UK to George W Bush?

Michael Gove: It was not a blank cheque. It was not a binding statement. It was of significance, but, as I have explained, Tony Blair at the time laid out to George Bush that certain steps were required before he would agree.

The point the right hon. Gentleman does not attend to is the consequences of inaction: Saddam Hussein remaining in power in a country he had turned into a torture chamber above ground and a mass grave below. Power would inevitably have passed on to his sadistic children, Uday and Qusay, who would have carried on their genocidal conflict against the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs. They would inevitably have taken advantage of the erosion of international sanctions to restock their chemical and biological weapons arsenal.

Whenever we think about the consequences of action, we very rarely think about the consequences of inaction. In front of us now, however, is a hugely powerful reminder of the consequences of inaction: what is happening in Aleppo at the moment. I was not in this House when the decision was taken to vote on whether to take action in Iraq, but I was in this House in the previous Parliament when we voted on whether to take action in Syria. I am
deeply disappointed that this House did not vote to take action then, because as a direct result of voting against intervention we have seen Bashar Assad, backed by Vladimir Putin and the anti-Semitic leadership of Iran, unleashing hell on the innocent people of Aleppo.

I have a lot of respect for the SNP position on many issues, but when asked about what is happening in Aleppo and in Syria it has no answer; it can put forward nothing that deals with the huge, horrific humanitarian disaster that is unfolding. My own view is that there is much that we can do both to relieve suffering and to put pressure on Russia, Iran and Syria, but once again the long shadow cast by Iraq, which certainly should call us all to search our consciences, means politicians are sometimes fearful of making the case for intervention now and certainly those like the SNP who are opposed to intervention are emboldened to make their case for neutrality when we are confronting evil.

Joanna Cherry: I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman was in the House on Monday, but if he was or has read the newspapers he will have seen that I and many of my colleagues signed a letter asking the British Government to take action in relation to Aleppo by way of dropping aid on the city. We are not without answers, and I wonder if he would care to withdraw that suggestion.

Michael Gove: I was happy to sign that letter as well. It was initiated of course by the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), both of whom, as I have, have argued consistently for muscular intervention in Syria to help the suffering people of Aleppo, and it is simply not good enough—although I have great respect for the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry)—to say we wish to drop that aid but not to be willing to go further to ensure that appropriate pressure, diplomatic and otherwise, is placed on those people who are responsible for mass murder.

It is all very well to look back on Iraq and say that mistakes were made; of course they were, but if we are going to have an Opposition day debate on foreign policy in this House at this time, it is a dereliction of duty to look backwards and try to blame Tony Blair, especially when the responsibility on all of us is to do something to help the people of Aleppo who are suffering now.

3.36 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion): Few would now dispute that the Iraq invasion was the biggest foreign policy failure of recent times. The Chilcot report provides detailed confirmation that military intervention was by no means a last resort, and that all other avenues were not exhausted.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Caroline Lucas: I will make a bit of progress and then I will.

Chilcot also showed that Iraq posed no immediate threat to the UK, and, crucially, that hindsight was not necessary to see those things. That seven-year Iraq inquiry, which cost £10 million of public money, also officially recorded detailed evidence of the vast discrepancy between the former Prime Minister’s public statements and his private correspondence. If we do nothing about that and take no steps towards accountability for it, it is unclear to me how we begin to restore faith in our political system.

Sir John Chilcot made it clear earlier this month that Tony Blair did long-term damage to trust in politics by presenting a case for the Iraq war that went beyond “the facts of the case”. Sir John told MPs he could “only imagine” how long it would take to repair that trust.

That need to restore trust in politics is a key reason why I support the motion. This should not be pursued as a personal or party political attack, and this should be reflected in our language and approach. This process must be based on the facts and the evidence.

Paul Flynn: Does the hon. Lady recall that world public opinion, especially in the Security Council, was greatly influenced by a presentation by Colin Powell in which he showed photographs of what he thought was biological weapons equipment? He has since retracted and said he was hopelessly deceived, that the pictures were nothing of the sort and that there was no threat from those weapons. He has shown some penitence; would it not be better if those responsible in this House showed some penitence as well?

Caroline Lucas: I am grateful for that intervention and, unsurprisingly, I agree.

The evidence in the Chilcot report does show that Tony Blair was responsible for fixing evidence around a policy while telling us that he was doing the opposite. It shows he was treating his office, the Cabinet, this House and our constitutional checks and balances with disrespect amounting to contempt. For that he should be held responsible.

But more than that, accountability must mean ensuring that any future decisions are taken with systems in place that guarantee proper Cabinet and parliamentary scrutiny and discussion.

In his report Chilcot does not judge the former Prime Minister’s guilt or innocence, and, as we have recently learned, secret Cabinet documents show the Chilcot report hearings were set up precisely to stop individuals being held accountable and specifically to avoid blame, and that is another key reason why we need a Committee to look at the issue of accountability.

Hon. Members have already cited numerous examples of what could be called misleading statements, deception, untruths or whatever word we choose, but I want to add just one more. Tony Blair stated in March 2003 that diplomacy had been exhausted in efforts to seek to avoid an invasion of Iraq. Yet the Chilcot report shows, without question, that this was not the case, and central to his case was the role of France. To get support from his own MPs, Blair argued that diplomatic efforts to secure a resolution had been exhausted, because the French President was unreasonably threatening to veto any resolution. That was not true, and Chilcot shows that Tony Blair knew it. In a phone call with George Bush on 12 March 2003, Blair and Bush agreed publicly to pretend to continue to seek a second UN resolution, knowing that it would not happen, and then to blame France for preventing it. [Interruption.] I suggest that those who are saying from a sedentary position that that is not true look at paragraph 410 of page 472 in volume 3, section 3.8—
Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Caroline Lucas: No I will not give way.

Mr Jones: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Caroline Lucas: No I will not.

Chilcot then reveals that Tony Blair did two misleading things. First, he told his Cabinet the very next day that work was continuing in the UN to obtain a second resolution and that the outcome remained open. Secondly, he went on to repeat a deliberate misrepresentation of the French position at Prime Minister’s questions on 12 March, in spite of the fact that, just minutes before, the French ambassador had telephoned No. 10 again to correct this repeated distortion. Blair did this again in his key parliamentary statement of 18 March 2003 and he also included it in the war motion before the House.

In short, the French position was to request more time for weapons inspectors, with war an explicit possibility, but Tony Blair kept deliberately taking out of context phrases from an interview by Chirac given on 10 March, saying that they showed that France would veto in any circumstances. France kept correcting that untruth, as the Chilcot report shows in black and white. Chilcot records that despite this Tony Blair instructed Straw to “concede nothing” in talks with the French Foreign Minister who, in essence, calling for more time. Tony Blair needed to continue the misrepresentation of France to provide cover for his failure to get UN support for war.

Hon. Members have covered a great deal of other evidence in the debate, including the gross misrepresentation of Iraq as a growing threat to the region and to this country. Blair said that Saddam’s weapons programme was “active, detailed and growing”, and that the intelligence behind that assertion was “extensive, detailed and authoritative”, yet the Joint Intelligence Committee had said just six months earlier:

“Intelligence on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction…and ballistic missile programmes is sporadic and patchy.”

I appreciate that it is hard for Labour Members to hear some of these facts, but to barrage us for citing what is in the Chilcot report is deeply disrespectful and shows that we are not learning from that hideous escapade.

3.42 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): One of the most ridiculous arguments put forward here today by a number of hon. Members is that the Scottish National party has no right to have a debate on Chilcot and that we should choose subjects that are of concern to Scotland. I say to them: tell that to the Scottish families whose sons died in that war. Tell it to the Scottish families whose sons were injured and who will have to live with their scars, both physical and mental, for the rest of their lives. Tell it to those people—

Graham Jones: I have a family who suffered. He should give way. It’s a disgrace—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) is not giving way.

Roger Mullin: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I want to compliment one speech that I heard today, and it is that of the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale). In his usual understated way, he made some of the most telling observations about why we should still care about what happened and about the need to learn the lessons. I cannot see how it can be argued that we can learn the lessons if we are unwilling critically to review the results of the Chilcot process.

I was critical when my constituency predecessor in Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath set up the inquiry—as I am critical now—that it was not a judge-led inquiry. I have also been critical in the House about Sir John Chilcot’s decision to invoke the Maxwellisation process, because he was not required to do so. That process allowed those who were criticised in the report to be the only ones to be given notice of what was being said about them and the only ones allowed to introduce new evidence into the process. For those reasons alone, this House needs to review and make its own judgment about the evidence. For me and many hon. Members from whom I have heard today, it is most telling that people recognise that the most important thing about the Chilcot report is not his personal views or interpretation, but the evidence that was presented, which this House is required to review.

I for one have confidence in the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, particularly in its Chairman, the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), whom we are asking to take this forward. If there is any reason at all for why we need further consideration by the Committee, it was given by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) when reporting some of his conversations with Sir John Chilcot in the Liaison Committee. He asked a question about Mr Blair and if I quote him correctly, Sir John’s response was:

“You would have to ask him.”

How does this House ask him without asking him?

3.45 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I pay tribute to all those who served, lost their lives or were injured in Iraq, to their families and to everyone who currently serves in our forces. I am delighted to support the motion that my colleagues have so ably put forward.

The scene was set in forensic detail by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), who started by asking what we should do in parliamentary terms in the light of the inquiry’s findings. It is reasonable to consider parliamentary accountability as a tool that this House should actually use. He went on to highlight that no checks and balances currently exist in the system. Like all of us, he looks forward to the report of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and its recommendations.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, said that lessons should be learned and that the Government are considering them. I believe that he meant that, so
does he agree that further specific examination of the contrast between public and private policy and presentation of intelligence vis-à-vis the then Prime Minister is desirable to help to prevent any repetition of past events?

The hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) spoke about pursuing one individual. That individual was the then Prime Minister, who gave differing statements in private and in public—statements upon which, as we heard today, Members of this House relied. If statements were different in private and in public, why should we not debate that? To use the current context, how would we and members of the public feel if we thought that our Prime Minister—heaven forbid we were to be in such a situation again—was having private discussions with President-elect Donald Trump that differed—[Interruption.]

Neil Coyle: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: No, I will not. How would we feel if those discussions differed from the information that the Prime Minister presented to the House?

I welcomed the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts), who spoke with great eloquence and some good humour, and gave us a whirlwind tour of his constituency. He rightly paid tribute to the work of the organisations that exist there. I welcome him to the House.

The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) and the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) seemed to suggest that they should have some say in the motions that the SNP brings to this House on our Opposition days. We will decide that, thank you very much. What we choose will be based on our constituents’ interests, which are at the heart of all that we on these Benches do. The Labour party can debate what it wants on its Opposition days. Let me be clear: we are not required to be sensitive to the Labour party’s ongoing issues when choosing what to debate. That is its problem. We will remain sensitive to our constituents’ issues and continue to stand up for them.

I thank the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) for his support for the motion. He made an excellent speech, as did my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), whose brother served. My hon. Friend quite rightly did not speak lightly and used his customary passion, conviction and principles, which the House so often enjoys. My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) spoke of the necessary further scrutiny. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) discussed how Sir John Chilcot was not charged with investigating blame and to help to prevent any repetition of past events?

The hon. Members for Arfon (Hywel Williams) and for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), whom we also thank for supporting this motion, gave informative speeches with huge insight into this matter. My hon. Friend the Members for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) also spoke very well indeed, and I thank them for their contributions.

This is an important debate, not simply because it is about a former Prime Minister, but because it is about the fate of 179 servicemen and women who went to war and did not come home. It is about their families, and the mental and emotional scars they bear. It is not about us—it is about them. And it is about the hundreds of thousands of dead and injured civilians in Iraq and beyond. It is also about Parliament—this institution—and about protecting the integrity of our democracy. When our democratic institutions are under immense stress and public faith in the political process is at a low ebb, it is vital for our democracy that we can reassert that the discussions we have here in this House may be contentious and controversial, but they are carried out in a way that recognises and does not distort the facts at our disposal. If we choose to look the other way, what hope is there for restoring the public’s faith in this Parliament?

Today, we have a chance to take a significant step towards restoring parliamentary authority. This issue is above party politics, which is why I am glad to have the support of colleagues from across the Chamber and from Members from seven separate political parties. To his great credit, Sir John Chilcot’s report forensically and repeatedly dismantles the public pronouncements of Blair as a catalogue of failure and neglect of the principles and duties of government. Chilcot stated that the actions of the Blair Administration were crucial in undermining the authority of the UN Security Council and that despite repeated declarations to the contrary, Blair personally committed the UK to joining the US in invading Iraq before all peaceful and diplomatic options had been exhausted. We have heard loud and clear about the following words today:

“I will be with you, whatever”.

Parliament must recognise that and must act.

Ian Austin: Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I will not give way, and I ask that Members also afford me the respect that I afforded them when they were speaking in this debate.

We must demonstrate that, a decade on from this disaster, we have listened and learned so that we are not doomed to repeat these deadly mistakes—that is what this is all about. It is about making sure that we do the right thing for the future. We know that the conflict and instability that has engulfed the region in the past few years was undoubtedly fuelled by the ideologically driven recklessness of Blair and Bush, but it is also clear from the lack of post-conflict planning in subsequent conflicts, both in Libya and the humanitarian disaster infolding in Syria, that we have not yet fully embraced the changes that need to take place if we are to play a progressive role in an increasingly dangerous world.

Parliament must be at the centre of this process if it is to reassert its integrity at the heart of our democratic process in holding the Government to account. That is why the motion supports the current work of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which is examining the lessons to be learned from Chilcot on the machinery of government. This matter is not in the past; it is being spoken of in a Committee, and we are asking that that be extended further.

Today, MPs have a choice to make, and each of us, but perhaps Labour MPs in particular, has to make an important decision. We need to decide whether we act to address the issues raised by Sir John Chilcot and seek to reassert the place of Parliament at the heart of the
democratic process, or whether to stand by while public confidence in this place is eroded even further. In the Lobby, we can stand up for parliamentary democracy and the importance of integrity, or we can look the other way. We can choose to learn from the lessons of the past or we can seek to brush this damning report under the carpet. I know the path that I will choose to take, and I hope MPs from across the House will support me in that endeavour.

3.53 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mike Penning): Let me say at the outset, as the Armed Forces Minister and as a former serviceman, that I would like to pay tribute to those who did not come home, to those who came home with injuries that are going to be with them for the rest of their lives, physically as well as mentally, and to their loved ones, who have to live with those memories. It is for us, as parliamentarians, to live with the decisions that we make in this House. At times, these decisions are enormously onerous, but they are not as onerous as those of Prime Ministers and Ministers in Departments such as mine, which send our troops around the world, as we are doing today.

May I say at the outset that there is no perfect answer to the debate that we have had today? I sat in this House in 2003, not in the Chamber as a Member of Parliament, but in the Press Gallery as adviser and head of news and media for the Leader of the Opposition. I went to many briefings, and sat with the Leader of the Opposition for hours on end while we deliberated what Her Majesty’s Opposition were going to do. Many of my hon. Friends, some of whom are still in the House, made really difficult decisions on that night on how they were going to vote. Some voted with the Government and some voted with their party, but many voted with their conscience. With hindsight, some of the decisions that were made, which have been debated in this House this afternoon, were wrong. If I had been a Member at the time—it was another two years before I was elected—I am sure, based on what I knew, that I would have voted to go to war. We all have to live with our decisions.

We can debate this matter, but many Members made up their minds on it a long time ago. I do not think that there is a huge number of people in the House today who have changed their minds, but this Parliament is doing its job. I will not in any shape or form—either as a Back Bencher, which is what I was and which is what I probably will be in the future, or as a Minister—criticise any party for the motion that they bring forward on their Opposition Day; nor will I criticise a Back Bencher for the subject that they may wish to debate.

I was commenting to the Leader of the House a moment ago about the fact that people from seven different parties signed up to the motion. I said that that is one of the most important things. That shortage could have been prevented if we had planned correctly. Chilcot goes into our planning in quite a lot of detail. Some would say, “Well, we had only a short amount of time.” Our armed forces need to be equipped on the basis that they will be doing this sort of thing, so we must ensure that the equipment is in place and that our boys and girls are equipped correctly.

It would be inappropriate for me, in the short amount of time that I have, not to pay tribute to our new colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), for a simply fantastic maiden speech. I will not be a hypocrite. I have criticised this House on more than one occasion, because we have too many accountants and lawyers—[Interruption]—and a lot of them are around me at the moment. However, this House has been enhanced by my hon. Friend’s speech and by the way my delivered it. May I ask him what I should do with all those photographs, posters and literature of him that are in the back of my car? Can they be suitably disposed of in a recycling facility? When I came to Witney to help him—I had never been to parts of Witney before, and my hon. Friend is right: it is absolutely beautiful—I was called back by friendly Whips on more than one occasion, so I did not manage to deliver the several thousand posters that his agent managed to give me.

The truth is that my hon. Friend said something fundamentally important: it is a privilege to be here on behalf of our constituents and to bring issues to the fore that concern them. In this case, SNP Members have decided that the Chilcot inquiry is such an issue. I am not going to be hypocritical and say that they do not have the right to do so, but my postbag is about housing, health and my local community. But that is their decision, and I fully respect that. I am not going to say that I have not had any correspondence on Chilcot; by tomorrow morning, I will have a lot more.

At the end of the day, I do not think that anybody wants to criticise Chilcot, his team or the report. It took a long time, and we can go over and over this. Whether the House decides to recommend to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) and his Committee that they look into this issue further, as I understand Select Committees, they make their own minds up about what they will do. It will discuss this matter whether the motion is passed or not. During the short time a Select Committee—I am looking around for the former Chairman of the Health Committee—we used to have in-depth discussions on what inquiries to do and how far they needed to go.

Alex Salmond: The Minister is making a very balanced speech. In his opinion, having read what he has read, is there a great contrast between the private commitments that the former Prime Minister gave to President Bush and his public statements and assurances to this House?
Mike Penning: I started to read the summary of the Chilcot report, but then read the report at great length, and if the right hon. Gentleman comes to my office he will see the markers in it. It took me several weeks. I respect what Chilcot said, and that is where we are today. If the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee or other Committees want to look at that further, fine, but my personal view and the view of the Government is that we do not need any more inquiries, so we will not go through the Lobby with the SNP this evening.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 70, Noes 439.

**Division No. 99**

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**State Pension Age: Women**

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected amendment (c) in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.19 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House is concerned that the Government is not taking action to alleviate the injustice facing women affected by the acceleration of the increase in the state pension age, despite the House previously voting in favour of such action; welcomes the Landman Economics report into the impact of the changes to pension arrangements for women born in the 1950s, which identifies an affordable solution which would slow down that increase in order to give adequate time for women affected by the acceleration to make alternative arrangements; and calls on the Government to work with the Women Against State Pension Inequality and Women Against State Pension Inequality Voice campaigns further to explore transitional protection for those affected.

It is a pleasure to move this motion in the name of the leader of the Scottish National party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson), and many of my right hon. and hon. Friends. We have long argued that the Government need to slow down the pace of the increase in women’s pensionable age, and that the increase in pensionable age is happening over too short a timescale. There has also been an argument about whether women were given enough notice of the increase in their pensionable age. Indeed, some Government Members, such as the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), have conceded that there were issues with communication. That is putting it mildly.

Thanks to freedom of information requests, we learned two weeks ago that only in April 2009 did the Department for Work and Pensions begin writing to women born between April 1950 and April 1955, and it did not complete the process until February 2012.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I will make some progress, and then I will give way.

The DWP wrote to women to inform them about changes in legislation that go back to the Pensions Act 1995, but it did not start the formal period of notification for 14 years. To take 14 years to begin informing people that the pension that they had paid in for was being deferred—that is quite something. Can we imagine the outcry if a private pension provider did the same as the Government have done? It is a classic case of the Government being too slow in the planning and execution of that notification.

The DWP notification began in 2009 for women born between 1950 and 1955, but it did not complete the process until February 2012. For nearly four years, women were not given notice of the change in their pensionable age. The Government have been slow to respond to this issue, and the House has been quick to respond to the injustice to which these women have been subjected.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that these pension entitlements are not a benefit or a privilege but a contract, and they should be honoured?

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are talking about women who have paid national insurance contributions on the basis that they would get a pension. This is not a benefit. It should be a contractual arrangement between the Government and the women involved, and that is what the Government have wilfully removed.

David T. C. Davies: Given the hon. Gentleman’s strong view on the matter, could he tell us whether the Scottish Government have written to pensioners in Scotland about it? Could he also tell us whether the Scottish Government are going to use their many fiscal and tax-raising powers, and their huge budget of some £30 billion, to compensate women in Scotland?

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman might treat pensioners in Scotland and the rest of the UK with a little bit more respect than he has shown by asking that nonsense of a question. Just in case he does not know, pensions are a reserved matter. I would very much like the Scottish Government to have responsibility for pensions. Let us be quite clear: if this Government gave us access to the national insurance fund, we would not treat pensioners in such a shabby way as the Government are doing. That is the reality.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I want to go back to the first part of the hon. Gentleman’s argument, when he described the absolute injustice that many of the women who are affected feel. I have met many from my constituency and from across Wales who feel that this is a terrible thing, which must be righted. They expected something; they are not getting it and we need to right that injustice.

Ian Blackford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point, and he is absolutely spot on. This is about justice and fairness. It is about people who have paid into a pension and who expected to get that pension—in the case of most of these women, at age 60. The discovery that they were not given adequate notice is a clear reason why the Government must change course and act in a responsible manner.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has spoken in many debates on this issue, and I pay tribute to him for that. The situation gets worse. The Government, through the back door, are examining the triple lock for existing pensioners. More importantly, responsibility for television licences for pensioners over 75 is being shoved on to the BBC, which will get the blame instead of the Government.

Ian Blackford: Again, I find myself agreeing with the hon. Gentleman.

As a House, we must reflect on the situation in which there are still 1.2 million pensioners in this country living in poverty. I am ashamed when I hear Members of the House saying that we should examine the triple lock, because we should protect our pensioners. One thing on which I will give an absolute commitment is that if we had responsibility for pensions, the triple lock would be secured by the Scottish National party. Pensioners would be secured with the SNP.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Ian Blackford: I will make some progress and then take more interventions. I am aware that many people want to speak.

The Government have changed the entitlement for something that women have paid for in with an expectation of retiring at 60. When the goalposts were moved, the Government could not get around to informing the women affected in a timely manner. A woman born on 6 April 1953, who under the previous legislation would have retired on 6 April 2013, received a letter from the Department for Work and Pensions in January 2012 with the bombshell that she would now be retiring on 6 July 2016. That is three years and three months later than she might have expected, but she received only 15 months’ notice. That is what this Government have done to many women throughout the United Kingdom: 15 months’ written notice on what they thought was a contract they had with the Government, but which has now been ripped up. That is the contempt that this Government have shown for the 2.6 million Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign women throughout the UK.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the attack was made on the WASPI women because they were an easy target, and that it is the first stage in a Conservative plan to downsize and dismantle the state pension altogether?

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend may well be right. The Government are of course hoping that with the passage of time this issue will go away, but it will not go away, because the women are angry. If they do not begin to recognise the need to do something, each and every Member of the House will have the WASPI women coming to their surgeries and demanding action. Not only will they be demanding action, but that will run the risk that this Government will be taken to court.

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. Is it still his policy to pay for this change from the national insurance surplus?

Ian Blackford: I will come on to cover that point, but the fact remains that the national insurance fund will be sitting with a surplus of close to £30 billion by the end of this decade. There will be £30 billion of contributions in the national insurance fund. There is no question but that the Government can afford to do this: there is a surplus. The national insurance fund has to retain two months’ cash flow, but that can still be done by putting in place what we are asking the House to do today, which is—as in the Landman report—to push back the increase in women’s pensionable age and to make sure that the women worst affected get recompense and fairness.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has mentioned that the WASPI women will not go away. That is one of the most delightful things about them. Way back, we carried a vote on a Back-Bench motion supporting them in this House. They were not satisfied that there had already been a debate in Westminster motion supporting them in this House. They were not about them. Way back, we carried a vote on a Back-Bench motion supporting them in this House. They were not satisfied that they were holding meetings in every constituency, city and town in Britain. They are like the Grunwick women of 40 years ago, the little Gujarati women who would not give in, and the Tory Government had better realise that the WASPI women ain’t going to give in either.

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. He is right that the WASPI women are not for giving in, and those of us on the Opposition Benches—and, I hope, some Conservative Members—are not for giving in either.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I want to make some progress, but I will let the hon. Gentleman in later.

The Government, despite not giving reasonable notice, have so far not apologised for how they have treated these women. It is utterly, utterly shameful, and it raises the question: how much notice should be given for changes to the state pension age? The Pensions Commission, which reported in 2005, suggested that at least 15 years’ notice be given on any further increase in pensionable age—15 years, not the 15 months given to so many women. Will the Government not recognise that appropriate notice has to be given and make changes?

Given the Government’s failure to give proper notice, I tabled a written question to the Secretary of State, which I received an answer to yesterday. My question was:

“To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what his policy is on the minimum written notice to be given to people who will be affected by future changes to the state pension age.”

I received the following response:

“The Government has committed not to change the legislation relating to State Pension age for those people who are within 10 years of reaching it. This provides these individuals with the certainty they need to plan for the future. We recognise the importance of ensuring people are aware of any changes to their State Pension age and we use a number of different means to do this...Anyone can find out their State Pension age with our online calculator or the ‘Check your State Pension’ statement service.”

According to the Minister who responded, the Government accept that they should not change legislation for those within 10 years of pensionable age. That is all well and good, but what is the point if they do not inform those directly affected?

Yesterday, in response to a further question, a Minister stated that,

“following the Pensions Act 1995, State Pension estimates, issued to individuals on request, made the changes clear.”

“On request”! It should not be done on request. People should not have to ask the Government to inform them; that is this Government’s responsibility. It almost seems like a script from the comedy, “Yes Minister”, rather than a Government acting in a proper manner.

Ian Murray: The hon. Gentleman has been dogged in pursuing this matter with colleagues from all Opposition parties. He mentioned “Yes Minister”. In 2011, I sat on these Benches as the then Liberal Democrat Minister pushed through the Pensions Act. Is he as astonished as I am that, having now left the House, that former Minister now says that the Act was wrong and unfair to women?

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct that the previous Pensions Minister has made these comments. In fact, the last Pensions Minister in the other place, Baroness Altmann, made similar comments. Everyone can see the deficiencies in the Government’s policy except the Government themselves.
Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): If the former Pensions Minister is to be referred to, it would be helpful to put the facts correctly. He said that the difference required was £30 billion. It went to the then Chancellor of the Exchequer and Prime Minister and asked for £3 billion. Then, when he was given a concession of £1.1 billion, he said, “That’s a hell of a lot of money.” So let us be clear: the difference was £30 billion but he only asked for £3 billion, which is a tenth of what the hon. Gentleman is arguing about.

Ian Blackford: We are not talking about concessions; we are talking about these women’s pension entitlement. How dare the Government talk about concessions, when people have paid into their pension and deserve to get it!

This is not a comedy but the reality of a Government letting women down.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): There are suggestions from Conservative Members that money does not grow on trees, and that is correct, but this money came from these women paying in through national insurance. It did not grow on trees; it came, hard-earned, from their own pockets.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is quite correct. We keep hearing about fiscal responsibility and how we cannot afford it, but of course we can, because the surplus is there in the national insurance fund.

When the new Prime Minister took office, the first thing she did was bring a motion before the House asking us to renew the Trident missile system, and effectively every single Conservative Member went through the Lobby and gave the Government a blank cheque. They can invest in weapons of mass destruction but they are not prepared to give women pensioners their just deserts.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I will take some more interventions later, but I must make some progress.

As I have mentioned, this is not a comedy; it is the reality of a Government letting women down. The failure to write to those affected is a failure of responsibility. It is an abrogation of responsibility. To pass the buck and say that anyone can use the online calculator is, frankly, stunning. All prospective pensioners ought to be treated with respect. Some 2.6 million women were not effectively communicated with, and many are now struggling to cope financially with a later pensionable age than the one they had planned for.

Let us look at what is taking place currently. I have highlighted the current sharp increases in pensionable age, but they need to be gone over again for the simple reason that, so far, the Government have simply not got it and will certainly need to do so. A woman born on 6 March 1953 will have retired on 6 March 2016 at the age of 63. A woman born a month later, on 6 April 1953, will have retired on 6 July 1953 and three months. A woman born on 6 May 1953 will have retired a few days ago, on 6 November, aged 63 and six months. A woman born on 6 June will have to wait until 6 March 2017, when she will be aged 63 and nine months. A woman born on 6 July 1953 will not get her pension until her 64th birthday in July 2017.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I hope that the Government are beginning to get the picture. For each month that passes, women’s pensionable age is increasing by as much as three months. We should just dwell on that—a three-month addition to pensionable age for each month that someone was born later than their neighbour, friend or colleague.

I spoke about a woman born in March 1953 who retired this year at age 63, but a woman born a year later, in March 1954, will not retire until September 2019, when she will be aged 65 and a half. Conservative Members seem to think that this is funny, but we are talking about women who are being significantly disadvantaged over too sharp an increase in women’s pensionable age. Those Members might find that acceptable, but I am afraid that I, my colleagues and many millions of other people in the country certainly do not. A woman born six months later, in September 1954, will have to wait until she is 66 in September 2020. Over an 18-month period, a woman’s pensionable age will have increased by three years.

As we keep saying, we are not against equalisation of the state pension age—[Interruption.] My colleagues and I have said that in every speech we have given in this House. We have made it crystal clear, as have the WASPI women, that we agree with equalisation. It is the pace of change that is the problem, and Conservative Members are burying their heads in the sand over it and are refusing to face the reality.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I must echo the very clear position that my hon. Friend has outlined. Does he agree that anybody who believes that, purely because someone is a woman and happens to have been born at a certain time they should lose out, is advocating a very warped and strange definition of equality?

Ian Blackford: Absolutely. Of course we have to face the gender inequality that has been with us, with women paid less for such a long time and women gaining less access to occupational pension schemes, but Government Members just seem to want to make things worse. As we keep saying, we are not against equalisation of the state pension age; it is the pace of change and the lack of appropriate notice that are the real issues.

Graham Evans: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Ian Blackford: I will give way one more time.

Graham Evans: I am most grateful. If Germany can introduce equalisation of the pension age in 2009, why cannot the United Kingdom do the same? We are behind the game.

Ian Blackford: I am absolutely dumbstruck! I do not know how many times we have to say it, but we are not against equalisation. We support it. It is the pace of change imposed by the Government that is the problem.

While we are on the subject, the Government might wish to consider the fact that the Polish Parliament met on the 16th of this month and agreed to reverse the increases in pensionable age because they recognised the unfairness. Perhaps we should take a leaf out of the Poles’ book, rather than this one.
Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I want to make some progress, because I know that many other Members want to speak.

We should remind ourselves what a pension is. It is deferred income. Women, and men, have paid national insurance in the expectation of receiving a state pension. That is the deal, plain and simple. You pay in, and you get your entitlement out. You do not expect the Government, without effective notice, to change the rules. What has been done to the WASPI women has undermined fairness and equity. The 2.6 million women affected by the increase in pensionable age have an entitlement to a pension and a right to be treated fairly: no more, no less.

The Government often state that the increase in pensionable age under the 2011 Act means that no women will have to wait longer than 18 months for their pensions. That is disingenuous, as it comes in addition to the changes in the 1995 Act, which are still in the process of being implemented. It is a fact that women’s pensionable age is increasing by six years over a very short period. That is the issue. That is the reality. It is the impact of both Acts. The Government have a duty to be truthful about this matter.

Let me now turn to the Prime Minister’s amendment. So much for her comments about supporting those who were “just about managing”. Many of the WASPI women are not managing, and this ill-conceived, patronising amendment from the Government is frankly contemptible. Although the Chancellor confirmed in last week’s autumn statement that the triple lock would remain for the duration of the current Parliament, he has ordered a review of the cost of the guarantee and whether it is affordable. We in the SNP remain fully committed to the future of the triple lock to ensure dignity in retirement for all our pensioners. Any roll-back by the UK Government will leave pensioners vulnerable.

The Government’s commitment to pensioners needs to be questioned. We already know that, in reality, although the new headline flat-rate state pension will be £159.55 a week, many people will get less if they contracted out of second or additional state pension top-ups over the years. With the Chancellor and others waver ing on the future of the triple lock, only the Scottish National party can be trusted to protect the rights of pensioners in Scotland. [Laughter.] Members may laugh, but I am glad to say that pensioners throughout the United Kingdom will be listening, and they will be watching the behaviour on the Government Benches.

The amendment is something that we might expect from a student debating society, but not from a Government who are taking the plight of the WASPI women seriously. What is it going to take for the Government to recognise that they must do something to deal with the unfairness of the sharp increase in pensionable age? Over the last few weeks, 240 petitions relating to the WASPI campaign have been presented to Parliament by Members on both sides of the House, which shows that this issue affects all parts of the UK. Parliament and the petitioners should be given more respect by the Government, and I hope that when the Minister responds to the debate he will withdraw their amendment. The issue is not going to go away: the WASPI woman are angry, and will be lobbying MPs in the weeks and months ahead. The Government must act.

This is not the first time that women have had to campaign to defend their rights. In the House, we frequently pay homage to those in the suffragette movement who campaigned for voting rights for women. There are similarities between the suffragettes and the WASPI women. The suffragettes were known by the acronym WSPU, which stood for the Women’s Social and Political Union, and they were well known for wearing purple, as do the WASPI women. The Government of the day, of course, stood steadfast against the demands of the suffragettes for many years before they were eventually forced into doing the right thing. My message to the present Government is not to be as pig-headed as previous Governments in opposing a campaign which, as I have said—and as was pointed out earlier by the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner)—is not going to go away. I say to them. “Show compassion. Show that you can do the right thing.”

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my bafflement that in the face of evidence, in the face of campaigning and in the face of the many women who come through the doors of our surgeries to raise this issue, the Government have not yet changed their mind? This is not about equalisation; this is about a campaign against the WASPI women.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is quite correct. The Government ought to reflect on all the petitions that have been launched in good faith, including by Conservative Members.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman will understand that in Northern Ireland this change is having a negative impact on thousands of women. I am one of them; but I will have a pension from this House: thousands of women will not enjoy that privileged status. On 13 July, a new Prime Minister walked into No. 10, giving an opportunity for this Government to set a different tone. The Prime Minister has a golden opportunity to deliver on the hopes and expectations that she revealed on the steps of No. 10.

Ian Blackford: The hon. Lady makes a strong point. I appeal to the Government to listen to what is said by Members in all parts of the House, including on the Government Benches. They can do the right thing today and deliver justice for the WASPI women. They have a chance to show that they really do care about the women who have been left behind.

Although it is simply shocking that we are still debating this issue without resolution, should we be surprised? Historically, women have suffered decades of gender inequality, and while the Tories tell us that the changes are about equalisation and fairness, they continue to push women further into hardship by delaying their pensions and ensuring that their austerity cuts continue to fall firmly on their shoulders.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the WASPI women should be commended for the civil, decent and reasonable way they have campaigned? We have met them all in our constituencies. He just made the point that women had a gender pay gap and a resulting pension gap even before the changes, so an already unfair situation is compounded. Does he agree that the failure to introduce better transitional arrangements exacerbates the existing inequality?
Ian Blackford: I fully agree. I commend the dignity shown by the WASPI women in their campaign. They have been an inspiration to us all.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: No. I have to make progress, because many others want to speak. I have been generous in giving way.

We also need to remind the Government that the House has already backed a motion calling on them to take action. It was passed on 7 January this year, and it is worth reflecting on its contents. It called on the Government “to immediately introduce transitional arrangements for those women negatively affected by that equalisation.”

Why have the Government ignored the will of this House? Does parliamentary democracy mean anything, or can it simply be ignored by a Government who choose to disrespect not only this House but the 2.6 million WASPI women? It is an affront to democracy that despite this House having voted for the Government to take “action to alleviate the injustice facing women affected by the acceleration of the increase in the state pension age”, the Tories are intent on resisting the will of the people. It is abundantly clear that we have won the argument. As well as winning the vote unanimously in Parliament for the UK Government to introduce transitional arrangements for the WASPI women, the Tories continue to shrug their shoulders at the will of the House. In various debates on this issue, we have won the argument. The UK Government must realise that, with the support of Members on both sides of the House, we will not be abandoning the WASPI women as they have done. We and the constituents we represent should be given more respect and consideration by the UK Government.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): On the point of fairness, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: Fairness! [Laughter.] For the last time, and because of his sheer cheek, I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

David Rutley: Not once has the hon. Gentleman told the House that he will pay the £38 billion price tag. That will increase national debt, and future generations will have to pay for it by having a much higher pensionable age. How does he answer that question about fairness?

Ian Blackford: That was pathetic.

There will come a time when not only the SNP but the Conservative Party will face delay in this Parliament. The Government must act now.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: With your forbearance, Mr Speaker, I am aware that I have been on my feet for quite some time and I want to move on to my concluding remarks. I have been generous in allowing others to come in, but I will not be taking any further interventions so that I can finish and allow others to speak.

Our report is a stepping stone. It should be adopted to help to end this injustice. We hope the UK Government welcome the report and act now to end this inequality. The SNP Westminster parliamentary group’s report detailed modelling by Landman Economics of the impact of different options for compensating women affected by the 2011 Act. One option was a return to the timetable in the 1995 Act, whereby women’s state pension age would rise from 63 in March 2016, to 65 in April 2020. The report estimates that reverting back to the 1995 Act for women would cost £7.9 billion between 2016-17 and 2020-21.

The Government estimate that the accelerated state pension age in the Pensions Act 2011 saved about £30 billion from both women and men from 2016-17 to 2025-26. However, that is simply not the case. The £8 billion cost is affordable given the surplus in the national insurance fund, which rightly should be used to end this injustice. The fund is in surplus and, according to the Government’s own Actuary’s Dept, is projected to be at a £30 billion surplus at the end of 2017-18. It is time the Government paid out. After all, the WASPI women paid in and helped to create this surplus. They now need to be given their due.

The Minister said that it is simply too expensive and that public spending is complicated. We will not be fobbed off. The report was carried out by a credible and sound model that has been used previously by independent economists. Again, the matter returns to priorities—too expensive by comparison with what other expenses? The Tories have a choice here: this is not a necessity.

While we are trying to get the Government to act, others elsewhere are doing just that. Measures were brought forward by the Polish Government on 16 November to reverse the increase in pensionable age from the previous planned state pensionable age of 67 to 60 for women and 65 for men as of October 2017. The Polish Prime Minister claimed that there were enough state funds from more efficient tax collection for earlier pensions. Well, well! Of course, the parallel here is that we know the national insurance fund is in surplus. We can afford to put in place mitigation. If Poland can do it, what about a rich country like the UK? It is all about choices.

We published in our report the scale of increase in pensionable age in each European country. Only two countries are seeing a rapid acceleration of pensionable age for women in line with the UK: Italy and Greece. Is anyone on the Government Benches prepared to defend the increase in women’s pensionable age of three months per month? We have given the Government an option and, unlike their Trident nuclear weapons commitment,
it is costed. I say to the Government that we are not going away. More importantly, the WASPI women are not going away.

In conclusion, today is Scotland’s national day. With deference to Rabbie Burns, if he will forgive me, I would like to adapt one of his better known pieces of work:

“Women, whae w’ WASPI bled,
Women, wham WASPI has af times led;
Welcome to your gory bed,
Or to victory!

Now’s the day, and now’s the hour;
See the front o’ battle lour;
See approach proud Theresa’s power—
Chains and slavery!

Wha will be a traitor knave?
Wha can fill a coward’s grave?
Wha sae base as be a slave?
Let her turn and flee!

Wha for Pensions rightly earned
Freedom’s sword will strongly draw,
WASPIS stand, or WASPIs fa’,
Let them follow me!

By oppression’s woes and pains!
By your daughters in servile chains!
We will drain our dearest veins,
But they shall be free!

Lay the proud usurpers low!
Tyrans fall in every foe!
Liberty’s in every blow—
Let us do or die!”

Justice for the WASPI women!

The Tory Government have ducked their responsibility for the WASPI women for too long. It is time to face up to the reality. Pensions are not a privilege; they are a state pension. On a verage, women reaching state pension age at the same age, a principle first set out more than 20 years ago in the Pensions Act 1995; secondly, that the age at which all receive a state pension has to rise as life expectancy rises; thirdly, that all who need help because they cannot work should receive appropriate support; and fourthly, that for most people work is beneficial not only because it provides an income, but because it gives them greater control over their own lives.

State pension age increases cannot be looked at in isolation. They fit into a wider array of changes, including changes in life expectancy, the huge and very welcome progress made in opening up employment opportunities for women, and the wider package of reforms we have introduced to ensure a fairer deal for pensioners, particularly the new state pension.

The state pension system for people who reached their state pension age before 6 April this year was extremely complex. The new state pension brings greater clarity by helping people to understand their pension more easily, and it is much more generous for many women who have been historically worse off under the old system. On average, women reaching state pension age last year get a higher state pension over their lifetimes than women who reached state pension age at any point before them, even when the accelerated equalisation of state pension age is taken into account.

By 2030, over 3 million women stand to gain an average of £550 extra per year as a result of these changes.

Fiona Mactaggart: I probably should declare an interest as a woman who was born on 12 September 1953. The Secretary of State’s remarks about women’s extra income throughout their lives does not pay the bills today for WASPI women, and that is their problem. They do not disagree with any of his four principles—they accepted the equal pension age—but they have planned their lives responsibly, and in return the Government have been irresponsible.

Damian Green: I will come to the specific point that the right hon. Lady raises later in my speech, as she would expect.

The new state pension works hand in hand with automatic enrolment, enabling many more people to save in a workplace pension. Together, the new state pension and automatic enrolment, along with reviews of the state pension age, are designed to form the main elements of a sustainable basis for retirement income in the decades to come. We want to ensure economic security for working people at every stage of their lives, including retirement, and that is why we are protecting the incomes of millions of pensioners through the triple lock. Living standards for pensioners have been rising steadily for many years. In 2014-15, the proportion of this group living in a low-income household was nearly the lowest on record, in terms of the proportion and of pensioner numbers. That is the general position, which is important for the House to recognise.
Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): How much notice would the Secretary of State expect his own private pension provider to give him of such significant changes? Would he be happy with as little as 15 months’ notice?

Damian Green: We are discussing the state pension, not private pensions—[Interruption.] My principal pension is that of a Member of this House, so all aspects of it are exactly the same as those of the hon. Gentleman’s pension.

Let me deal with the group that is principally affected by the changes. Of course I have met many of those women in my own constituency. There was clearly a problem, and that is why a substantial concession worth £1.1 billion was introduced in the Pensions Act 2011. As a result, no woman will experience an increase of more than 18 months, and for 81% of the women affected—more than four in five of them—the increase will not exceed 12 months compared with the previous timetable. This concession benefited almost 250,000 women who would otherwise have experienced delays of up to two years. The introduction of further concessions cannot be justified, given the imperative to focus public resources on helping those who are most in need.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about those in need as though the WASPI women are not in need, but of course many of them are. He has talked about resources, but what price justice? What price doing the right thing? These are the women who brought us up, who now care for older relatives and who are the mainstay of their communities. They are not some militant group. At a time when this House has a low standing, I believe that his dismissive attitude towards them will damage not only the Conservative party but politics as a whole in the eyes of the women who have made this country what it is today.

Damian Green: I am not being remotely dismissive, and if the right hon. Gentleman will be patient, I will come to the measures that the Government are taking to help women in that age bracket. I can absolutely assure him that I am not being dismissive.

Mr Vara: Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the luxuries for the Opposition is proposing to spend money that they do not have? Does he also agree that the comments from the Opposition parties ring hollow, given that these matters were not mentioned in their manifestos? They were not mentioned in the Labour manifesto or the Scottish National party manifesto.

Damian Green: My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point.

I want to deal specifically with some of the issues raised by the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber. He talked about communications. Since 2000—a long time before the 2011 Act—the Department for Work and Pensions has issued 14 million state pension estimates, which include mention of the state pension age. Between 2003 and 2006, the Department issued about 16 million automatic pension forecasts, which were accompanied by a leaflet about equalisation. There was also a media campaign in 2004. After the 2011 Act, as the hon. Gentleman admitted, the Department wrote to all those directly affected. There has been quite a significant communications campaign, going back more than 15 years.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Damian Green: The hon. Lady certainly deserves to intervene on my speech.

Melanie Onn: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He says that media and publications campaigns have been undertaken, but does he accept that some of the women did not receive any notification of the latest changes, which extended the period before which they would be entitled to access their state pension?

Damian Green: It is obviously impossible to talk about individual cases without talking to the individuals. All I can say is that the DWP tried hard after the 2011 Act and wrote more than 5 million letters to people’s most recent addresses.

Ian Blackford rose—

Damian Green: I feel that the hon. Gentleman has had his fair share of the time, having used more than 35 minutes of a three-hour debate, and I want to turn to the specific option that he proposed. He mentioned the Landman Economics report that modelled the impact of several options. The SNP’s preferred option would roll back the 2011 Act entirely, returning to the timetable in the 1995 Act. He said that that option would cost £8 billion, but I disagree. Our analysis suggests that the cost has to go beyond 2020-21 and must include the effects on national insurance payments and tax collection, which his economic model entirely ignores, and that it would cost over £30 billion.

Even if we accept the hon. Gentleman’s figures, his other suggestion is that the costs could be met from the surplus in the national insurance fund that he conveniently discovered. In fact, there is no surplus in the fund because it is all used to pay contributory benefits. If we take from the national insurance fund £8 billion, £30 billion or whatever number one cares to mention, we take it from people who receive benefits. The surplus of £16 billion that he identified is two months’ expenditure—an advisory level recommended by the Government Actuary as a prudent working balance. The money has been put there by a Treasury grant to maintain the fund at the recommended long-term balance. The Government Actuary does not forecast a long-term surplus, so this convenient pot of money for the SNP does not actually exist.

James Cartlidge: May I add to that? Others have tried to alight on this fund as a source of expenditure, but the then Financial Secretary Ruth Kelly said in 2003: “The national insurance fund provides security for those contributory benefits. It is ring-fenced and cannot be used for other Government expenditure.”—[Official Report, 21 October 2003, Vol. 411, c. 231WH.]

Damian Green: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is knowledgeable about such matters.

The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber used to work in the financial services industry and has been a fund manager, so he knows what he is talking about. However, he must know that his characterisation of the national insurance fund as involving some kind of individual contract that relates what someone gets out of it to what they pay in is not true. The state pension is a social security benefit, funded through national insurance contributions.
Ian Blackford: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Damian Green: All right, I will finish this point in a minute.

Ian Blackford: I am grateful. I actually talked about a cost of £8 billion for this Parliament, which is affordable given the current surplus in the national insurance fund. Please do not twist what I said.

Damian Green: I did not twist what the hon. Gentleman said at all. Is he prepared to take £8 billion from people who receive contributory benefits? That is the only way that he could pay for it.

Returning to the hon. Gentleman’s characterisation of the national insurance fund, he gave the impression that it involved an individual contract. As he knows perfectly well, the national insurance scheme operates on a pay-as-you-go basis, meaning that today’s contributors are paying for today’s social security entitlements and pensions. Those who previously paid contributions were paying for the pensioners of that time. In other words, contributors do not accumulate an individual pension fund. It is not like any individual’s pension fund of moneys paid, which is personal to them. Instead, payment of contributions allows them, or their spouses, to access a range of social security entitlements. It is not an individual contract or fund. I gently suggest that the hon. Gentleman knows that perfectly well.

Moving on to the issues that affect the WASPI women, I absolutely accept that getting into work will be difficult for some older women, so I want to say what we are doing to help them and also what we are doing for those who simply cannot work.

Maggie Throup: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, however well intentioned, the message of the WASPI campaigners has been severely damaged by the hate campaign on social media and in constituency offices against MPs, such as me, whose viewpoint is different from the campaigners? Will he condemn that and say that it must stop?

Damian Green: I deprecate any form of personal abuse. I think that one of the problems of modern politics is that everything becomes personalised. I have not been aware of such abuse, as every WASPI woman I have met has been entirely polite and entirely reasonable, and I would wish that to continue.

Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that the fundamental issue here is not equalisation, because that has been agreed, but fairness? He can give comfort to the 63,000 WASPI women in Merseyside who, through a quirk of their birthdate, will be hit hard and penalised. He can announce transitional arrangements that would give them some comfort that that is not going to happen.

Damian Green: I was coming on to discuss what we are doing and what we will do for this group. Supporting older claimants to remain in the labour market, and tackling the barriers to their doing so, is a key priority for the Government. To support that aim, we have abolished the default retirement age, so most people can now retire when the time is right for them, and we have extended the right to request flexible working for all. Flexible working is particularly important for this group of people, who may well have caring responsibilities.

Fiona Mactaggart: The Secretary of State will be aware that many of these older women are putting together two or three jobs, all of which are paid at less than £108 a week, as a result of which they do not get any national insurance contributions and that will affect their future pension. What is he doing about that? They can have their tax claimed, but they cannot get credits for a future pension.

Damian Green: What we are trying to do is what I am talking about, which is remove barriers to work, so that it is easier for these people to work. The arrival of universal credit makes it easier for people to extend the hours they work, so that they do not hit the old cliff edges under the other benefits. Paid employment maximises people’s opportunities to build up savings—the point the right hon. Lady was just making—and helps to maintain social networks, and it is beneficial to health, provided the employment takes into account the person’s broader circumstances.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I appreciate that the SNP’s proposal is not economically viable, but does the Minister accept that some women, including in my constituency, had to give up work for health reasons and were therefore not able to pay in, and they are not able to return to the workplace either? It does not seem that we have yet put in place adequate measures to be fair to those people, who cannot change their situation.

Damian Green: Absolutely. I quite take the point that my hon. Friend makes. Clearly, specific issues need to be dealt with for this group, and I am going through several of them now. Some of these people will not be able to work, as I made clear at the start: this touches on one of the four principles I set out at the start of my speech. Working-age benefits are specifically designed to help such people, and I wish to make it clear that this group of women will be entitled to working-age benefits. If there are barriers to their claiming them, we need to remove those barriers.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I, too, accept that the SNP proposal is totally ludicrous because it is totally unaffordable, but can the Secretary of State give me assurances on what can be done for WASPI women who say that they are finding it difficult to get back into work, with the jobcentres not geared up to help them, and who may have been out of the workforce for considerable time and do not have the skillset needed to get a good job?

Damian Green: Absolutely, and if my hon. Friend will bear with me for 30 seconds while I make one further point, I will then deal with precisely the point she raises, as I absolutely recognise it as an issue for many of these women. I should point out that the current average age of exit from the labour market for women is 63.1, which is well above the state pension age of 60 that the SNP proposal would take us back to. The number of older women aged 50 to 64 in work in 2016 stands at more than 4 million, which is a record high. That is one reason why the Government have extended the right to request flexible working and why job search requirements for those who are not in employment are adjusted to take account of individual circumstances. One purpose of the Green Paper on work and health
that we have just produced is precisely to look at much better ways to join up the health, welfare and employment systems, so that we can deal with health conditions or disabilities that may be particularly prevalent in older women who want to work. We need to make the system much better than it has been in the past at removing those barriers, so that people can work.

Victoria Borwick (Kensington) (Con): Will the Secretary of State, or a member of his team, personally examine some of the individual cases so that the women affected can prove that they are suffering hardship?

Damian Green: Absolutely. We are always willing to look at individual cases. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Pensions has already done so. More widely, we introduced older claimant champions last year specifically to support older claimants. They work in jobcentres with work coaches and employers to raise the profile of this group and highlight the benefits of employing older jobseekers.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): My right hon. Friend is being very generous, and I very much respect the interest that he has taken in this matter. On the older people’s champions and in answer to my parliamentary question, since April 2015 his Department has appointed seven such champions to cover every jobcentre in the country, which sounds good, but, in practice, it will really not make a lot of difference, will it?

Damian Green: So far, we have appointed older people’s champions at a regional level. This is the first step to a system that needs to improve. My hon. Friend and I will be at one on that, because this is an increasingly important part of what we need to do. One thing that I hope these older claimant champions will be able to achieve is to spread best practice. I am conscious that there will be different standards of practice in different jobcentres—I am talking about the capacity to deal sympathetically with older workers, particularly those who may not have been in a jobcentre before. We must get better at that.

Andy Burnham: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way again. I hear what he is saying about people working, but it is difficult for many older women in this position to run a car. It is something that they often cannot afford, yet free bus passes are not available in all parts of the country. They are available to women at 60 in London, Scotland and Merseyside. People’s ability to access work is different in different parts of the country. In Greater Manchester, they do not have that help. Will the Government do a very practical thing today and commit to helping all women into work by extending that free bus pass on the same basis all over the country?

Damian Green: The right hon. Gentleman, who has other fish to fry in the Manchester area, will know perfectly well that bus passes are the responsibility of the local authority, rather than national Government. I will of course urge everyone in the Manchester mayoral election to vote Conservative, but it may be that he has the chance to do something about that matter at some stage in the near future, as successive Mayors of London have done.

Apart from the older claimant champions, we have appointed Andy Briggs as business champion for older workers. He is the chief executive of Aviva, which is one of the most enlightened companies in dealing with older workers, and I am delighted that he has accepted this job, as he will work with employers not just to retain older workers, but to retrain and recruit them. If women in this age group are finding it difficult to find work, there will be more employers out there who are actively looking for them. We have also established carers in employment. We are carrying out pilots in nine local authorities at the moment. I recognise that people in this group are quite likely to have caring responsibilities, and combining those with work is inevitably complex. Ensuring that businesses are suitably sympathetic and flexible in dealing with that is one of the very important steps forward that we need to take as a society in the next few years.

David Rutley: My right hon. Friend is being very generous, and I very much respect the interest that he has taken in this matter. On the older people’s champions and in answer to my parliamentary question, since April 2015 his Department has appointed seven such champions to cover every jobcentre in the country, which sounds good, but, in practice, it will really not make a lot of difference, will it?

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Early in the new year, we will propose a new strategy specifically for elderly workers—the fuller working lives strategy—and I would be very happy to deal with colleagues on both sides of the House who have suggestions about how we can specifically help older workers in general and, specifically, older women. I do not believe that a monopoly of wisdom in this area lies in Whitehall. We will propose a new strategy that will involve many Departments, but we will also need to include ideas from employers, charities and Members and their constituents.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The Secretary of State talks about reaching out to other Departments. This point has been made by my SNP colleagues, but we are about to spend £167 billion on weapons of mass destruction—the figure has gone up because of the collapse of the pound. Will he charge his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence to see whether they can find the £8 billion we are proposing from there?

Damian Green: The defence of this country is hugely important, but not, I think, a direct issue for this debate. I hope that the House will see that I am extremely open to ideas to help this group of women but in ways that reflect the modern world of work and do not blur the lines between working age benefits and pensions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Damian Green: I think I have been very generous in giving way. It should go without saying that any idea needs to be not only practical but affordable. None of the ideas proposed that concentrate purely on the pensions issue achieve this. The acceleration of the pension age for both women and men was necessary to ensure the state pension’s sustainability in the light of increasing life expectancy and increasing pressure on public resources. For those who face hardship, we continue to provide a strong and well-functioning welfare safety net. I am always looking for ways to improve that. Of course there has been a considerable concession of £1.1 billion to lessen the impact on those most affected. As I have set out, we not only continue to increase the employment prospects for women above the age of 60, but provide the new state pension, which gives people greater security, choice and dignity in retirement. This is a balanced and affordable package for older women—and men—and I commend the amendment to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. On account of the number of would-be contributors to the debate, I am afraid that it is necessary to impose with immediate effect a five-minute limit on each Back-Bench speech.

5.24 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Thank you for calling me, Mr Speaker. It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. I commend Scottish National party Members for tabling the motion, using their limited Opposition day time on the issue of accelerated state pension equalisation. I pay tribute to Members from my own party who have campaigned tirelessly and fiercely on the issue, alongside admirable WASPI campaigners. I support amendment (a).

The treatment of WASPI women seems like politics-by-Excel-spreadsheet in its crudest form. The decision to make the lives of working-class women even harder has thrown into turmoil the lives of up to 4,100 women in Batley and Spen, as well as many thousands across the country. It is a decision that moves the goalposts unfairly for women born in the 1950s. We have heard plenty of examples from Members’ constituencies today. I would like to share some from mine.

One woman works in a care home. She was approaching retirement age and, having had a long and fulfilling career, she was looking forward to an equally rewarding retirement looking after her daughter’s children. Her plans would have allowed her daughter to go back to work, get a career back on track and provide for her family. Although I support equalising the pension age, the clumsy way in which that has been introduced means that her daughter will not be able to seek the employment she wants, because of the cost of childcare, and it has caused great distress to my constituent, who is genuinely unsure whether she will be able to do such a physically demanding job for another five years.

Ministers may remember that during Question Time I asked about the assessment that they made of the knock-on effect on families. To be fair, I received an answer, but unfortunately not an answer to my question. I wrote to the Minister that day to ask for more information and I have yet to receive a reply. Perhaps when he sums up, the Minister will be good enough to shed some light on the issue.

The next example is from a letter I received just the other day. A woman born in 1954 was looking forward to retiring within three months of her husband and spending the precious years ahead together, living on money from savings and the state pension that they were promised. Now she will have to wait not months, but years.

Andy Burnham: Like my hon. Friend, I have a very vibrant WASPI group in Leigh. Does she know that today the Secretary of State described the Government’s treatment of WASPI women as fair? How does she think her constituents to whom she refers will react to that?

Tracy Brabin: This is indeed about fairness, compassion and humanity towards women who have contributed so much to our society and are now left with difficult choices. One such woman is my constituent whose dilemma is to continue working, even though she does not feel physically able, or to stop working and spend the money that she has saved for retirement on getting by. She sent me questions to ask the Government. What can they offer her to make her life easier? Why cannot the Government phase in the change, understanding that life choices at this stage in the women’s lives take proper planning? Why can my constituent not have what she is entitled to after 40 years of working and paying in? Those are good questions.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. My constituent Patricia has been severely affected by the changes. After spending years looking after her late husband Billy and then her mother, she now has to live off her hard-earned savings. Patricia feels under immense stress, knowing that the money will not last long, and...
she is anxious about finding work at this stage in her life. Does the hon. Lady agree that such instances are all too common, and that this demonstrates that those who are suffering are the ones who we should be helping the most?

Tracy Brabin rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should not use the intervention opportunity as the chance of a compressed—but not very compressed—speech.

Tracy Brabin: I thank the hon. Lady and agree that there are many constituents out there who feel the same. We have felt the anger in the Chamber today and we are right to be angry. Our constituents’ lives have been thrown into turmoil. The former Prime Minister admitted that something had to be done, but we are still waiting. The Chancellor’s big finish to his autumn statement—to some laughter on the Government Benches—was to abolish the autumn statement. A far more elegant and just end to the statement would have been a commitment to justice on women’s state pensions.

Melanie Onn: The Government have previously accepted that the changes were an unintended consequence of their policy. Does my hon. Friend not think that now is the right time for them to accept that if this was an error on their part, they should make amends properly?

Tracy Brabin: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, because although the answers and solutions may not be forthcoming today, the questions and the calls will not stop. For as long as our constituents feel they have been mistreated, we—the party of justice, compassion and humanity—will keep up the fight.

5.30 pm

Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): There has been much agreement in the Chamber today about equalisation, but I am probably unusual in that I am not actually sure I agree. Maybe, when the majority of men become carers, and when all men have a menopause, I might, but I am not sure I do now.

I feel very sorry for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, because he has come to the Dispatch Box to pick up a mess that has been created by others. We knew equalisation was taking place, but the former Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), decided he would move things from 2026 to 2020.

I am terribly sorry to say this to the Secretary of State, but I am one of the WASPI women. I am also one of those who were not written to and informed about this, and I think the DWP knows where I live—I have made that point before. Many of these women were not informed and not able to plan, and that is because the former Chancellor wanted to save £30 billion. I understand that the former Chancellor may have wanted to save that money. I also understand that the SNP is never going to be able to achieve anything in this debate. It is never going to be in power. When it makes financial claims, as it is trying to at the moment, that absolutely shows how unprepared it would ever be to be a party of government. The claim about the £30 billion is ridiculous, and the SNP is doing the WASPI women an injustice.

The crude way the former Chancellor tried to slip this £30 billion saving under the fence by moving from 2026 to 2020 without informing women was wrong, and many women are suffering as a result. I am not considering that, financially, we can achieve what most people are asking for. However, in the spirit of fairness, amelioration and pouring some oil on troubled waters, would the Secretary of State please go away and have a look at whether we can do something just around the edges, for some of the women, or perhaps the older women, in this group—I am 21 May 1957, by the way. I do not mean that we should deal with all of it or do something for everybody, but that in the spirit of fairness, there may be something we could do.

Obviously, I have constituents who are in this situation, and I have heard from lots of the WASPI women. I am actually appalled at some of the comments I have seen on social media, and I have stopped engaging with the WASPI women on social media—not the core campaigners, who are a very decent bunch of ladies—because some people have hijacked their cause for social media and unpleasant purposes. However, I have engaged with many of the WASPI women, and their stories are very difficult.

I do not know how many women in the Chamber or the House are of my age, but I would not like to be in the position where I thought I was going to get my pension but then had to get another job, because nobody would employ me. Who would employ a woman facing her 60th birthday? Despite the fact that we have a lot of skills and life experience, and that we are probably very good employees, it is difficult for women of a certain age to get employed. You become faceless when you reach a certain age.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving such a powerful and impassioned speech, but could I correct her in saying, “Who would give me a job at my age?” I gave two ladies in my office who are in exactly that age group a job, because—I think this is what the Secretary of State was driving at—there is a change in culture.

Nadine Dorries: I thank my hon. Friend. I actually have a member of staff in my office who is older than I am, but I also know of many friends who are being made redundant and have lost their jobs. Recently, in fact, a whole group of people in a company—all women over a certain age—were made redundant, and they all know that it was because of their age. It is not the case that most employers want to take on women in their 50s and 60s—it just does not happen.

Melanie Onn: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Nadine Dorries: No, because it takes up other people’s time. If the hon. Lady wants to speak, she should put in to speak. [Interruption. I am sorry, but it is a fair point—a lot of people want to speak.] I ask the Secretary of State please to go away and have a look at this, because that would be a generous and healing statement on the part of the Government. We would be able to show that we are a kind, considerate and healing statement on the part of the Government. The change was an unintended consequence of their policy . Does my hon. Friend not think that now is the right time for them to accept that if this was an error on their part, they should make amends properly?

Melanie Onn: The Government have previously accepted that the changes were an unintended consequence of their policy. Does my hon. Friend not think that now is the right time for them to accept that if this was an error on their part, they should make amends properly?
the process have been laid bare for all to see, has been UK Government’s view on this, even after mistakes in and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), it would be possible to outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye Under the solution offered by the SNP, which was further forward. How utterly frustrating! It is frustrating “more could and should have been done” that report from the Work and Pensions Committee concluding that the WASPI women will win a case against the they must surely fear a humiliating defeat—it is possible potential legal action against the Government in which hon. Lady give way?

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: I will make some progress.

Despite four previous debates, a UK-wide petition that in my own constituency attracted 2,534 signatures, potential legal action against the Government in which they must surely fear a humiliating defeat—it is possible that the WASPI women will win a case against the Government on mis-selling of their pensions—and a report from the Work and Pensions Committee concluding that “more could and should have been done” to communicate these changes, we still appear to be no further forward. How utterly frustrating! It is frustrating for us in this place, so can the Secretary of State begin to imagine how frustrating it must be for the women caught up in this nightmare? Well, 4,800 women in my constituency are caught up in this nightmare, as are many more across the United Kingdom.

When will this Government wake up to the fact that pensions are not a benefit, despite the chuntering earlier that suggested otherwise? They are a social contract, which has been cruelly broken. It is time for the Government to step up and take responsibility for the way in which this entire matter has been mishandled.

Ms Ritchie: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: I really am conscious of the time. Under the solution offered by the SNP, which was outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), it would be possible to increase women’s pension age to 66 in the 2020s. The UK Government’s view on this, even after mistakes in the process have been laid bare for all to see, has been characterised by intransigence and wilful stubbornness. The Government have ducked their responsibilities in this matter for far too long. It is time to do what is right, fair and just. It is time for the Government to waken up and realise that pensions are not a privilege and they are not, as I have heard them referred to in another debate, a promise or a benefit.

A contract has been broken, and the breaking of that contract marks a fundamental shift between the Government and those they purport to represent. When contracts can be torn up and ignored, what does that say about a representative democracy? It is time for the Government to stop telling us that they have no choice. When it comes to writing blank cheques for Trident, there is a choice, so they have a choice here. It is time to make the right choice for WASPI women.

5.41 pm

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): I think we all recognise that in the world of politics, there are very few easy solutions, and solutions are certainly never cheap. As far as the matter that we are debating is concerned, the cheap version—to undo the Pensions Act 2011—would cost some £30 billion, and to undo the Pensions Act 1995 would cost many billions more. We must recognise that any pension scheme that we have must be sustainable, and the Government have a duty to keep it so. It would be irresponsible for the Government not to act with a view to keeping the pension scheme sustainable.

Much has been said about transitional arrangements. It is important that colleagues realise that there have already been transitional arrangements. Those who take the trouble to read Hansard will find that on Second Reading of the Pensions Bill of 2011, the Minister speaking for the Government said, “we will consider transitional arrangements”.—[Official Report, 20 June 2011; Vol. 530, c. 52.] On Report, the Government delivered on their promise, because they made a concession worth £1.1 billion and reduced the time period from two years to 18 months. For 81% of the women affected, the increase in the time period will be no more than 12 months. It is fundamentally wrong to say, as the last line of the SNP motion does, that there should be transitional arrangements.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Vara: Forgive me; I am mindful of the time limit. If people want to seek a change to what has already been done, they should have the courage to say so. They should say that they do not accept the transitional arrangements that have been made, and that they want further changes. To say that no changes were made is, frankly, disingenuous. As far as notification and the 1995 Act are concerned, let us not forget that the Labour party was in government for 13 years and it did very little—in fact, it did nothing—in the way of notification, even though some 10 Pensions Ministers could have done so. In 2012, research by the DWP found that only 6% of women who were within 10 years of reaching their pension age thought that their state pension age was still 60.

There are, of course, a number of other factors that need to be taken into account. It is wrong that debates such as this focus solely on state pension age equalisation
and its impact on the women concerned. We have to take account of life expectancy, which is increasing. [Interruption.] It is good news, but nevertheless we have to take it into account. Employment prospects for women are far better than they have been at any time since the state pension was introduced in 1940. There is record female employment and record employment for older women. The Government have worked hard to engage with stakeholders and employers to make sure that they recognise and value all the contributions that older workers can make. There are also our broader reforms. We have protected the winter fuel payment, permanently increased cold weather payments, created a new and simpler state pension system, abolished the default retirement age and extended the right to request flexible working.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Vara: I will not give way, because I want to leave other hon. Members as much time as possible in which to speak.

We must also mention other countries. Nine EU countries, including Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands, introduced equalisation as far back as 2009. I conclude by simply saying one thing: we have had many debates on this issue and the Government have repeatedly made their position clear, which is that they do not intend to revisit this issue. The issue was not in the Labour or the SNP manifesto, and by continuing to debate it, Labour and SNP Members are doing a disservice to the good women affected by giving them false hope. They should understand that doing so is opportunism pure and simple and political irresponsibility of the highest order. They should not give these good women false hope, and they should recognise that the Government will not give way.

Ian Blackford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We are being traduced by the hon. Gentleman. For clarification, this matter was in our manifesto, and perhaps the hon. Gentleman will correct what he has said.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I think we all know that that is not a point of order, but, not to worry, it has been put on the record.

5.46 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): If I may say so, this is starting to feel like déjà vu. The story is now one that we are all familiar with, and the injustices are being experienced right across the country. However, at the risk of repeating the same old argument, I am going to continue just in case anyone is in any doubt about where I stand on this matter.

Because of the 2011 pension changes, over 500,000 women born in the 1950s is that they were actively encouraged to give up work when they had children, so their pensions are actually smaller now than they would be had they taken maternity leave, and they are therefore at more of a disadvantage. Does she agree that we owe these women justice because they have been the backbone of this country for decades?

Carolyn Harris: I think my hon. Friend already knows my answer, but I would most certainly never disagree with him.

The Government’s refusal to engage constructively on this issue has left many of these women very angry, and it has left many Members on both sides of the House frustrated at the Government’s bloody-mindedness. I will not cite facts and figures or offer Ministers examples, because they have heard them all before, but I will just give them a warning. The women affected by the pension changes—the WASPI women—as well as their families and, increasingly, the general public are getting more angry and they are getting better organised. They are not going away, and we are not going to stop talking about the issue. Those of us who object to this situation, who I would even go so far as to say are offended by this Government’s inaction, will stand up week on week in debate after debate to put forward the argument for the WASPI women until they get the justice they deserve.

5.49 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): The Work and Pensions Committee, of which I am a member, worked on this issue at length earlier this year, and the SNP-commissioned report by Landman Economics draws upon much of our work—indeed, copies much of it. I certainly hope that the SNP did not pay too much for its report.

It is clear that there was a gross inequality in the old system, which had been untouched for some 70 years. It was very much a “kick it down the road” subject that few wished to touch, but we as Conservatives did touch it, because it needed touching. That said, I have not only taken the WASPI women’s concerns on board, but actually done something about it. I wanted to hear directly from local constituents about their own experiences, and to that end I held a Thanet WASPI forum on Saturday 21 May. It attracted not only local constituents but others who had heard about it from across Kent. In all, 100 women came.

I have also encouraged WASPI women to come to my surgeries and met campaigners, as have many right hon. and hon. Members from the across the House, outside Parliament. I have written to, and discussed the issue with, current and former Pensions Ministers and Secretaries of State, and I have presented a WASPI petition to the House. Few could have done more to understand the issue, to listen to the problem and to try and get a solution. I have tried to come up with a single solution, but within the problem: WASPI does not speak with one voice. The reason is that no one solution fits all the problems.

David Rutley: I commend my hon. Friend for his efforts in trying to better understand this challenge—no doubt it is a challenge and there are people having to
cope with this—but does he agree that the question ultimately comes down not just to the complexity of the solution but to affordability?

**Craig Mackinlay:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Given the state of the nation’s finances in 2010 and that 70-year-old inequality, something had to be done.

WASPI women find themselves in a difficult situation, having started out in a more traditional era of British life. Back then, women were more likely to be at home. If in work, they were unlikely to have been on a well-paid career path. Often part-time work would feature and low-paid work was the norm. The problems do not end there, though; this generation has parents themselves benefiting from increases in longevity, hence an extended caring function often falls upon them, while many WASPI women often support grandchildren as well.

The majority view among women at my forum was that there should have been no change at all to the 1995 Act and that the retirement age of 60 should have prevailed. Now, that clearly is not sustainable. None of the Opposition parties proposed it in their manifestos last year, and indeed this option—option 1 in the Landman Economics report—has been discounted even by the SNP. At £30 billion, it is simply too expensive and unfair. The SNP report advanced other options: option 2 was to wind back the 2011 pension change, which accelerated the age increase; and option 3 was a slowing down of the 2011 Act—a sort of Pension Act 2011-minus.

An option 4, suggested by Labour Members, is that pension credit be used to bridge the gap, but the great problem with that is that it might actually discourage work, or even encourage people to stop work altogether. Option 5 is for an actuarially reduced pension at an earlier age. I floated that with many WASPI women, and some supported it, given an appropriate discount rate. It could work—it works in the USA and Canada—but we do not see much of that in our surgeries. Because of the great service she had received—she also attended a jobs fair that I had put on—she had found a job. I have never seen her so happy, but that would not have happened unless the changes had moved her in that direction.

It is very clear that one solution does not fit all. I would have supported the amendment proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), if it had been available to vote for this afternoon. I have to say to SNP Members, however, that I am sorry, but I am unable to support their rather blunt motion. As ever, I am afraid, it is pure political grandstanding, offering very few answers. There is an answer out there, and it will be found, I am sure, by the excellent work of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I encourage WASPI to speak to us with one voice, so that we can reach a solution that is right for the majority.

5.57 pm

**Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank SNP Members for bringing forward this debate, and I pay tribute to the WASPI women and their supporters up and down the country for their tireless campaigning on this important issue in the face of an obstinate Government who refuse to listen to their very rational arguments about the need for better transitional protection and arrangements for this group of women.

Most of all, I want to pay tribute to the WASPI group in Durham, which was formed after a visit to Parliament in June. I attended a meeting it held in my constituency on 10 November. I wish that the Secretary of State, who is no longer in his place, the Under-Secretary of State for the Penman the hon. Member for Westminster North (Richard Harrington) and indeed the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara) had been there to listen to what the women had to say. Most of them
had until recently been simply unaware of the changes to their retirement ages, and most of them will now have to wait years to receive their pension. Most of them had already had two significant changes made to their pension age. These women described in great detail the strain that their current situation was putting on them and their families. Many of them had planned to retire in order to care for family members, and were now having to balance social care needs with full-time work often across a range of different jobs. All were job-seeking.

One point that the Secretary of State did not acknowledge earlier was that for an older woman, trying to get a job in a depressed labour market is extremely difficult. Nor did he recognise that it does not matter how many older champions women have. If no jobs are available in their local labour market, women of any age will be unable to find employment, but it will have a negative impact on older women in particular.

Furthermore, the Secretary of State did not acknowledge two important factors: the regional disparities in the ages at which women will remain fit and active enough for work — especially if they have been involved in more strenuous occupations — and the differing ages of mortality across regions and, indeed, within specific areas. None of that has been factored into the Government’s thinking, and that, in my view, is also pretty atrocious.

One of the things that I was asked to do by the women whom I met on 10 November was to write to the and that, in my view, is also pretty atrocious.

It is simply not acceptable for the Government to say that they are not going to do anything. The message that they need to hear from us this afternoon is that we will continue to support the WASPI women and their campaign — we will continue to raise questions and initiate debates in the House to support them throughout the country — until they do the right thing by those women, and introduce proper transitional arrangements that will protect them from the hardship that they are currently experiencing.

Several hon. Members rose——

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The good news is that I must reduce the speaking time to four minutes so that everyone can speak for the same amount of time.

6.3 pm

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I am a little surprised that there are so few Members on the SNP Benches.

There is a clear need for equalisation of the state pension age. We are all agreed on that. We have an ageing population. People are living healthier, longer lives. Given that an ever greater proportion of the population are drawing pensions, while an ever smaller proportion are contributing through national insurance, the pension system risks becoming unsustainable without the important measure that we debated and voted on in 2011.

On the most fundamental level, however, we as a House should champion equality. The new single-tier pension is much fairer and simpler. People who have worked for 35 years will receive £8,000 a year. It is a very simple process: 35 years of work will give us £8,000. I have already worked for 35 years, but I will not qualify for my pension until I am 67; the same applies to Mrs Evans. As we all live longer and healthier lives, that will increase, I am sure. Let us make that clear, here and now. The single-tier pension also takes into consideration for the first time the time off that people take to have children — maternity and paternity leave.

I supported the measure. When I was a member of the Work and Pensions Committee we investigated the matter. I contacted the DWP to find out my retirement date, and I have to say to the Minister that the document I received was rather drab — not the most exciting document to read. The first time I went through that process, in 2013, I was told I was going to retire at 65; when I did it in 2014, the answer was 66; and the following year it went up to 67. I had to read the documents very carefully indeed, so I think people can be forgiven for not realising that their retirement date had changed. I encourage the Government to take a look at the personalised documents that are regularly produced, with a view to perhaps introducing a little colour — for example, making the retirement date red and easier to see.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments about information, but this is not a small mistake. I have constituents who will lose £30,000 or more by the shifting of the goalposts. Does he not think that because of the failure to communicate the changes, the Government have a duty to look again at transitional arrangements for the women affected?
Graham Evans: I do not agree, because, to be fair to the DWP, it has communicated with people. I think it could communicate better, as I have just described, but following the 1995 Act the Department issued a leaflet, among other press and publicity measures including direct mailings, to advise the public of the changes. In 2004, during the 13 years of Labour Governments, the DWP ran an information campaign distributing more than 2 million pension guides alongside adverts in the press and women's magazines to complement an interactive online state pension calculator. In addition, all state pension statements issued from 2001 would have included as standard the new state pension age as determined by the 1995 changes. Since then, more than 11 million statements have been issued.

The Government have been notifying women of the changes. Those most affected by the 2011 changes were written to directly. That involved sending out more than 5 million letters between January 2012 and November 2013. Research carried out by the DWP found that 6% of women who were within 10 years of pension age thought their state pension age was still 60. However, those efforts were not wholly successful. Had they been, we would not be here now debating this subject. There are lessons to be learned by Governments of all colours, present and future, on effective communication of such important matters. Those who planned for their retirement want to live the retirement they planned for.

After the 2011 changes, the Government passed an amendment to the Bill that provided £1.1 billion-worth of transitional funding, delaying the equalisation of the state pension age. We have already considered this matter and taken mitigating action. The new state pension has been brought forward a year and many women will be significantly better off than they would have been. By 2030, more than 3 million stand to get an extra £550 a year. Likewise, the introduction of the triple lock, which ensures that the state pension rises by inflation, wages or 2.5%, whichever is greater, ensures that the basic state pension will be over £1,100 a year higher than it was at the start of the last Parliament.

To undo the 2011 changes would cost £30 billion in addition to the loss of £8 billion in tax revenue. To undo the 1995 changes—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

6.9 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Here we are again. By my calculation, we have had no fewer than 10 debates in Westminster Hall and the Chamber since 2 December last year. In 20 years, I have never known such parliamentary attention on a single subject that was either not instigated by the Government or subject to proposed legislation. We have had over 240 petitions, mass demonstrations by WASPI women all over the country, the best attended all-party group meeting—I am proud to be a co-chair of the group—and unparalleled activity in this Chamber.

As hon. Members have said, this problem is not going to go away: WASPI women are not going to go away and we are not going to go away, yet throughout the entire past 12 months there has been no movement whatever from the Government. There has been no recognition of the very real hardship now being suffered by some of the WASPI women, and no recognition of the disproportionate impact of pension equalisation falling on a minority—albeit a significant minority—of women. We have had three Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions who, notwithstanding my respect for the current incumbent, have refused to engage with WASPI women and sit around a table to hear what hardship is like in real life.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The WASPI women in Cheltenham I have spoken to broadly recognise that the SNP's plan to reverse the entire equalisation process, at a cost of billions of pounds we do not have, is unrealistic and inappropriate. Where individuals can establish exceptional hardship due to circumstances beyond their control, however, is it not right to examine cost-neutral transitional measures?

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will come on to that in the very limited time available.

I am concerned that the Government's amendment to the motion is just another example of them sticking their head in the sand and hoping the problem will go away. I acknowledge the wisdom of Mr Speaker in selecting the Government amendment, rather than those in my name and other hon. Members, but it appears to have little to do with the subject of the debate—the effect of pension age equalisation on WASPI women. I welcome the average rise of £550 a year for 3 million women. I welcome the increases in the basic pension, which the Secretary of State talked about. I welcome the introduction of the triple lock. Frankly, however, to produce such an amendment adds insult to injury. WASPI women will not be able to enjoy those benefits for up to six further years. That is the whole point. These women will not qualify for the benefits for a much longer time and they need help now. In addition, and despite what we have heard, women's life expectancy actually fell last year for the first time in many years. The Chancellor, understandably, recently declined to guarantee the triple lock for years to come. By the time many of the WASPI women qualify, they will not be able to enjoy the security of the triple lock. That is why I cannot support the Government amendment. I urge hon. Members to refrain from supporting it, too. Frankly, to vote for such a disappointing and inappropriate amendment would be an insult to the many WASPI women who have campaigned so hard.

I also have a problem with the SNP motion. Mr Speaker, you were lucky enough not to be here when the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) spent 36 minutes losing my vote. SNP Members have been unilaterally pushing this cause. I am grateful that they do so, but in Scotland they do not have to pay for it. That is why we never hear solutions from the SNP. The motion references the Landman report, which relies heavily on the magic money tree known as the national insurance fund. We know the fund has been in deficit and that the Government, who have a responsibility for pensions up and down the country, had to top it up. The SNP suggestion is, in reality, a pension fund-raiding exercise.

I am disappointed that Mr Speaker did not choose my amendment, simply because it asked for a dialogue to be opened up—that we prioritise looking at the most extreme cases of hardship, which we all know are not representative of our surgeries. The amendment does not commit to specific substantial spending and it certainly does not call for a reversion to the pre-1995 status quo. We support pension
age equalisation. It is just that the speed of the transition process has led to unintended consequences for a large number of women. Many hon. Members have seen cases at first hand in their surgeries. We just want to talk.

Robert Neill: I agree that it is regrettable that we were not able to debate my hon. Friend’s amendment. I would have supported it. Does he agree that we are where we are, and that we should not go down the extravagant SNP route? We should take the Secretary of State up on his offer of dialogue to find something constructive for those most in need.

Tim Loughton: I agree. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for seeing a delegation from the all-party group just a few days ago, even though there is no preparedness to discuss specific options. He has, however, offered to look at examples of hardship, particularly where women are being offered very inappropriate and impractical jobs by jobcentres up and down the country. We have examples from all over the place of women aged 65 being offered bar jobs in a nightclub or a job stacking shelves at 4 o’clock in the morning. It is just not working in practice. We need to be much more sensitive and sensible to the particular work needs of these women if they do indeed have to go back to work, and transitional arrangements cannot hold them back from doing that.

I also made the point earlier about there being just seven of these older people champions at jobcentres up and down the country. We do not need to go over the issues again. We heard them today, and we have heard them nine times before: the poor communication; the little notice or no notice of the change; the fact that women from the 1950s worked in very different environments, where they did not get equal pay or childcare benefits, or have access to occupational pension schemes, and typically worked part time. I believe if we proceed on these lines it will be a breach of trust between the older people champions and jobcentres, and some of them also have caring responsibilities—and the Government.

The state pension system is founded on the contributory principle. This is not a state benefit for which no prior commitment is involved, yet this group of women, who have been paying national insurance contributions over many years in good faith, now stand to have their reasonable expectations dashed.

I urge the Government to think again and to talk, and let us come up with a sensible proposal.

6.16 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): There are times when Conservative Members support our Ministers and their policies because we know that they are doing something great to reform the country, whether it is giving more choice in the national health service, freeing up schools from local authority control or even delivering on Brexit. There are other times when we support our Ministers because we know they are taking difficult decisions for all the right reasons, because one of the centrepieces of this Government’s policy is to bring Britain’s books back into the black, to pay off the deficit and to solve the financial problems created by Labour Members, and that is what this is all about today.

We all have accepted, I think—perhaps bar one—the principle of the equalisation of the pension age, and we all accept that people are living longer, which is a wonderful thing, under our national health service. As a result, it is going to take us longer to get our pensions. However, there has been an issue with the transition. I meet women affected in my constituency, and they are honourable, decent women. They say to me that they were not informed. I am told that back in the 1990s and early 2000s, when different people were in office, they were in fact informed, but I believe these women; they clearly did not know what was going to happen.

I appreciate the help the Government have already given, but I ask them to continue to look at what is going on in jobcentres—what officials there are to help with special cases—to draw more attention to that, and, if the finances improve, to make further help available if at all possible. But I absolutely reject the ridiculous proposals put forward by SNP Members today. They have come up with an uncosted proposal that even they say will cost at least £8 billion, but which the DWP has said would cost about £14 billion. They do this knowing perfectly well that, if they chose to, they could find all the women affected in Scotland and use the powers they already have to raise taxes, cut costs elsewhere or indeed borrow money—although that might be rather harder to do because even The Guardian has reported that they borrowed £50 billion up until 2020, and they may well find there are very few people left who would lend them the money.

The reality is that SNP Members jump up and say, “This is nothing to do with us,” but, frankly, foreign affairs have got nothing to do with them either, yet that has not stopped them talking about Brexit. If they wanted to do something about this issue, they could, but they are not going to do anything because what they are really doing is playing political games—building up people’s hopes, knowing full well that they are not prepared to take the decisions that they ask my hon. Friends on the Front-Bench to take.

SNP Members wrap themselves in the flag of the suffragettes. The Conservative party needs no lessons from them in its support of women’s rights.

Patricia Gibson rose.

David T. C. Davies: I am not giving way.

I remind Opposition Members that it was a Conservative Government who equalised the voting age between men and women; that the first female MP to take her seat was a Conservative; that the Conservative party—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Stopped in your prime, Mr Davies.

6.19 pm

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I will try to keep this swift in order to give other colleagues a chance. I agree with just about everything that my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) said, although there is one point: the Work and Pensions Committee has stated that with hindsight previous Governments could have done a lot better in communicating. I would throw a slight challenge to Labour Members: they had 13 years—[Interruption.] The changes had been announced, and women like myself did not receive any communication about them.
I too have met my WASPI women, and I sympathise with the principles of their campaign. However, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) that this is a complex issue. My first point is about affordability. This is not a movable feast, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara) pointed out. If the proposal is indeed affordable, I would urge SNP Members to put their money where their mouth is—as my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth suggested—and to pay those 100,000 women.

Patricia Gibson rose—

Alan Brown rose—

Jo Churchill: I am sorry; I am not taking interventions.

I draw hon. Members’ attention to the fact that the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland has called into question the reliability of the figures that the SNP has been trying to sell to us. So let us look at this problem. We are living longer. If I start work at 16 and get a pension at 66, I will be receiving that pension for a third of my life. A third of babies born this year will live to 100. We are not a party that kicks the can of difficult decisions down the road. Can we create a policy without a cliff edge? No. My sister and I will go through a difficult period between 2026 and 2028, because she is 18 months older than me and will retire a full year earlier. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans), I have seen the pension age go up. We have had to make adaptations and it is tough.

Should we not be looking at this differently? The motion tells us that all women want this solution. That is not the case. I have had women write to me to say that they felt they had been informed. I would not want us to go backwards in this regard. I believe, as many hon. Members do, in the equalisation of the pension age. That is right and proper. Moreover, we should be fighting to remove the gender pay gap, which is not due to be equalised for 43 years. That is a much bigger problem. There are some exceptions, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) said. A constituent of mine volunteered overseas and lost her professional registration. She now has a low-paid job, but she plans and she saves. I am grateful that the Minister is looking into these cases.

I will not support the motion. It ignores our children. Our generation has done better than they have done. They have tuition fees, soaring rents and difficulties with housing. I oppose the motion because it is financially unsustainable.

6.22 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): As other hon. Members have commented, this is our umpteenth debate on the WASPI campaign. We have already covered this ground in huge detail. Indeed, the Work and Pensions Committee produced an extensive report on this subject, entitled “Communication of state pension age changes”, in March this year. So what is new today? What has changed? In my view, there are three things.

First, the WASPI campaign has split into two. The original campaign required a reversal of the Pensions Act 1995, which was all about equalising women’s pensions with men’s, but three of the five original founders have resigned over disagreements over what constitute fair transitional arrangements.

Secondly, the WASPI campaigners born between 1953 and 1955 are now close to receiving their state pension. Many of them will start receiving it in 2018, and all of them will receive it before the 2020 election. That fact is convenient because it means that Labour Members, who did not put this issue in their 2015 manifesto, will not be able to put it into their 2020 manifesto either, because it will no longer be relevant.

Thirdly, Scottish National party Members believe that they have found a way to fund a reversal of the Pensions Act 2011, which was accelerating the equality of women’s pensions. In fact, they have gone further than that. The Daily Business quoted the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), in whose name this debate is taking place, as saying that he had found a solution:

“The Tories have tried to wash their hands of this crisis—which is why the SNP decided to do the work for them.”

In doing the work for them, the hon. Gentleman has identified that the national insurance fund—which funds welfare benefits—is the source of the £8 billion he believes will rectify the situation. The Government believe that it would cost £30 billion. His suggestion is arguably the most extraordinary of all time in this House. It is irresponsible, inappropriate and inaccurate, and it is seriously worrying that the hon. Gentleman, who has worked in the pensions industry for a long time, believes that he has done the work. His work needs serious improvement.

Interestingly, the SNP leader said that this is an issue on which the “UK government must make transitional arrangements”.

However, while pensions remain a UK Government responsibility, things could be done by the SNP Government. The powers have been devolved, and the Scottish Government could use them now. The SNP is leading the WASPI campaign up the garden path. It is to be regretted that good women, some of whom are in trouble, are being so seriously misled by ostensibly serious politicians. We should turn the motion down.

6.25 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am delighted to be called. Like many Government Members, I have the greatest of sympathy for constituents who have been left incredibly frustrated by the changes. Indeed, this group of people have held an expectation for many decades but have then found themselves, without notification in some cases, with little time to make things up. However, the ultimate point is that if reversing the changes will cost up to £39 billion, it is wrong of this House to raise expectations and suggest that the problem can be solved without any intelligent rationale for where the money will come from. Others will always have to pay. It will be a question of having to reduce spending on essential services that are listed in our manifestos. Health is a huge issue in my constituency, and I would like more money for social care, but I am realistic about what we can afford.

Alan Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Huw Merriman: I will not give way, owing to the time. Will we see services cut to pay for this proposal, or, as is so often the case, will it be left to future generations to foot the bill?

My next point is crucial. Individuals in their 20s and 30s—often termed the packhorse generation—have had to pay tuition fees, which I and others did not have to pay, and are living with expensive private rents and cannot afford to get on the housing ladder. It will be left to them to pay—a generation that will be fortunate indeed to retire at 66, let alone 60. Many of them do not even have occupational pensions. The Opposition may scoff at some of the points made by Government Members, but they should ask themselves whether they are really thinking of those individuals in the same way as we are and protecting their futures.

Alan Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman way on that point?

Huw Merriman: I will not give way.

I raised my next point when I slipped over to the other side of the Chamber. Manifestos are where such changes should be proposed and where we should stand up and be counted for what we believe in. We should not jump on bandwagons mid-term when we do not have to cost things. This proposal was not in the Labour manifesto. I have looked through the SNP manifesto—it is a gripping read—and it contains a reference to not supporting pension changes above the age of 66.

Drew Hendry: Rubbish!

Huw Merriman: The hon. Gentleman says, “Rubbish,” so he can then state where it is. It does not appear at all in three sections. This is a cynical move that mismanages the expectations of the most vulnerable, who need looking after. They do not need cheap gimmicks from the Opposition that do not have intelligent costings. On that basis, I am going to do what is right for generations to come and not support the motion.

6.28 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I am grateful to you for getting me in, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will be brief. I will not hear any aspersions cast against the WASPI women. The women whom I have met have been completely sincere. I have received much correspondence from people facing difficult and challenging circumstances.

In Waveney, 2,249 people have signed a petition and the Conservative-controlled Waveney District Council unanimously passed a motion in support of the WASPI petition. There is an injustice here that we need to correct. I acknowledge that the finances are tight, something which I fear the SNP has not taken on board, but there are times when we need to do the right thing. This is one of those times. I urge the Government to sit down with the WASPI women and engage the experts in the DWP and the Treasury to come up with a fair, considered and affordable solution.

6.29 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Once again, the injustices suffered by 50s-born women at the hands of the coalition and now the current Government dominate proceedings here in Parliament. Labour Members would give our eye teeth to have the powers to help the people we represent, but, sadly, all we can do is continue to try to help the Government out of the hole they are in. This will be the fifth time in the six weeks since I took on the shadow Pensions Minister role that I have spoken in Parliament about the WASPI women’s plight, which has been created through poor communication and mismanagement. Sadly, even our low-cost option to extend pension credit to those who need it has been turned down flat by the Secretary of State and his Pensions Minister. I would have said that it had also been turned down by the Treasury, but at Work and Pensions questions last week, it was revealed that the Secretary of State had not even bothered to run it past the Treasury, so it could not even consider the matter.

As I have said before, the Pensions Minister is a decent man, but he disappointed me by failing to fight for the WASPI women and he has done so again by refusing to set up a special proactive helpline for those affected to ensure they all access the social security benefits he says are sufficient to meet their needs.Labour Members do not believe they are sufficient, and we all know that hundreds of millions of pounds—if not billions—in social security to which many people are entitled is left unclaimed because people simply do not know that they are eligible. I have no doubt that that applies to many of the 50s-born women, including members of WASPI and WASPI Voice.

Perhaps the Government need reminding of the hardship that the poorly managed changes they have put in place have caused to 2.6 million WASPI women. We have heard from one woman who had her pension age moved back and could no longer afford to pay the rent, so she went spiralling into debt and was on the verge of losing her home. We heard about another who is struggling to keep her sick husband out of care, so that they can hang on to their family home, and is doing so without the state pension income that she was planning to use to keep them going in her retirement. Many Members have outlined similar cases, which are repeated reminders of the Government’s failure.

Some of those examples were given in a full speech from the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). It was just a shame that he had to sacrifice more than any of us. Backbone of our country—women who have probably sacrificed more than any of us.
The hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) wanted a relaxation of the rules on JSA and ESA. Will the Minister consider that idea from someone on the Conservative Benches? My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) spoke of the need for vacancies in the labour market for women. If the vacancies do not exist—and they do not in the north-east, where I am a Member, too—people cannot get a job.

We must remember that the two main campaigning groups WASPI and WASPI Voice agree with equalisation of the state pension age, but this is about the means by which that is achieved. Contrary to what the Government say, we still need fair transitional arrangements in place to support the most vulnerable, and there have been plenty of options put forward by Labour that this Conservative Government have not properly considered.

The Government are now getting themselves into a deeper hole, as one of the WASPI campaign groups is planning to mount a legal action, with their representatives

We have said that the proposals are not fair, have not been implemented properly and are damaging the most vulnerable, but the Government have made it clear that they do not care about the plight of women up and down this country. Those women are frightened of these proposals because they do not know how they will cope. The Secretary of State spoke about the older people’s champion. We could have a champion in each and every department across the country, providing a special helpline for the women affected.

Under our proposals, we are calling on the Government to extend pension credit to those who would have been eligible under the 1995 timetable, so that women affected by the chaotic mismanagement of equalisation will be offered some support until they retire. That will make hundreds of thousands of WASPI women eligible for up to £156 a week. We will not stop there. We are developing further proposals to support as many of the WASPI women as possible. Importantly, they will be financially credible and will be based on sound evidence and supported by the WASPI women themselves.

It is disappointing that the SNP chooses to cost only the option in the Landman report—the one mentioned in the motion—to the end of this Parliament. This accounting trick has led it to promise the WASPI women that it has a long-term solution, but that is not the case. The measure will cost £8 billion until 2020, but more than £30 billion if it is to help affected women up to 2026. Sadly, this has confused the debate, when clarity was needed. As I have mentioned, if the SNP actually wanted to support the WASPI women rather than play games, it would have acted already in Scotland.

The Government could have done something in the autumn statement to support these women and then used the Pension Schemes Bill currently in the other place to put the changes into law. They still have time to do so in the new year.

I have had numerous emails, phone calls and meetings with women all over the country who are begging and pleading for Parliament to act. They are at their wits end. If they are not already suffering the full impact of the changes, they are dread them, as they know this Government will require them to survive on very little—including those who are single or incapable of working.

My party believes in standing up for the most vulnerable, and that is what we are doing today. We will to do that tomorrow, and we will continue to support the WASPI women in this fight. For that reason, we will support the SNP motion today, but we hope to have the real cost of its proposed solution up to 2026 properly acknowledged. Only Labour is taking a detailed look at the evidence and trying to find the best way forward to help dig both the Scottish and UK Governments out of the hole they are now in. Let us make it clear once again: it is not a Scottish, English, Irish or Welsh solution that we need, but a UK-wide solution, and this Government must act.

6.38 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I have to start by saying that I am feeling very, very humbled here today, because the Conservative Benches are the busiest that they have ever been for me, talking on this issue.
Unfortunately, I have to start off on a negative point. Earlier, the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) talked about Members of Parliament finding themselves continually criticised for their pronouncements. Is that really what we want to base our arguments on? Is that the kind of model we want to follow?

This has been said a million and one times in the debate, and I have been biting my tongue the whole way through because of the incredible hypocrisy and lack of knowledge on these Benches—I was going to say on the Conservative Benches, but now unfortunately I have to add the Labour shadow Minister to that. Scotland does not have the power over pensions. If anyone wants to dispute that, I suggest that they get the Scotland Act 1998 and go to section 28, and they will see that in all the reserved matters that we are entitled to top up, pensions is not included.

Even if we did have the power to create pensions, and to fix them, I tell you something—and I think I speak for my colleagues not just in this Chamber but up the road as well—we are sick to the back teeth of using taxpayers’ money to fill all the holes that this Government create: a Government with policies that we have never voted for in Scotland, that we actively rejected in the general election. We cannot be expected to plug every single hole that this Government create with their shambolic policies.

The Government now say, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) alluded to earlier, that they will never make changes to pensions unless people are within 10 years of reaching pension age. How can they justify that position but not do anything for these women, who have been told that they have to wait six or seven years to get their pensions?

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) said that this was not in our manifesto. If he goes to page 21 of the 2016 manifesto for the Scottish elections, he will see it says that we support the WASPI campaign. He said that he would vote against our motion tonight because it is the younger generation who will pay—people in their 20s and 30s. I am included in that category, funnily enough, and I have to say that the issue is bigger than just the WASPI generation, because I want to know that when I am paying national insurance throughout my working lifetime, I am not going to be shafted at the last hurdle—that I am not going to be told at the last minute that the goalposts are moving. This is bigger. This is about the Government setting a precedent that pensions can change anywhere at any time, and that is not a healthy position for any Government to have.

The issue is altogether bigger than WASPI. The justification for the change is that we do not have enough money and this is about austerity. But the thing is that it is women that suffer under austerity. That is the reality; whether it be pensioners, single mothers or young women, it is always women that bear the brunt of this austerity.

Alan Brown: On affordability, is it not the case that the Government can revisit the £20 billion of tax giveaways in the last Budget—£8.5 billion in corporation tax and £5.5 billion in capital gains, inheritance tax and higher tax threshold relief? The Government can revisit those in the forthcoming spring Budget.

Mhairi Black: My hon. Friend makes his point very eloquently.
The Women’s Budget Group has done tremendous work. I urge Ministers to look at it and see the impact that they are having on women’s lives because of the Government’s detrimental policies. The group’s director said:

“We’ve known for some time that the poorest households and women have shouldered the greatest burden of austerity measures.”

In fact, 85% of the burden is forecast to fall on women by 2020. These women are not unfortunate casualties. They are not people who just happened to get unlucky. This Government cannot claim ignorance. They cannot plead innocence and say that they have no idea of the impact that they are about to have on people’s lives. These women, for whatever reason, are suffering under Conservative policies for no other crime than the fact that they are female and they are poor. That is the reality of what this Government are doing.

The legacy that this Government are leaving is absolutely shambolic and no amount of sympathy and flowery words from hon. Members is going to pay bills for people. It is not going to move things forward; it will not make sure that your citizens have a good, high-quality standard of life. The idea that the £8 billion spread across five years, as proposed in our report, is not affordable is an absolute joke. The national insurance fund, as we have said multiple times, will be sitting on a surplus of £30 billion. That figure has been disputed from the Government Benches, but it is worth pointing out that it comes from the Government Actuary’s Department. It is a Government figure.

In every one of these debates I have said that politics is about choice, and I have lambasted the Government for choosing to bomb Syria instead of paying pensions. I have lambasted them for spending billions on Trident. I have had a go at them for doing up this Palace of Westminster for £7 billion, which funnily enough we can afford. I understand that sometimes it can be quite dull when politicians repeat things time and again, but now there is something new. We can now also afford to pay up for the Queen’s house; we can now find the money to refurbish Buckingham Palace. So my question to the Minister would be this: are we going to be doing up Downing Street anytime soon? Are there any other houses filled with millionaires that need to be done up—that need a lick of paint? It is a ridiculous notion that we can afford to fork out money for palaces—literally, palaces such as this and Buckingham Palace—but we cannot pay pensions. It is a joke.

Our job here is to represent; it is to maintain democracy, to make sure that people watching at home feel as though they have a voice, to make sure that they feel there are people listening and standing up for them. When you see the quality of the debate that we have just sat through, no wonder people are quite depressed and disillusioned with politics. We have debated this subject five times. We have had 240 petitions all across the House. People are affected by this. Every single Member who handed in a petition has not just a professional duty but a moral duty to walk through that Lobby, tonight and vote with us, because if they do not, as my WASPI mother would say, hell slap it intae ye at the next election.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): I have been to quite a few Opposition day debates in my six and a half years here, but I have never known one when there were no Back-Bench speeches from the party that brought the motion forward. I found that very sad. I do apologise to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson)—there was one.

That does not mean that we have not heard extensively from the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), who opened the debate. He has kindly referred to me in the past as an honourable man—in fact, a principled man—and I would say exactly the same thing to him, as I would, indeed, to my shadow from the Labour party, the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham). However, they painted the Government as heartless and as people who are not interested in pensioners, and that is absolutely untrue.

We have had a lot of platitudes and clichés about how taxing millionaires more could fund the WASPI pensioners. Everybody says, “We believe in equalisation.” Everybody says what the problems are. Everybody talks of hardship. Everybody talks of examples from their constituencies. But when it comes to it, the Opposition have a licence to say anything they want—the Government have to make hard decisions. This Government and their predecessor—

Andy Burnham: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I am sorry, but, for the moment, there is not time to take interventions.

Governments have to take hard decisions. The can that was kicked down the road for many years by the Labour party had to be dealt with by the coalition Government. I would just like to refer to some of the fallacies mentioned by Opposition Members. The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, in moving the motion, talked about the 1995 Act as if there was absolutely no communication from the Government—as if the DWP and everybody else suddenly forgot to talk about it. Well, that is not true. There were leaflets produced. There was an extensive advertising campaign. There were articles in women’s papers. In addition, millions of people, who decided they were going to sort out their pension, applied, quite properly, to the DWP; if the DWP and everybody else suddenly forgot to talk about it, we are not aware of the details of what their pensions were. I mention that because it would appear that there was absolutely no communication whatever. After the 2011 Act, that was a direct mail campaign, where individual letters—

Ian Blackford rose—

Andy Burnham rose—

Richard Harrington: I will not give way. I have a very short time left.

There was actually very good communication. However, I would like to mention the various contributions we have had. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries), who was among many speakers from the Government side, said that women, including herself, were not informed following the 2011 Act. In fact, as I have just shown, millions of letters were sent between January 2012 and November 2013. She said it is difficult for women over the age of 60 to
find employment, and she said nobody would employ her. Actually, more than 4 million women in her age group are in employment—more than ever.

From the Opposition, we have had the argument, which I have had to deal with on many occasions, about the state pension being a contract. It is not a view but a question of fact that the state pension is a benefit, not a contract. As my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara) said, promises are cheap. The Government have to actually deal with facts.

I have much sympathy for Members who spoke of constituents who are finding it difficult to access the benefits system. [Interruption.] Someone has shouted from a sedentary position, “What are you going to do about it?” As hon. Members will be aware, and as the Secretary of State mentioned, we have a system of helping through the benefits system people who may need looking at. We have older claimants’ champions, and we are getting more of them. We will find a way to help people to find their way into the benefits system. For any constituents who are finding this difficult, if the Department can have their name, address and national insurance number—I have asked for this on many occasions—I will be very happy to personally see what the position is and get them the help they need to get through the benefits system. We hear a lot of talk from hon. Members about their constituents, but the actual factual details I get are few and far between.

Let me move on to the famous economic report from the Scots Nats. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who described it as irresponsible and inaccurate. I really could not have put it better myself, because it is, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire said, raising false hopes by saying to our constituents that this is a small problem that can quite easily be dealt with. I remind hon. Members that even the SNP costs this at £8 billion, and the Department, as I have written to the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, has assessed it at nearer £30 billion. We have looked at every alternative. We have looked at more than 25 options that have been mentioned to us about the WASPIs, and there simply is not a viable option, either because of cost, complexity or practicality.

The luxury of opposition is promising everybody money without having to consider how to pay for it. I view this as very irresponsible.

Ian Blackford: I must tell the House that the figures in this report, which has been produced by Landman Economics, are based on the Institute for Public Policy Research model, which has been tried and tested. It really ill behoves the House to traduce the economists who have produced these figures based on a Treasury model. When we had the debate two weeks ago, the Minister said that the cost was £14 billion. How come we have gone from £14 billion to £30 billion? It is the Government’s figures that do not make any sense.

Richard Harrington: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman—I could not hear the end of what he said because of the noise. I am not disputing that this was produced by proper economists—I accept that fact—but it is about what timescale they look at, in this case going to 2021, and how they brief. But okay, fair enough: even by the SNP’s calculations the figure is £7.9 billion, which should apparently come from millionaires or from Trident. Government is not like that; these are completely separate issues. This country has a proud record on state pensions. This Government, and the predecessor coalition before it, did not have the luxury, partly because of the economic mess Labour left us in, of kicking the can down the road and ignoring these very, very serious issues.

The benefits system is available to people, and if they are not having the access to it they should, we will help them. I give an undertaking to look at every way that the benefits system can be used to help people who are in difficulty. Contrary to what some hon. Members have said, my door is open to people so I can speak to them. I hope I have shown that. I took this job to help pensioners, not to not help pensioners. It has been irresponsible to imply—

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith. That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Question put accordingly (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 234, Noes 293.

**Division No. 100**

[7 pm]

**AYES**

Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Clegg, rh Mr Nick

Clwyd, rh Ann
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawsby, Mr David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Cressy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danzuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Debonnaire, Thangam
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Elliott, Julie
Elliott, Tom
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Ferrier, Margaret
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Tellers for the Ayes:  Marion Fellows and Owen Thompson

NOES

Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Doyly-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fyeh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Sir Michael
Ghani, Nusrat
Gauke, Mr David
Gray, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Greensill, Tim
Green, Chris
Greensill, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Handy, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harrison, John
Declares that climate changes impacts upon both people and places; further that the rapid progress towards ratification of the Paris Agreement is to be applauded; further that the UK requires a low carbon investment plan to transform the economy in line with the Climate Change Act 2008; and further that 1,100 individuals have signed a local petition on the same matter.

The petition of residents of Macclesfield, 7.14 pm

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I rise to present a petition of over 1,100 residents of the Macclesfield constituency on the subject of climate change.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Macclesfield,

Declares that climate changes impacts upon both people and places; further that the rapid progress towards ratification of the Paris Agreement is to be applauded; further that the UK requires a low carbon investment plan to transform the economy in line with the Climate Change Act 2008; and further that 1,100 individuals have signed a local petition on the same matter.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to publish an ambitious low carbon investment plan.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
Paisley (Cultural Contribution)

**Motion made, and Question proposed.** That this House do now adjourn.—(Heather Wheeler.)

7.15 pm

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to lead today’s debate on Paisley’s cultural contribution to the world. I am sorry to disappoint the undoubted millions tuning in from Northern Ireland, but I am most definitely not talking about the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley)—despite his party colleagues alluding to that fact on Twitter earlier this afternoon.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, although I know that Renfrewshire’s ain, Madam Deputy Speaker—the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs Laing)—was hoping to chair the debate, but is otherwise engaged addressing a haggis, which is as good an excuse as any in this place. I know that she has taken a keen interest in developments in Paisley of late and will no doubt be bending the ears of the rich and powerful at her Burns supper this evening.

However, I am perhaps underselling Paisley’s contribution. As Paisley’s Member of the Scottish Parliament and fellow Buddie, George Adam, is forever telling everyone, Paisley is, in fact, the centre of the known universe. Given that I am forever being compared to Gerard Butler and that he and I were born in Paisley and are proud Buddies, I think that George’s point is well made. I should point out for the uninitiated that a Buddie is what people from Paisley are called.

This debate is a sheer fluke of scheduling, as it just happens to coincide with Paisley’s bid to be named UK city of culture for 2021. I am not an impartial observer, but to my mind Paisley is one the UK’s greatest towns. The Paisley pattern is quite literally famous all over the world and represents the legacy of our one-time place at the centre of the world’s textile industry. Our rich and proud history is second to none, and people should not just take my word for it. Ian Jack, writing in *The Guardian* said:

“There is probably no more unjustly neglected town in these islands; there is nowhere of comparable size—77,000 people—that has such a rich architectural, industrial and social history and that once mattered so much to the world.”

It is for that reason that I would like to use this opportunity to touch on the town’s positive future, should it be named as the UK city of culture in 2021.

For those unaware of the town, Paisley is the largest town in Scotland, with a population of around 77,000. We are proud to have Paisley Abbey, to accommodate a world-class university in the University of the West of Scotland, and to be home to the St Mirren football club; and we are proud of our industrial heritage, particularly in our heyday with the Paisley mills, which made the town an economic powerhouse.

In so many ways, Paisley well and truly punches above its weight in the impact that it has had on the world. Our cultural strengths are there for the world to see. We are the birthplace of music superstar Paolo Nutini, who earlier this month outlined his backing for Paisley being named UK city of culture and spoke about the “romance of the town” and its importance on his own career. Dr Who duo, David Tennant and Steven Moffat, also hail from the town and regularly come back to Paisley to support local causes, as does Hollywood superstar, Gerard Butler, whose family stay in the Gallowhill area of Paisley, which I am proud to represent.

The list of famous Paisley Buddies that have forged a career in culture, media and sport is almost without end, including such names as: Andrew Neil, John Byrne, Kelly Marie, Gerry Rafferty, Tom Conti, Archie Gemell, Chris Brookmyre, Alexander Goudie, Owen Coyle, Shereen Nanjiani, Phyllis Logan, Kenneth McKellar, Robert Tannahill, David Hay, John Byrne, Fulton Mackay— [*Interruption.*] I am pleased now to see the hon. Member for North Antrim in his place.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Gavin Newlands:** The hon. Gentleman is being very cheeky, but I will give way to him.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. I rather think that the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) should be here for at least five minutes before anyone gives way to him. Come on!

**Gavin Newlands:** I was trying to be generous, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I shall assume that the hon. Gentleman is here to intervene later.

**Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP) rose—

**Gavin Newlands:** In that case, I shall give way to my hon. Friend.

**Mhairi Black:** Would my hon. Friend like to congratulate the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) on wearing the traditional Paisley attire?

**Gavin Newlands:** My hon. Friend is correct, and he would be right at home at St Mirren Park if he wore that outfit on a Saturday afternoon.

**Ian Paisley:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Gavin Newlands:** I will in two minutes.

Let me return to my list, which is extensive. Other famous Buddies are Kenneth Gibson MSP—I would be under threat of death if I did not mention him—Paul Lambert, and two of Scotland’s most well-kent weather forecasters, Heather “the weather” Reid and Sean Batty.

While I am listing famous Buddies, it would be remiss of me not to give a quick mention to those outside the area of culture who have left an indelible mark on the world. From the world of business, there is the Coats family, of Coats threads fame, which once owned one of the UK’s largest businesses. James Coats, and his sons who followed him, built up a business empire supported by vast mills along the River Cart. His son Thomas was particularly philanthropic towards his home town, and funded or donated some of Paisley’s finest buildings. Marion Robertson decided to try and use an oversupply of oranges to her husband James’s greengrocer business to make marmalade. The result was to prove very popular, and the enterprise is still going strong as the company that makes Robertson’s jams.
Ian Hamilton was a renowned lawyer, but is perhaps better known for something a little less legal. Ian was the mastermind who led the repatriation of the Stone of Destiny to Scotland from the Crown Jewels vault at the Tower of London, much to the authorities’ embarrassment. I note that Perth is trying to use the stone as part of its fledgling bid, but it was Paisley that helped to get the real one back before returning a replica via Arbroath Abbey—allegedly.

Members may not instantly recognise the name May Donoghue, but the case of Donoghue v. Stevenson has huge repercussions throughout the legal world since the other place along the corridor ruled on it in 1932. May Donoghue had been enjoying an ice cream float in the Wellmeadow café in the town, but when she poured out the remainder of her ginger beer into the glass, a partially decomposed slug fell out. She suffered from shock, and was later treated for gastroenteritis. Having got nowhere with the café owner, she decided to sue the manufacturer, David Stevenson. Her lawyer’s argument centred on the fact that Stevenson had a “duty of care” to the consumer, even without a direct contract, which had not obtained before that landmark ruling. The case is still taught in law schools, and has been quoted at the start of millions of damages actions throughout the world.

Buddies are rightly proud of all those who have made their mark, but Paisley is arguably more famous for the distinctive teardrop pattern that is world renowned. There are competing thoughts about the origins of the Paisley pattern, with some historians even suggesting that it can be traced back to ancient Babylon. However, although shawl production began elsewhere, because of the huge scale of shawl production in Paisley, which started in 1805, the pattern was given the name “paisley”. Paisley’s mills have long closed, but the impact of the paisley pattern can still be seen on catwalks throughout the world, as my tie so stylishly highlights.

Ian Paisley: I am not wearing a paisley pattern, although it is true that I once chatted up a girl and told her that my great-great-great-grandfather had invented the pattern and that he was a friend of Mr Tartan—but that is not the point. The point is that not everyone is lucky enough to have a town, or a city, named after them, and I am delighted about that.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on drawing our attention to the important issues of raising cultural awareness and the identity of the great towns and cities in this nation of ours. I hope that Ministers will continue to ensure that the whole of our nation is properly represented around the world, and that that includes all the great things that flow from the various towns, but in particular—Paisley.

Gavin Newlands: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Perhaps one day, if he perseveres, he will be granted his own debate about his contribution to the world.

Paisley has produced an abundance of actors and actresses of stage and screen. One reason why that has been so, especially over the last quarter of a century, is PACE Youth Theatre. PACE was founded in 1988 by David Wallace, and has now grown to become the largest youth theatre of its kind in the UK, with a current membership of about 2,000. The success and attraction of PACE mean that more than 200 young people are on a waiting list for a place there at any given time throughout the year. As well as putting on shows for thousands, including the perennially sold-out pantomime and shows touring Scotland, PACE delivers up to 34 workshops each year that not only improve on the performance skills of those who attend, but aim to increase confidence and improve communication and self-expression. The list of those who have enrolled in PACE includes James McAvoy, Paulo Nutini, “Game of Thrones” actor Richard Madden, and “Star Wars” actor James McArdle.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I taught him. [Laughter.]

Gavin Newlands: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution.

However, PACE amounts to a lot more than the acting or singing careers that it has helped to kick-start. It is about the lives of all the kids who attend its workshops. Founder David Wallace explained that better than I could when he said:

“We aren’t all about finding the next Annie. If that’s what a member is looking to achieve then that’s great.

However, for me and the team, it’s about providing our members with essential life tools such as self-confidence, team work and motivation and allowing those individuals to create their own pathways geared towards a successful and happy future, whatever that career may be.”

Paisley is lucky to have David and PACE. Long may they continue their fine work.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I cannot let the moment pass without adding one more name to the long list of famous Paisley Buddies. My late father, Jimmy Cowan, was a Paisley Buddy. He played for the mighty Greenock Morton, but he also played 25 times for Scotland, including in two famous victories against the auld enemy at Wembley, one in 1949, when the English forward line was Matthews, Finney, Milburn, Mortensen and Pearson. We won 3-1 that day. My father was a famous Paisley Buddy and a Greenockian; I am happy to be a buddy of Paisley.

Gavin Newlands: The fact that my hon. Friend’s father played for Morton is why I left him out of the list—[Laughter.]

Paisley’s rich architectural culture runs through the town, from Paisley Abbey and the town hall down the high street to the museum, Coat’s observatory and Coat’s memorial church, often described as the Baptist cathedral of Europe. One of the town’s not so well known facts is that it has the highest concentration of listed buildings anywhere in Scotland outside Edinburgh, but the jewel in Paisley’s architectural crown is the abbey, which dates back more than 850 years. The building is known as “the Cradle of the Royal House of Stewart”. Marjory Bruce, the daughter of Robert the Bruce, was married and later died in the abbey after a riding accident near the Gallowhill area of the town. Her son survived this accident and grew up to become Robert II of Scotland, the first of the Stewart monarchs.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As an Ulster Scot descended from the Stewarts of the lowland of Scotland, it is a real pleasure for me to hear the hon. Gentleman’s speech. Does he feel that there is a golden opportunity
for Paisley’s traditions and culture to be twinned alongside the Ulster Scots of Northern Ireland, with their history, their culture and their language?

Gavin Newlands: It is not in my power to grant the hon. Gentleman’s wish, but I note the keen interest of the Democratic Unionist party in tonight’s debate—that is two interventions from DUP Members on a debate about our Scottish town.

Jim Shannon: We are proud to be Ulster Scots.

Gavin Newlands: Absolutely, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for it.

The abbey is absolutely stunning and when you pay a visit, Mr Deputy Speaker—not if, when—be sure to keep an eye out for the 25-year-old embellishment by the stonemasons who replaced one of the gargoyles on the roofline with a replica of the xenomorph alien from the Alien films. I would hope that the committee looking at the refurbishment of this crumbling edifice could perhaps take a leaf out of the abbey’s book.

Benjamin Disraeli once warned his cabinet that they should “keep an eye on Paisley.” Disraeli might have been speaking about his fear of the guid folk of Paisley, rather than the hon. Member for North Antrim, becoming the source of revolution, but that quote is as true today as it was in the 18th century. Paisley is well known for its radicals. This is marked by a monument in Woodside cemetery which celebrates the 1820 martyrs, Baird, Hardie and Wilson—three of the leaders of the 1820 radical war who were executed for their part in it. That insurrection started largely because of savage cuts in workers’, mainly weavers’, pay and conditions.

Paisley’s radical past is celebrated annually during the “Sma’ Shot Day” festival. The sma’ shot was a cotton thread that bound the shawls together, but the sma’ shot was unseen in the finished garments, so the manufacturers—known locally as “corks”—refused to pay for the thread. The weavers had no choice but to buy the thread themselves, as without it the shawls would fall apart and the weavers would not be paid for their work. A long dispute followed. The Charleston drum, which was beaten through the streets of Paisley to summon the weavers in times of trouble, was beaten to rally the weavers to protest. After a long and hard struggle, the manufacturers backed down and the weavers were paid for the sma’ shot.

Mhairi Black: Bearing in mind Paisley’s phenomenal political history of responding to economic inequality, does my hon. Friend agree that the current Prime Minister could do with taking the advice of the once Conservative Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, who said, “keep your eye on Paisley’”?

Gavin Newlands: I think my hon. Friend speaks for herself, as she did so very well in the previous debate.

On the first Saturday of July, the beating of the Charleston drum rallies the people of Paisley to a gathering outside the town hall. A procession is held through the streets of Paisley led by the Cork, an effigy of one of the manufacturers defeated by the Paisley weavers, which is then set on fire.

Paisley is fortunate to have two great education institutions in the shape of West College Scotland and the University of the West of Scotland. Both do a fantastic job at providing high quality and inclusive education. UWS is also the home of the internationally acclaimed sculptor, Alexander—or Sandy—Stoddart, who is the Queen’s official sculptor in Scotland. Sandy created the monument to the Rev. John Witherspoon, a Paisley minister who became one of the signatories of the American declaration of independence. The original is positioned at the entrance to the university’s Paisley campus, with an exact replica at Princeton University in the United States where Witherspoon moved to when he became the university’s president. UWS, which was founded in Paisley in 1897, is also playing an important role in creating the cultural superstars of tomorrow through its highly successful school of media, culture and society. The school offers industry-ready degree programmes designed by staff with wide-ranging experience in broadcasting, film, journalism, music, performance and the visual arts.

The guidance that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport issued in 2014 said that the

“UK City of Culture should be expected to deliver a high quality cultural programme that builds and expands on local strengths and reaches a wide variety of audiences, creating a demonstrable economic impact and catalyst for regeneration as well as contributing to community cohesion and health and wellbeing.”

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Eight years ago, I was lucky enough to attend the National Mòd, Gaeldom’s premier event for music and traditional arts, which was held in Paisley. It was an extremely good event. Paisley proved to be a wonderfully hospitable host. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a perfect example of Paisley showing that it is capable of hosting tremendous cultural events in the future?

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. The economic impact of that event on the town was massive, with a 6:1 return on the council’s investment. I know that the council is hoping to host the event again, hopefully in 2021 to coincide with Paisley being UK city of culture—obviously, we will be the city of culture in 2021.

We have not received updated guidance for those competing to be named UK city of culture. I hope the Minister can advise on when it will be published. Given that the hon. Member for Epping Forest received an unilluminating written response yesterday, I have my doubts. The second part of the guidance, on the need for a wider economic benefit if named UK city of culture, is critical to Paisley.

As I have said, Paisley is a special place. Our built environment matches that of any in the UK and the tenacity of Paisley buddies is second to none. We are a town with a rich history and the chance to have an equally bright future. However, despite all that I have said, Paisley has its challenges, which are deep-rooted in the fabric of the town. Poverty is a blight which afflicts too many. Shamefully, that includes generational poverty. In Renfrewshire, more than one in five of our children are growing up in poverty. In the affluent areas of Renfrewshire, boys are expected to live 16 years longer than those who stay in the poorest parts of Paisley—separated by only a few miles.
Paisley is home to what is statistically Scotland’s most deprived area. Ferguslie Park, an area I represent, topped the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, confirming the generational nature of poverty in parts of Paisley. This is something that Citizens Advice Scotland refers to as poverty breeding poverty. Yet despite this, the community still has a strong sense of pride. One of the area’s most famous sons, John Byrne, sums the area up perfectly:

“Paisley is a remarkable place. I support the bid wholeheartedly. I thank Ferguslie every day of my life for providing me all the information I ever needed about life. It was the best place I have ever been.”

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Speaking of sons and daughters of Ferguslie Park, I am sure my hon. Friend will thank me for wheedling this in. Just to prove that people can fight the odds and achieve, one of the daughters of Ferguslie Park is heading up Paisley’s city of culture bid. Does he agree that nobody is better placed than Jean Cameron from Ferguslie Park to win that bid for Paisley?

Gavin Newlands: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I could not agree more with her point about her friend—and my friend—Jean.

As policy makers, the thought of kids waking up hungry, going to school hungry and going to bed hungry should motivate us all to ensure that we design more effective policies to prevent any child from living a life of hunger. That is why securing the title of UK city of culture is so important to Paisley. I believe it will generate a transformational change that will provide us with some of the tools to tackle our challenges head-on. For that reason, I believe this title means so much more to the town than those of other competitors bidding for it. Our bid will connect our communities and it will help us to take co-ordinated action against poverty through economic growth and opportunity.

Securing the title will bring around 1 million visitors to Renfrewshire in 2021. It will generate an estimated economic impact of around £50 million across our area. It will create hundreds of new jobs for local people and help grow our economy. It will breed new confidence in the town and make everyone believe that they are part of something special. It will transform Paisley’s image nationally and cement a deeper sense of pride in Paisley. However, more importantly, the lasting legacy of being awarded city of culture is that it will help us tackle poverty in an innovative manner and make it easier for every child and family in Renfrewshire to access cultural activity.

We all have our reasons for wanting to see Paisley named UK city of culture. I was born in Paisley, and lived in the Seedhill area of the town for five years before moving to Renfrew—just north of Paisley—where I still stay. I will always have a deep affection for the town. That goes without saying, and not just because I was born there. Some of the proudest moments of my adult life revolved around representing the town during the 15 years—three serving as club captain—I spent playing for Paisley rugby club. Everywhere we played, I was proud to wear the Paisley crest on my top, although I think at times we could have done a better job in representing the town, as we took a doing quite frequently. The same pride that I felt playing rugby is growing stronger again throughout Paisley. Buddies are proud of their history, and they are proud to be a welcoming place that has opened its arms to people from all over the world, evidenced recently with the arrival of our new neighbours from Syria.

Paisley has a lot to offer the world, but there is far more to come from our famous town. We are a town with our challenges, but if anyone researches our proud history, they will come across countless examples where the people of Paisley rose and overcame these challenges. We believe that winning the title of city of culture will serve as another example of Paisley seizing the opportunity and shaping a new, positive future for the town.

7.36 pm

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock):

It is a great pleasure to respond to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), and I begin by congratulating him on securing this debate on securing the UK 2021 city of culture bid for Paisley. I also congratulate him on, in so doing, uniting the United Kingdom almost like never before and on seeing so many Members representing different parts of Scotland and England and some good Ulster Scots also supporting his bid. This is about the UK capital of culture, and long may the UK capital of culture continue to be. That is enough of that point, but I think it is well mentioned.

Paisley has a fascinating history, and I note the excellent work Renfrewshire Council has done in putting this bid together, and there are some exciting plans to revitalise the town and create a new sense of optimism and pride, building on the wonderful history. The heritage, particularly in textiles, is important and global. The Paisley pattern transformed the town into an international textile producer, with tens of thousands of people employed in the thread mills.

The resurgence of the pattern in the 1960s led to the Beatles wearing Paisley print and the creation of Fender’s unique pink Paisley Telecaster guitar, and it is wonderful to see the pattern coming back into fashion again today, as represented by so many Members. That is demonstrated not only by the Member for Paisley himself but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland, who sits next to me resplendent in his Paisley pattern tie, which brings together the best of the UK, because it is made by Ted Baker, showing Britain coming together. But there is more than history, and more than just the Paisley pattern. There are fantastic historical buildings, including the 12th century Paisley abbey and the neoclassical town hall. In fact, the town has one of the highest concentrations of listed buildings anywhere in Scotland.

Support has been given over the past decade to Paisley and across Renfrewshire by the Heritage Lottery fund, which is also supporting the public realm improvements that are taking place in the town. These will turn Paisley’s historic core into a better place to work, live and visit, by converting empty buildings and enhancing the area’s historic townscape. Should the bid be successful, I am sure that that would create a wonderful backdrop to a UK city of culture.

The town already has some important cultural assets. PACE Youth Theatre is one of the largest youth theatres in the UK, and runs workshops to improve young
people’s communication skills, confidence and self-expression. The Spree festival of comedy, music and arts is held during the October school holidays each year, with free activities for families to enjoy. This year, one of the most prestigious events in the Scottish musical calendar, the Scottish album of the year awards, were held in Paisley. And of course there is the Paisley Museum, with its superb collection of Paisley shawls as well as other objects and displays relating to Paisley’s history, art, textiles and natural history. The development of the museum is the flagship project in the council’s regeneration programme, which aims to tell the story of Paisley’s history and transform the town over the next decade. It is great that the council is placing culture at the centre of its regeneration plans.

That brings me to the broader point about the role of the UK city of culture. The impact and importance of culture in improving and anchoring the redevelopment of a town is increasingly being recognised. We have seen this across the past cities of culture, including Derry/Londonderry and Liverpool, as well as in Hull. It is estimated that being next year’s city of culture will deliver a £60 million boost to Hull’s local economy in that year alone. The city has seen investments of more than £1 billion since winning the city of culture title in 2013, and thousands of jobs have been created. This is about improving place and about giving a sense of optimism and positivity to a community. It is about strengthening the whole community. We have seen the cultural offer underpin the regeneration of towns and cities across the country from Margate to Newcastle and from Glasgow to Liverpool, and I hope that it will happen in Paisley, too, notwithstanding the result of this competition.

The hon. Gentleman asked some important specific questions, and I can tell him that we will be bringing forward the formal competition for the UK city of culture 2021, along with guidelines for application, early in the new year. I am delighted that there is such a coalition of support for Paisley’s bid, not just from Ulster but from Paolo Nutini and other cultural icons from the town. Ministerial colleagues from the Scotland Office, including my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, have met representatives of Renfrewshire Council to hear about their vision for Paisley and their bid to be the UK city of culture. This is the third UK city of culture competition and it promises to be incredibly exciting. I am delighted that Phil Redmond has agreed to continue as the chair of the panel for the 2021 competition. He brings a wealth of experience from previous competitions. I am sure that Paisley will engage in the formal process once it starts in the new year.

I wish the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues at the council and elsewhere well. I hope that the UK city of culture competition can bring our country together and provide the anchor for regeneration and redevelopment, for a sense of community and for a strengthened sense of place. I hope that he will play his part as we take this forward. There is only one thing that I am duty bound to deny him. I cannot announce today that Paisley will win the competition, not least because other towns and cities, including in Scotland, are planning to apply. I look forward to the SNP meetings when those various plans are discussed. I can tell him, however, that it will be an open, fair, free and frank competition with towns and cities from right across the UK applying. In the past, the competition has brought the power to transform cities and towns, and I hope that it can continue to do so. I am really excited to see what the next step in that journey will bring in 2021.

7.45 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).
Oral Answers to Questions

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Devolution of Power and Resources: Local Communities

1. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What recent discussions has he had with Cabinet colleagues on further devolution of power and resources from Whitehall to local communities as part of his Department’s preparations for the UK exiting the EU? [907589]

2. Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): What recent discussions has he had with Cabinet colleagues on further devolution of power and resources from Whitehall to local communities as part of his Department’s preparations for the UK exiting the EU? [907593]

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): The vote to leave the European Union was a vote to take back control, and this Government continue to champion devolution to local government.

Chi Onwurah: Newcastle voted to remain; the north-east voted to leave, and that is what we are doing, but no one voted to replace regional European support with centralised Whitehall neglect. Will the Minister confirm that, as powers are returned from Brussels, they will be devolved to the regions? Will he agree to meet me and local government representatives in Newcastle to determine how best to achieve that?

Mr Jones: The hon. Lady invites me to visit Newcastle. In fact, I do intend to visit it, and I look forward to seeing her and local government leaders there. I must point out that this Government are making huge strides towards rebalancing the economy and empowering local government through the devolution of powers away from Whitehall. At the autumn statement, the Government signalled their intention to go further, including exploring devolution to cities such as London and Greater Manchester and to the west midlands, and offering greater flexibility for mayoral combined authorities to borrow for their new functions.

Julie Cooper: Although I voted in the referendum to remain, I fully accept the outcome of the democratic election and my focus now is to ensure that the people in my constituency are not worse off post-Brexit. Given that we have benefited from EU funding to the tune of around £5 million a year, may I seek a guarantee from the Minister that the Government have a plan to ensure that those resources continue to come to my constituency post-Brexit?

Mr Jones: The Government set out a clear plan at the autumn statement for our strategic framework for the northern powerhouse. We are spending £13 billion on transport in the north, establishing Transport for the North and ensuring a statutory status. Investment in the north is very substantial indeed, and that is borne out by the improving—and, indeed, record—levels of employment in the north.

Mr Jones: I am glad that my right hon. Friend is so supportive of Government policy in this regard. He is absolutely right. Frankly, Opposition Members would do well to be more positive about the benefits of Brexit, rather than constantly seeking to talk down the economy.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I fully approve of more money going to the frontline, but can the Minister give me some reassurance that he will not be funding the “regions”—a pernicious invention of people who wanted to break up the United Kingdom into various parts that were not contiguous with any historical links to our communities?

Mr Jones: Indeed, the regions are a European construct. Post-Brexit, we will be able to choose which parts of our country benefit from Government support.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend point out to those who are moaning about the potential loss of EU funding that it is our money in the first place, and that for every £1 we get from the European Union, we have to pay £2 to achieve it?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend makes his point precisely; that is exactly the case. There will be substantial savings following our departure from the European Union, with more to invest in the local economies around our country.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Change in local government is normally done by Bills that go through this House. The system this Government are adopting is to charge local authorities or produce cuts in local
authorities—representing, in Derbyshire’s case, about £155 million—and then to say that if they have the northern “poorhouse”, as it might be called, they will get a little tiny bit back. As for Brexit, we all know why the Secretary of State is going slow on that: because, unlike John Major before him, who had about 18 rebels, this time there are 80 Tory Back Benchers who are in favour of Brexit and about another 80 who are against it. That is why he does not deliver any information.

Mr Jones: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be pleased when article 50 is triggered before the end of March. On the issue of local government in the north, all I can say is that there is huge enthusiasm in northern local authorities for directly elected Mayors.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): We could be a bit more positive if the Government showed us a plan that we could be positive about. I assume the Minister misspoke when he said that the regions are “a European construct”. I can assure him that that is not the case where I come from in the north-east. They are very much not a European construct, but something about which we are intensely proud. For the Government to think that they can negotiate without involving regional businesses, civic leaders, airports and our universities really takes a special kind of narcissism. If there is going to be so much money flowing post-Brexit, why is it that the Government are refusing to guarantee every penny of our regional funding now?

Mr Jones: The hon. Lady is entirely right: it is necessary to consult businesses, universities, civic leaders and all parts of civil society. Indeed, that is precisely what we are doing. The Department is engaging with representatives of over 50 sectors across the economy. This is important work, and it is much better to get a proper, reasonable Brexit than the hasty sort of Brexit that she and her colleagues seem to be advocating.

EU Budget: UK Contribution

2. Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the likelihood of the UK having to contribute to the EU budget after the UK has left the EU. [907590]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Davis): Withdrawing from the EU means decisions on how we spend taxpayers’ money will be made in the United Kingdom. We will strike a deal in the best interests of United Kingdom taxpayers. It is the job of my Department to bring back control over issues such as money, law and borders. As we do so, it will be up to this House and this Government to make the decisions.

Andrew Rosindell: I do not expect the Secretary of State to reveal his negotiating position today, but will he accept that on 23 June the British people voted to restore control over the money that we have paid to the European Union? They want that money spent in the United Kingdom, not subsidising Brussels.

Mr Davis: I understand entirely where my hon. Friend is coming from. Indeed, as he well knows, I have a great deal of sympathy with that viewpoint. Of course we intend to respect the decision of the British people and what underpins it. As he rightly says, it would be irresponsible to set out red lines or to make unilateral decisions at this stage, but it must be made clear that we want decisions over how taxpayers’ money is spent to be made in this House.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): This is a general question, so it provides the Minister with plenty of scope to give some sort of response. Will the Government consider making any contribution in any shape or form for access to the single market?

Mr Davis: I note that the first half of the hon. Gentleman’s question was probably aimed more at you, Mr Speaker, than at me. The simple answer we have given previously—it is very important, because there is a distinction between picking off an individual policy and setting out a major criterion—is that the major criterion here—[Interjection.] I will answer him if he lets me do so. The major criterion is that we get the best possible access for goods and services to the European market. If that is included in what he is talking about, then of course we would consider it.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): One of the decisions that I suppose the Government have to make is when we will stop paying money to the European Union, or whether we then ask for it back. One way to negotiate could be to say, “Well, any money we’ve paid to the European Union after 23 June should come back to us.” Is that not one of the positions we could take?

Mr Davis: I got into trouble once before for saying, “Get thee behind me, Satan”, which was royally misinterpreted in the press. However, my hon. Friend makes a significant point. This money is British money: it will come back to us, and we will decide what to do with it.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): In a week in which it has been reported that the Foreign Secretary told EU ambassadors that he does not agree with the Government’s policy on free movement and that a Dutch Member of Parliament attended a Downing Street briefing on the Government’s Brexit plans, does the Secretary of State understand why the House is getting a little fed up with being told nothing? If he does, will he tell us when the Government will come forward with their plans for Brexit, including for what will happen regarding any future contributions to the European Union after we have left?

Mr Davis: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I am appearing in front of his Committee on 14 December. His Committee has already visited my Department, and we are seeking to help it as much as we can. As a previous Secretary of State for International Development and Cabinet Minister, he also knows full well that the probable success of the negotiations greatly depends on our ability to manage information and to keep secret until the last minute what needs to be kept secret.

As for the other things from this week that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, they are all based on a presumption that a scribbled note in Downing Street is actually anything like Government policy. It is not.
Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): EU Brexit negotiators have been clear about their intent to pursue the UK for an exit bill of anything up to £60 billion based on an expansive interpretation of our liabilities under the EU budget. That is a colossal sum of money and the British public deserve to know from their Government how accurate it is. Will the Secretary of State tell the House how much his Department estimates that it will cost to settle our outstanding liabilities as part of any future withdrawal agreement?

Mr Davis: May I start by welcoming the hon. Gentleman back? I understand that he has a new member of his family, on which the whole House will join me in congratulating him. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] We have seen an opening bid from the European Union. That is what it is. It is nothing more than the maximum price for departure from the Union. If he will forgive me, I am not going to engage in chipping away at that bid; we will start from scratch when we go through the door after March when the negotiations start.

Article 50

3. Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to prepare for triggering Article 50. [907591]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): At home, we are carrying out an extensive programme of sectoral analysis on the key factors that affect our negotiations with the European Union. We are working closely with the devolved Administrations, Parliament and a range of other stakeholders, as we have already heard from the Minister of State. The House should understand that we are also working with every Department to ensure a full range of opportunities.

In Europe, we are undertaking wide-ranging engagement, led by the Prime Minister. I have met representatives of the European Commission and the European Parliament, as well as Ministers and other officials from several European member states.

Heidi Alexander: I am not entirely sure how that answer related to my question, but it was certainly full of flannel. It seems that we are no further forward with a plan to leave the EU than we were five months ago. Will the Secretary of State tell me when the Government are going to drop the pretence that Brexit can mean continued tariff-free access to the single market and an end to freedom of movement? The British public deserve better than that embarrassing charade.

Mr Davis: I am interested to hear the hon. Lady’s supplementary question, which she obviously prepared earlier—[Interruption.] This has been the Labour line for some time. It is really interesting that Labour Members cannot agree among themselves on whether they agree with their Front-Bench spokesman or with their shadow Chancellor. We are four to five months from the triggering of article 50. That will be point at which the negotiations start and it will be clear where we are going.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is quite a bit of room between the phrase “Brexit means Brexit” and a full detailed dossier of negotiation? Does he note that more than one witness to the Exiting the European Union Committee and several Members of Parliament believe that, in order to provide some clarity and deal with some of the current uncertainty, there is room for the Government to publish in advance something on their high-level objectives, which will be known to the EU and to all of us the moment article 50 is triggered? Will he consider that with great urgency?

Mr Davis: Of course I will consider anything my right hon. Friend comes forward with in this area; I know it is a matter of great importance to him. Let me say this: “Brexit means Brexit”, an interesting phrase at the beginning of this exercise, is a long way short of what we have already said, which is that we are aiming to achieve the maximum possible free access to the market and that we need to respect all the implications of the referendum. In between those things, in an important area that nobody seems to talk about, justice and home affairs, we have made it very clear that we want, as far as is possible, to replicate what we already have. We have had a great deal of parliamentary discussion about this matter already and we are going to have a great deal more between now and the triggering of article 50, including the appearance before the Select Committee and so on. So he can expect to know a very great deal about this at the time we get there. I made one particular undertaking at the first Select Committee I attended, the Lords one, which was that this House would be kept at least as well informed as the European Parliament.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): It could be argued that we have made some progress on what the Government’s plans are this week. Once the Secretary of State gets round to moving on from scribbled notes to typed-up notes, will he pass them to the House? Will he tell us whether he briefed the Foreign Secretary before his latest trip, and is freedom of movement still a priority for this Government?

Mr Davis: Let me pick up on the last point first. What I have seen in the papers this morning strikes me as completely at odds with what I know about my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary’s approach to this matter. He believes clearly—he made this clear during the leave campaign, which he was a much more major part of than I was—that some immigration is useful. We all agree on that, but it is not the same as thinking that free movement of people as it now stands is a good idea—it is a problem. On the other aspects of the forward planning, the hon. Gentleman should know—I assume he talks to his opposite number on the Joint Ministerial Committee EN, the Committee that co-ordinates the approaches of the three devolved Administrations—that a great deal of work has been taking place on these matters and all of it is in typed script; none of it is scribbled on a bit of paper.

Stephen Gethins: So what we take from that is: yet more bumbled diplomacy from the Foreign Secretary. On what the Minister of State said about regions being European constructs, I hope he was not referring to the ancient European nation of Scotland or the ancient European nation of Ireland. The Secretary of State will be aware of the First Minister’s successful trip this
week, so what lessons does he take from Ireland and the fact that the number of passport applications has gone up by 50% in that country?

Mr Davis: One lesson I take from it is that if the parties on the Opposition Benches—all of them—continue to frighten people, that is what the response will be. The hon. Gentleman should know, in terms—we have said this over and over again—that we wish to provide the maximum protection for both European citizens here and British citizens abroad. Just so he does not forget this, let me say that the Polish Prime Minister—not just the British Prime Minister—accepted earlier this week in public that both of those matters matter.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We need to speed up, as progress is very slow. I want an extremely short, one-sentence question from Mr Michael Tomlinson.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): On article 50, does the Secretary of State agree that it is right to appeal from the High Court, that it is inevitable that this would end up in the Supreme Court and that this constitutional point needs to be resolved?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: this point is wider than just the issue of article 50; it goes right to the heart of the operation of the Crown prerogative.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have repeatedly said that there will be no running commentary on their article 50 plans, yet there is one. It is being provided by leaked memos, notes caught on camera and the near-constant comments of the Foreign Secretary to anyone who will listen to him. This is serious because it is damaging the prospects of the negotiations getting off to a good start. The Secretary of State must realise that this is going to continue throughout the two years unless and until he discloses to this House the basic plan the Government are adopting. So my question is simple: when is he going to do so?

Mr Davis: The answer is the same one I have given the hon. Gentleman before to exactly the same question, which is that we have already set out the strategic aims—he knows that. He is also aware that we do not want to cut down the options available on things such as the old issue of market access. At this stage, we do not wish to go into great detail on the justice and home affairs front, on which I suspect that we absolutely agree, because we want to get the best possible outcome for Britain. The dominating factor here is not what is in the newspapers, but what is the best outcome for Britain in the long run.

Keir Starmer: The question was when will we see the plan. On 7 November, when the Secretary of State was last at the Dispatch Box, he was asked whether the Government were intending to keep the UK in the customs union. He answered by saying:

“We will make that judgment in due course and make it public in due course.”—[Official Report, 7 November 2016; Vol. 616, c. 1269.]

There are now just 121 days left until the end of March next year. Time is running out. Another simple question is: when does the Secretary of State intend to honour his commitment and make the Government’s position on the customs union clear?

Mr Davis: One hundred and twenty one days is a long time in policy terms, I am afraid. The simple truth is that there is one chance in this negotiation. This is unlike almost anything else that comes in front of this House. With everything else, we can come back and repeal it, change it or amend it later. This is a single-shot negotiation, so we must get it right, and we will get it right by doing the analysis first and the notification second. I will do that. I will meet my promise to the hon. and learned Gentleman—that is no doubt about that—but he will just have to wait until the analysis is complete.

Leaving the EU: Regional Economic Effects

4. Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): What plans his Department has to assess the potential economic effects of the UK exiting the EU across different regions and nations of the UK.

Mr Davis: The answer is the same one I have given the hon. Gentleman before to exactly the same question, which is that we have already set out the strategic aims—he knows that. He is also aware that we do not want to cut down the options available on things such as the old issue of market access. At this stage, we do not wish to go into great detail on the justice and home affairs front, on which I suspect that we absolutely agree, because we want to get the best possible outcome for Britain. The dominating factor here is not what is in the newspapers, but what is the best outcome for Britain in the long run.

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16. [907606] Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): My constituency is one of the most deprived areas in Europe. The last round of regional EU funding for Neath and Port Talbot launched 485 small and medium-sized enterprises, supported 7,300 people into work, and created 1,355 jobs and 5,000 apprenticeships. What is the Government’s plan to continue this vital financial support for Neath, Wales and the UK regions once the UK exits the EU?

Mr Jones: As the hon. Lady will know, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has absolutely guaranteed the continuance of support for such programmes to 2020. She has to bear it in mind that the European Commission itself will not be making its own consideration of any future schemes until that time. We will of course take very seriously the issues that she mentions, but at this stage I cannot confirm anything.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Can the Minister detail the “significant powers”—to use the words of his colleague the Secretary of State for Scotland—due to be devolved to Scotland when he appeared on the “Sunday Politics” programme—due to be devolved to Scotland?

Mr Jones: Yes. We fully acknowledge the importance of the aerospace sector, which is a major employer in his constituency and aerospace is of critical importance to the north-west economy. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the concerns of the aerospace sector will remain one of his top priorities?

Mr Jones: Yes. We fully acknowledge the importance of the aerospace sector, which is a major employer in his constituency and in many other parts of the country. It is very clear to us that, for example, integrated supply chains are important to that industry, which is why we are engaging extremely closely with the industry. Indeed, I had meetings earlier this week.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh: The continuance of support for such programmes to 2020 will ensure that we can continue to support programmes that are working. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to ensure that the European Commission makes its own decision about future schemes and that we do not have to go through the same level of political wrangling as we have already experienced?

Mr Jones: Yes. That is my belief.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): The Prime Minister set out the timetable for triggering article 50 by the end of March 2017. We will soon put before Parliament the great repeal Bill, which will remove from the statute book the European Communities Act 1972 and bring back sovereignty to this Parliament.

Mr Davis: I understand my hon. Friend’s impatience after, as he says, 30 years of campaigning, but there have been 40 years of membership of the Union and it takes some time to decide on the best way of removing us from the Union in the way that people want. On the court case, it is not just a yes/no outcome in December/January. The actual nature of the Bill may be influenced by the outcome, but within that context, yes, we will carry on as rapidly as we possibly can.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): With reference to delivering Brexit in a timely manner, the Secretary of State will be aware that there is a two-year timescale once article 50 is triggered. Is it the Government’s policy that both the Brexit negotiations and the future trade arrangements should be agreed within that two-year period, or are they open to a transitional arrangement if that is not possible?

Mr Davis: Yes, that is my belief.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): I congratulate the Government on the sophistication of their approach to Brexit. Deploying the Foreign Secretary to declare his undying support for free movement of labour is a masterly addition to the policy of chaos and confusion at the heart of the Government’s strategy. If 121 days is a long time in politics, how many days before 31 March will the Government narrow down their range of policies to one and tell us what it is?

Mr Davis: I hear from behind me, “How is your poll rating?” I would not be so cruel to my old friend. We will use all 121 days to get the best possible policy for us and then we will put that single policy to the European Union.

Police and Security Co-operation

7. Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): What discussions has he had with the Home Secretary on maintaining police and security co-operation with EU partners after the UK leaves the EU.

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Mr Pat McFadden: The answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s question is yes. There are other questions on transitional arrangements that I will come to in detail later, as the Speaker will pull me up if I do not. The answer is yes; we want to see them both done in parallel inside the two years.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): As I know from talking to businesses up and down the country, whether they voted to leave or to remain, there is overwhelming consensus—they want get on with this. Uncertainty is the one threat, as opposed to the comically inaccurate forecasts, which have been proved completely wrong, by the remain side. Can the Secretary of State confirm that whichever way the appeal goes in the Supreme Court—the Government do have very good arguments—there will still be time to pass the necessary legislation, if required, and to stick to the timetable of triggering article 50 by the end of March?

Mr Davis: Yes, that is my belief.

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The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): The Secretary of State and I speak regularly to our Home Office colleagues about a range of issues relating to the UK’s exit from the EU. We are both committed to maintaining very close police and security co-operation between the UK and EU member states after we leave the EU. The safety of the British public is, of course, a top priority.

Craig Whittaker: Can my right hon. Friend assure me that after Brexit we will continue this close co-operation with the EU on law enforcement and counter-terrorism in particular, to ensure that we continue to protect not only the UK, but Europe?

Mr Jones: I can assure my hon. Friend that the UK will continue to play a full role in this area at a time of increasing risk of terrorism, Russian belligerence, instability in the middle east and a host of other threats. There is undoubtedly a huge benefit for both the UK and the EU from continued close co-operation in this field.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that the deplorable comments being made about exiting the EU having a destabilising impact on the peace process, or leading to an increase in violence or the return of terrorism, are deeply damaging and wrong? Does he agree that co-operation between the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Garda Síochána has never been better and will continue like that after we exit the EU?

Mr Jones: Yes, I agree entirely and, more importantly, so do the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland and, indeed, the Taoiseach of the Republic of Ireland. Such comments are deeply deplorable.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): The UK has been a lead player in Europol. What is likely to be our access level post-Brexit? Will it be similar to that of non-EU members such as the United States?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend is entirely right: Europol is of importance. As part of the exit negotiations, the Government will discuss with the EU and member states how best to continue co-operation on a range of tools and measures, including membership of Europol.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): In his discussions with the Home Office, has the Minister talked about the letter written to it by the National Farmers Union warning that British fruit and veg will go unpicked this winter because of the current labour crisis in the horticultural and agricultural industries, and what is he doing about that?

Mr Jones: The right hon. Gentleman is entirely right: the agricultural industry has traditionally relied on seasonal agricultural labour. These are matters that we are giving close attention to. Indeed, I discussed them only yesterday with representatives of farming unions.

Select Committees: Ministerial Attendance

8. Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): What is his policy on giving evidence to Select Committees other than the Committee on Exiting the European Union.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): We take parliamentary scrutiny of the Department’s work extremely seriously, and I am delighted to be appearing before the new Select Committee on Exiting the European Union on 14 December. Department for Exiting the European Union Ministers and officials have made 10 appearances before Select Committees since the Department was established and before our own Select Committee was formed. But it is right that we do not overstep our remit and that Ministers across Whitehall—this is a cross-Whitehall operation—are accountable to their own Committees, including in relation to European Union exit.

Paul Flynn: To curb the Secretary of State’s manic optimism, would it not be beneficial for him to get a dose of reality from the Welsh Affairs Committee, which went to Aberystwyth this weekend? Somebody came to me and said, “My company has decided after the referendum not to expand here in Ceredigion but to relocate in Dublin.” Is it not right that the Minister should come, not to tell us what he is doing but so that we can pass on to him the fact that industry is collapsing post-referendum?

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman should perhaps make his point about industry collapsing to Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Nissan, GSK, Jaguar Land Rover and the rest. To come to his substantive point, we consider every request from Select Committees on its individual merits. There are probably something of the order of 30 ongoing projects at the moment. Frankly, if we appeared in front of every Select Committee on all those, we would not have any time to do any negotiation or planning at all.

Science and Technology Sector

9. Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): What representations the Government has received from the science and technology sector on priorities for its negotiations on the UK leaving the EU.

13. Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): What representations the Government has received from the science and technology sector on priorities for its negotiations on the UK leaving the EU.

19. Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): What steps he is taking to negotiate the UK’s continued participation in European science and research programmes after the UK has withdrawn from the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): The Department has a wide programme of engagements to ensure that the views of the science and technology sector are heard. For example, we have recently met representatives of the life sciences and tech sectors, and will continue to meet them in the coming months. While it is too early to speculate on our future relationship with EU science and research programmes, as part of our commitment to make Britain the global go-to nation for scientists, innovators and tech investors, we will be investing an extra £2 billion in research and development by the end of this Parliament.
Lucy Frazer: I thank the Minister for that answer. The life sciences and pharma sectors are concerned that they need globally recognised and equivalent regulations to compete internationally. Can the Minister assure me that he will continue to work closely with these sectors to ensure they have the best possible opportunities in the Brexit negotiations?

Mr Walker: My hon. and learned Friend is right, and the Government are committed to ensuring a positive outcome for the UK’s life sciences and the pharmaceuticals sector as we exit the European Union. We have welcomed many hundreds of millions of pounds of new investment from Alnylam and GSK, and I can assure her that Ministers in our Department are engaging, and will continue to engage, with the pharma and life sciences industry to ensure that we take the opportunities as well as meet the challenges ahead.

Mrs Gillan: In Europe’s largest space innovation competition this year, the UK took the top prize and four major awards. We have been one of the leaders in, and most successful exploiters of, space technology, and it is vital that this support continues. In particular, can the Minister confirm that the European Space Agency is entirely independent and not an EU organisation, and that our membership of and participation in ESA will continue, as will the UK’s involvement in space research?

Mr Walker: Absolutely. The UK space industry, in which I understand my right hon. Friend’s husband has played an important part, is a global success story, leveraging our best talent to deliver highly innovative products and services every year. We want a UK space industry that captures 10% of the global market by 2030, creating 100,000 new jobs. The UK will remain a member of the ESA, which is not a part of the EU. The ESA’s next ministerial council is being held in Lucerne today, attended by my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation.

Dr Mathias: May I thank the Minister for taking time last week to meet me and science and engineering companies from my constituency? Will he heed the calls made at that meeting, specifically to continue the easy and free movement of scientists across Europe and to maintain our participation in European projects?

Mr Walker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for arranging that very useful meeting. I will repeat what the Secretary of State has said before:

“We will always welcome those with the skills, the drive and the expertise to make our nation better still...Britain has always been one of the most tolerant and welcoming places on the face of the earth. It must and it will remain so.

We are a global leader in scientific collaboration, and we want that to continue.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Is it the Government’s policy to exit the European Medicines Agency at the same time as we exit the EU?

Mr Walker: The Government are committed to ensuring a positive outcome for life sciences and pharma as we exit the European Union. The Prime Minister has already outlined steps to make sure that we continue to back research and development. No decisions have yet been taken as to the final location of the European Medicines Agency.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): T.G. Eakin, which is located in my constituency, is a successful business that supplies medical equipment throughout the world. It is imperative that such businesses are kept informed of progress. Will the Minister outline how his Department will achieve that?

Mr Walker: We continue to engage very closely with businesses across sectors and across the whole of the UK. We have already had a number of engagements in Northern Ireland, and there will be many more to come.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The absence of a Government plan for the science and technology sector is causing huge uncertainty. The Minister will be aware that the current funding arrangements for the ITER project, which includes a JET—Joint European Torus—centre for fusion energy in the UK, run out in 2018. If he can say nothing else about the Government’s plan, will he confirm that the UK will seek to maintain full participation in the Euratom programme?

Mr Walker: I think that the hon. Gentleman’s question is better directed to Ministers at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but I am sure that that is something on which we will work closely with them.

Transitional Deal

10. Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Whether the Government plan to seek a transitional deal with the EU as part of their strategy for the UK exiting the EU.

Emma Reynolds: The Prime Minister recently told the CBI conference that we want to avoid a cliff edge. Further to the answer that the Secretary of State gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), and given that our EU partners have so far refused to commit to parallel negotiations on our future arrangements alongside those on article 50, what is the plan if we cannot start, let alone conclude, those negotiations within two years? Will we be forced off that cliff and on to World Trade Organisation rules and tariffs, with all the consequences for jobs and investment that business has warned of?

Mr Davis: The substance of the hon. Lady’s question is incredibly important and, as she has said, the Prime Minister addressed it at the CBI. She addressed it again yesterday and that is why she has said that we want a smooth and orderly exit. How that occurs will be affected by a number of things. The hon. Lady has mentioned the structural issue relating to whether the negotiation
is done in parallel or in series. We do not accept the series approach. We have made that plain to the European Union, and we need to deal with that before we come to the detailed question of whether there is a transition or not.

On transition itself, I make this important point. The Select Committee Chairman, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), is sitting next to the hon. Lady, Transition, when it is raised by various people, will mean different things. For example, when the Europeans talk about it, it effectively means a much longer negotiation period, while other people are concerned about matters such as financial stability. There are different issues that need to be dealt with in a different way.

Mr Speaker: I do not know why the right hon. Gentleman says that he needs to make an important point; all points made by Secretaries of State ought to be important, as should the points made to them.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): UK money through the European Union funds important international development projects all over the world. As part of any transitional arrangements, will the Secretary of State make sure that those continue to be supported and that the plug is not pulled when or if the UK finally leaves?

Mr Davis: There is no “if” about it. There is a “when.” I say that to the hon. Gentleman quite firmly, because that is part of the problem that the European Union has had in engaging on the process so far. Many of them want to see this not happen and they have to face up to that so we get the right answer.

The hon. Gentleman raises a significant issue. I have not addressed it in detail myself, but I will do so. Will he forgive me if I write to him on this matter, because it is sufficiently important that I think I should do so?

Higher Education

Gavin Newlands: I thank the Minister for that answer. The University of the West of Scotland provides a high-quality and accessible education, and the university’s 112 staff from the EU are absolutely critical in delivering that. Can the Minister guarantee EU staff working across higher education and further education the right to remain without any visa conditions when the UK leaves the EU?

Mr Walker: We value highly the contribution of EU and international researchers and academic staff. We remain fully open to scientists and researchers from across the EU, and we will always welcome those with the skills, drive and expertise to make our nation better still. Regarding those who are already in the UK, we have been clear that there has been no change to the rights and status of EU nationals in the UK as a result of the referendum.

Chris Elmore: In 2014-15, there were 43,000 EU staff in the UK higher education sector. Those people are making decisions now about their future. When will the Government give them certainty, and what is in the Government’s plan for Brexit to ensure that our universities can benefit from the contribution of those staff members once we have left the EU?

Mr Walker: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer that I have just given. I think we have been very clear that we want to continue to attract the top talent and that we want the UK to remain a leader in research, which means attracting people from the EU and from around the wider world.

Jeff Smith: The Erasmus exchange programme has enabled 200,000 UK students and 20,000 staff to spend time abroad. That enhances their employability, improves their knowledge and promotes understanding between cultures. What is the plan to ensure that that kind of valuable exchange can continue in future?

Mr Walker: There is no change for those who are currently participating in, or about to start, Erasmus+. Erasmus+ offers a range of programmes to countries across Europe and beyond. Post-exit access to Erasmus+ will be a matter for the negotiations that will follow the triggering of article 50. The Erasmus+ programme has proved to be a valuable tool that helps organisations and citizens to achieve their potential through international education, training and collaborative opportunities. As part of our vision for the UK as a global nation, I am sure we will want to look at how such an approach can be perpetuated in the future.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The Secretary of State was absolutely right to say earlier that we only get one chance at this, so the Prime Minister is absolutely right to make sure that we have listened to all the representations, including those from universities, before invoking article 50. Does he agree that it is far preferable to have a full, hearty Brexit than a rushed, messy, unsatisfactory dog’s breakfast?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and it is important that we listen to and take on board the evidence from the university sector.
Ministerial Discussions: Scottish Government

15. Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Ministers of the Scottish Government on the Government’s plans for the UK leaving the EU.

Mr Davis: May I say two things to the hon. Lady? It is a serious issue and I accept that she takes it seriously, as we all do. As I said last time—I hope this gets promulgated—the majority of European nationals already have the right indefinitely to remain because of the time they have been here, or if they have been here for two and a half years, they will certainly have that before we leave. More to the point of what she said, we discussed the matter with the Poles and several other European countries, and they accept in terms—indeed, the Polish Prime Minister said it in public two days ago—that this has to be dealt with at the same time as British citizens abroad because they, too, will feel a nervousness and we must not let them hanging.

Ruth Cadbury: I also have many constituents who are EU citizens actively contributing to our community and our economy, and they are worried about their future here. This Government have the power to give them certainty and to find the best way to ensure reciprocal guarantees for UK citizens in other EU countries. Is it fair to use one group of people to hold another to ransom?

Mr Davis: The phrase, “holding people to ransom” is mightily unhelpful to the whole argument. Our whole strategy is designed to avoid holding anybody to ransom and to ensure that everybody who should have rights gets them recognised at the same time. I am afraid that the arguments in the European domain in the last week have reinforced that viewpoint. As the Prime Minister said yesterday, it demonstrates that we are taking the right approach. If it were up to us, we would have this resolved in months, but we have to get agreement with the European Union, too.

Topical Questions
transitional regime for the financial sector beyond the two-year Brexit negotiations. On a scale of one to 10, how closely does the Secretary of State agree with the Chancellor?

**Mr Davis:** On a scale of one to 10, I will give that number when I hear what the Chancellor says myself, rather than hear that routed through the hon. Gentleman. The substantive point—transition—is material. We have said that the first thing to determine is the endpoint and the outcome. Whether we need a transition will be dictated by that in the first instance. As I said earlier to the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds), what transition means is itself a moot point.

T2.  [907580] **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): On 23 June, the British people voted to leave the European Union, no ifs, no buts. Yesterday, my Withdrawal Bill from the European Union (Article 50) Bill was read the First time. Second Reading is expected on 16 December. Does the Secretary of State agree that, whether by royal prerogative or a Bill, article 50 will be triggered by 31 March?

**Mr Davis:** Yes.

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): May I return to the question of EU nationals? Home Office figures released this morning indicate that the number applying for permanent residency in the UK has increased by 50% in the quarter since the referendum. The Brexit Secretary keeps returning to the question of people's opportunity to apply for leave to remain. Does he not recognise that that process is not automatic, costs money, is complex and is not guaranteed? Will he not simply do what the British public want and give them the right to stay?

**Mr Davis:** Frankly, the hon. Gentleman allows me to reiterate the important point I made earlier. [Interruption.] I will get to the issue of leave to remain. By the time we get to the end of the process, five out of six European nationals who are here already will have the automatic right. The hon. Gentleman got that wrong—when it comes down to it, it is effectively automatic. After six years, people get the right to citizenship, which is important.

The hon. Gentleman is right that we would like to resolve this in a fast, expeditious and comforting manner for the individuals concerned, but we have a responsibility to 1 million British citizens abroad, and we must protect them as well.

T3.  [907581] **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The tourism industry sustains 3 million jobs in the UK. Brexit presents the sector with many opportunities and challenges. How is the Department engaging with the tourism industry?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** The Government fully recognise the contribution that tourism makes to our economy and communities in all parts of the UK. Foreign visitors contribute £22 billion to our economy. There were record numbers of overseas visitors each month from July to September—10.7 million in total. I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for hosting a roundtable with some of the key players in the hospitality sector, which I attended last week shortly after attending the Tourism Industry Council. As the Prime Minister has said, we are confident that our exit represents opportunities for growth in tourism, and we will work closely with the industry to achieve them.

T6.  [907584] **Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): In evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs revealed that between a quarter and a third of the UK's environmental legislation that comes from the EU will not be neatly transposed through the great repeal Bill. Will the Secretary of State tell the House whether legislation to protect our air and improve our water quality, and to set waste and chemical standards for products going into the EU, will be part of the great repeal Bill, or will we have to wait for legislation after we leave?

**Mr David Davis:** That will be part of the great repeal Bill. If there is any amendment, I would think it would be done through primary legislation in the House.

T5.  [907583] **Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend reject the advice of those calling for a second referendum and agree with me that seeking to reverse the decision that the people of the country made on 23 June serves only to undermine public trust in the House and in our democracy?

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): My hon. Friend is entirely right: there will be no second referendum.

T7.  [907585] **Graham Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State say what the current tariff is for motor vehicles entering the European Union? If we do not get a trade deal, when will British car manufacturers start paying that tariff—what date?

**Mr David Jones:** Our intention is to seek the best possible access to the European market, and to provide similar access for Europeans to this market. That is the basis upon which we are approaching the negotiations.

T9.  [907587] **Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): Those working in Rolls-Royce in Barnoldswick and elsewhere in my constituency benefit from employment rights that in many cases are ahead of those elsewhere in the European Union. Will the Minister confirm that they will remain in place from the point when we leave the EU?

**Mr Jones:** I can confirm that. We had a debate very recently in which that point was reiterated several times.

T8.  [907586] **Roger Mullin** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Following the Chancellor’s statement, will the Secretary of State point to the precise page on which we can find the Brexit bonanza in either the autumn statement or the Office for Budget Responsibility forecast?

**Mr David Davis:** I recommend to the hon. Gentleman the comments of the shadow Chancellor, who said that Britain should grasp the opportunities available and use Brexit to transform society. Sadly, the shadow Brexit Secretary does not help.
Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On the question of the port services regulation, does my right hon. Friend accept that it is opposed by the Government, the Opposition, the trade unions and all port employers? The issue is about to be decided by the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers. Does he agree that it should be voted against?

Mr David Jones: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The regulation is not designed for the British system. We intend to oppose it, but sadly it will be carried by a qualified majority vote.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The OBR, the IMF, the Bank of England, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research and the London School of Economics all say that Britain’s share of world exports will fall post-Brexit. Does that not show how empty the Government’s rhetoric is about us being a global leader in world trade?

Mr David Davis: The hon. Lady should be very wary about taking economic assumptions underpinning a forecast as a statement of what is going to happen. The outcome after the Brexit process is over will depend very much on the deal we strike. That will be a good deal and there will be an increase in the amount of world trade we take.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Major pharmaceutical investors, such as Eli Lilly in my constituency, use a common EU system for medicine regulation in clinical trials to help British patients to gain access to the best treatments in the world. What work is the Minister doing to ensure that the decades-long co-operation with the EU is maintained after Brexit not just for the benefit of companies but for the benefit of patients?

Mr Robin Walker: I assure my right hon. Friend that we will be looking very carefully at that. As I said earlier, no decisions have yet been made about the future location of the European Medicines Agency. Until we have left the EU, the UK remains a member with all the rights and obligations that membership entails. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency continues to play a full role in all procedures of the EU medical device regulatory framework.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): What priority has the ministerial team given to achieving continued tariff-free access and continued membership of the single market?

Mr David Davis: Those are two different things. As I said earlier, we give very high priority to both tariff-free access and access without tariff barriers, at least no more than there are already—there are plenty. That may or may not include membership of the single market, but it is achievable by a number of different methods.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The fishing industry has never fully recovered from the sell-out in the original negotiations to enter Europe. Can Ministers assure me that the fishing industry will have a much higher priority in this set of negotiations?

Mr David Jones: I can assure my hon. Friend that the fishing industry is at the forefront of our considerations. We have already had several meetings with the industry’s representatives and will continue to do so.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Businesses across a range of sectors in my constituency are concerned about their ongoing ability to attract and retain skilled labour as a consequence of Brexit. Will the Secretary of State say what he is doing both to reassure businesses that in future there will be the opportunity for skilled labour to migrate to this country, and to retain people who are already considering leaving now?

Mr David Davis: The function of my Department and this strategy is to bring back the control of migration to the British Government and the British Parliament. That will be exercised in the national interest. That means that we would expect to see pretty free movement of highly talented labour and, in other aspects of the economy, it is not in the national interest to cause labour shortages. Therefore, businesses should be aware that this is not shutting the door; it is taking back control.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): On reciprocal rights for United Kingdom and EU citizens, does the Secretary of State agree that the Prime Minister is absolutely right to be seeking an early resolution, and to be already speaking with individual member states?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right and that is why we have taken this strategy. I hope that, at the end of the day, there will be unanimity so we can get early movement.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Since 2014, Scottish small and medium-sized enterprises have received over €21 million in funding through Horizon 2020. What assurances can the Minister give that firms that they should continue bidding for the scheme. The current EU budget and the framework for Horizon 2020 runs only up to 2020. What assurances can the Minister give that firms will be eligible for equivalent funding before and after 2020?

Mr Robin Walker: As the hon. Lady knows, the Treasury has already given strong assurances up to 2020, beyond the period of our exiting the EU. That is an important signal to SMEs, universities and others that they should continue bidding for the scheme. The current EU budget and the framework for Horizon 2020 runs only up to 2020.

Mr Speaker: On the principle of humanitarian assistance to the involuntarily delayed, I call Mr Henry Smith.

T4. [907582] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): My sincere thanks, Mr Speaker, for your understanding.

With regard to the EU exit negotiations, does my right hon. Friend agree that, for the first time in history perhaps, we start from an equal point, which is a great advantage to this country’s position?

Mr David Jones: My hon. Friend is entirely right. On the day we leave the EU, we will be in perfect alignment with the rest of the EU regulations, directives and so on, which gives us a strong, solid base for moving forward with negotiations.
Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Prime Minister, in an attempt to set the right tone for negotiations, has offered an early agreement on the status of EU nationals living in the UK. Is the Secretary of State disappointed that, in a petulant post-referendum response from the EU Commission, this offer has been refused, and will he assure us that, should this hard line continue, there will be no lack of resolve on the Government’s part to detach us from the chains of the EU?

Mr David Davis: The Government will not be so easily put off, although the hon. Gentleman is quite right. It would have been better if we had got a better response from the EU—but I will not say anything rude about those involved. One of the interesting disciplines of the next two years is that I will be polite to everybody.

Mr Speaker: Preserving the habits of a lifetime, I feel sure.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The agricultural and food sectors are incredibly significant in the Corby and east Northamptonshire economy, employing thousands of local people. What steps are Ministers taking to engage fully with these sectors to make sure that their needs are totally understood?

Mr David Jones: My hon. Friend is entirely right. We hold regular meetings, both with our colleagues at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and with the various stakeholders in the industry. Only yesterday, I and the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), held a roundtable at my Department to discuss these very issues.

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): A major retailer has raised with me whether they would continue to invest in the north-west because of potential tariffs. What comfort can the Minister give to such businesses?

Mr David Davis: Interestingly, one of the first business meetings I had was in Blackburn, at the invitation of the former MP for the area, Jack Straw. We are clear that we are seeking tariff-free, barrier-free access, and we—I certainly, as a northern MP—have the interests of industry throughout Britain, particularly the north, very much in mind.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must now move on.
Business of the House

10.37 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): The business for next week will be as follows:

Monday 5 December—Second Reading of the Children and Social Work Bill [Lords].

Tuesday 6 December—Remaining stages of the Health Services Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill.

Wednesday 7 December—Opposition day (15th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

Thursday 8 December—Debate on a motion on UN international day for the elimination of violence against women followed by a general debate on cancer strategy one year on. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 9 December—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 12 December will include:

Monday 12 December—Remaining stages of the Savings (Government Contributions) Bill.

Tuesday 13 December—Remaining stages of the Neighbourhood Planning Bill.

Wednesday 14 December—Opposition day (16th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

Thursday 15 December—Debate on a motion on the creation of a commercial financial dispute resolution platform followed by a general debate on UK negotiations on future co-operation with EU member states on scientific and university research projects. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 16 December—Private Members’ Bills.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 8, 12 and 15 December will be:

Thursday 8 December—Debate on the fourth report of the Scottish Affairs Committee on post-study work schemes followed by general debate on the UK ivory trade.

Monday 12 December—Debate on an e-petition relating to the closure of retail stores on Boxing day.

Thursday 15 December—Debate on the fourth report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on air quality followed by a debate on the second report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on greyhound welfare.

Colleagues will also wish to know that subject to the progress of business, the House will rise for the Easter recess on Thursday 30 March 2017 and return on Tuesday 18 April 2017.

The House will not sit on Monday 1 May.

Subject to the progress of business, the House will rise for the Whitsun recess on Thursday 25 May 2017 and return on Monday 5 June 2017.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for those dates. I press him to be a little bolder, because he still has to come up with one date—for the summer recess. If he could do that for next time, it would be great.

Members want a vote on the boundary Bill. What progress has been made on the money resolution for the Bill?

On this day in 1942, the Beveridge report was published. It showed us what it meant to be a caring society in which people are supported when they most need it as a safety net. Saturday 3 December is International Day of Persons with Disability, but the Government have still not confirmed whether they will end the humiliating and harmful reassessments of people with long-term conditions who have applied for personal independence payments. May we have a statement, following yesterday’s report from the National Audit Office showing that sanctions on welfare payments have been handed out without any evidence that they work? The figures for 2015 show that £132 million was held back in benefits; £35 million was paid in hardship; and the cost of administering the scheme was £50 million. It is going to be worse next year, because the Government have lowered the benefit cap. The NAO concluded that there was no evidence that sanctions provide value for money for the British taxpayer.

The Leader of the House mentioned the debate on science that was arranged by the Backbench Business Committee. I ask the Government to make a further commitment to UK science—more than just an injection of funding. The Prime Minister recently said that our competitors are not standing still but investing heavily in research and development. On UK science and research, we are standing still—frozen by Brexit. Damage is done to networks of collaboration. Over 60% of the UK’s international co-authored papers involve partners in the EU, so may we have an urgent debate in Government time on support to UK science and research to ensure that the promised £2 billion will protect those collaborations and networks that form the foundation of world-class science? This is about preserving a shared culture and intellectual heritage.

We also celebrate a Labour Government commitment, made on 1 December 2001, to keeping museums free. On the 10th anniversary, research carried out found that audiences became more diverse after the introduction of free admissions. The number of visitors from ethnic minority backgrounds to Department for Culture, Media and Sport-sponsored museums rose by 177.5%. That all adds to our education—widening our horizons; fulfilling our potential; understanding each other and the world around us; and providing us with lifelong learning.

We also celebrate last month—we are only a day out—the birth of Jennie Lee on 3 November and, sadly, on 16 November her death. She was a fantastic Member of this House, who introduced the Open University—another Labour Government success. However, the number of part-time students aged 21 and over has declined by 57%. Figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency and the Open University have shown that the lost part-time students correlate to the highest participating age group in the UK labour force. That not only affects social mobility but makes it vital to fill the UK skills gap, driving up international competitiveness and productivity.
[Valerie Vaz]

This Government are not a Government of education, and neither are they a Government of law and order, with 47 magistrates courts shut and 45 to follow in 2017. These courts deal with 90% of criminal cases. Many magistrates are resigning—75 of them over the issue of criminal courts charges. Neither are they a Government of business. Business wants transitional arrangements, but we know from the memo that was shown to the whole world that the Government have said no to such arrangements before Brexit.

This is not the Government of unity. The Prime Minister has her three backing singers, like the Three Degrees: the Foreign Secretary, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union—whose Department is now known as DExEU—and the Secretary of State for International Trade, who, apparently, is allowed to deal only with international trade outside the EU, the rest being done by the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union.

We also need an urgent debate, which was promised by the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, on the comprehensive economic and trade agreement. The Government cannot just have turf wars; they must also deal with the sovereignty of Parliament and accountability to the House.

This is not the Government of the national health service, either. It is a case of “Social care crisis? What crisis?” Only recently, NHS England lost a case in the High Court. Today is World AIDS day. The drug Pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP, has been shown to reduce the risk of infection by 90%, and it can now be commissioned by the NHS as a result of that ruling.

Both you and the Leader of the House, Mr Speaker, have received a letter from the World Wildlife Fund about Earth Hour. May I ask the Leader of the House to use his best offices to ensure that the lights in the Norman Shaw South building can be turned off? They have been on constantly since last December. We in Norman Shaw South want to take part in Earth Hour day.

Mr Lidington: Let me begin with the hon. Lady’s final question. I will certainly make inquiries of those in the relevant part of the House’s administration department about the lights in Norman Shaw South.

The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the importance of World AIDS day. As far as the Government are concerned, this country remains committed to ending the AIDS epidemic as a public health threat by 2030. We recently pledged a further £1.1 billion to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, which will provide essential antiretroviral therapy for 1.3 million people who are living with HIV. That, of course, is in addition to the £2.4 million national HIV prevention and sexual health promotion programme.

The hon. Lady mentioned the recent court case on PrEP. I think it is good that we have legal clarity about where responsibility lies. Clearly, in the light of the court judgment, NHS England will now consider its normal process of assessment whether and how PrEP should be made available to patients on the NHS.

Given that we have just had an hour of questions to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the House has been able to discuss the matters raised by the hon. Lady in some detail. However, the importance of ensuring the strength and vitality of the country’s science base—including, critically, its important relationships with universities and scientific institutions—in Europe and globally will of course be an important element of the Government’s approach to the forthcoming negotiation.

I join the hon. Lady in saluting the work done by our great museums, both our great national museums here in London—and, I should add, in Edinburgh, Belfast and Cardiff—and our regional and local museums, which do tremendous work. I remember, as a small child, being taken off on rainy half-term days to some of the museums in London, and I agree with the hon. Lady that they perform an important educational and cultural role.

In the spirit of these weekly occasions, I am more than happy to pay tribute to the work of the late Jennie Lee. There have been formidable champions of the arts on both sides of the House over the years, but I think that Jennie Lee was the first Arts Minister to be formally designated as such, and she has an important place in the history of public policy on the arts.

The hon. Lady referred to skills. The Government are committed to creating 3 million new apprenticeships during the current Parliament, and to continuing the work to drive up the quality of education that our children receive in schools. It should be a point of remark—not of complacency, but of some celebration—that more children than ever before attend state schools that are categorised by Ofsted as either good or outstanding.

The hon. Lady referred to magistrates courts, and all of us who have been through this process in our own constituencies know it can be a painful one, but in an age when quite a lot of routine court work can now be done more effectively, swiftly and cheaply online, doing away with the need for as many personal appearances—particularly when there is not actually a trial—there is not the need for quite so many individual courtrooms as there used to be. That is why my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor is looking realistically at how our justice and courts system is best equipped to deal with the challenges of the 21st century and the digital age in an effective fashion.

I was disappointed that the hon. Lady made no reference in her comments about benefits to the recent announcement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that he will do away with the need for reassessments of people who suffer from the most serious disabilities and chronic and degenerative medical conditions. I would have hoped the entire House welcomed that.

I think the hon. Lady is playing to the gallery a bit, frankly, when it comes to benefit sanctions. As the National Audit Office itself pointed out in its report, our current sanctions system has existed since 1996; it was in operation throughout the 13 years of the Blair and Brown Governments, because the Labour party in government recognised that a sanctions system, properly applied, was a necessary part of a fair benefits system. In any month, fewer than 1% of employment and support allowance claimants and fewer than 4% of jobseeker’s allowance claimants are now sanctioned, and we have seen a halving of sanctions in the past year alone. So I think the Department for Work and Pensions is showing it is trying to address genuine concerns, but we do not flinch—as the Labour party in opposition
appears to flinch from its record in government—from accepting that a sanctions system is necessary for the fair functioning of our welfare arrangements.

The hon. Lady asked for a debate on the EU-Canada trade agreement. [Interruption.] Of course, under the provisions of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, that treaty will have to be laid before Parliament in the normal way, so there will be an opportunity for such a debate.

While I enjoyed the hon. Lady’s little jibe about music—[Interruption.] I was given a long list of questions by the Opposition. She asked about a serious point in respect of the private Member’s Bill on boundaries. The Member promoting the Bill published it only three days before it was down for its Second Reading debate, and it was not accompanied by any kind of statement or analysis of the costs associated with it. So the Government are now going through the normal process of trying to establish what those costs are before coming forward further to the House.

Finally, the hon. Lady talked about a discordant band. [Interruption.] I have to say that if I were looking for dissonance and atonality, I would be looking at Members on the Benches opposite, who are members of a party—

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) rose—

Mr Lidington: It is always good to have the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). Some 70% of Labour party Members of Parliament have expressed no confidence in their current leader; that strikes me as a party that is engaging in a premium on brevity from Front and Back Benches which I am very keen to accommodate, too? So there is adequate subscribed and all of the contributors to the Backbench Business Committee, both of which are more than with my usual practice, I do want to accommodate all would-be contributors to the business statement, but I remind the House that there are two subsequent debates to take place under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee, both of which are more than adequately subscribed and all of the contributors to which I am very keen to accommodate, too? So there is a premium on brevity from Front and Back Benches alike, now to be brilliantly exemplified by Mrs Maria Miller.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): The Government acknowledge that the level of sexual harassment and violence in our schools is worrying, but they have not yet embraced my Select Committee’s recommendation to make sex and relationship education compulsory. Will the Government make time for an urgent debate to demonstrate the support for that measure not only in the House but from nine out of 10 parents in this country?

Mr Lidington: It is important that all schools should be safe places and that no young person should fear, let alone suffer, harassment or violence, and we want all schools to put high quality personal, social, health and economic education, including age-appropriate sex education, at the heart of their curriculum. We are looking again at the case for further action on PSHE and sex education, not least in the light of the views that my right hon. Friend and her Committee have expressed, with particular consideration to improving quality and accessibility.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I also thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. May we have a debate on cake, and on the perennial question of whether it can be consumed simultaneously? Apparently, that conundrum is now at the very heart of this Government’s clueless Brexit strategy. Meanwhile the Foreign Secretary has expressed the view, over a generous slice of Battenberg at the ambassador’s residence, that he is simultaneously for and against freedom of movement. I am pretty certain that the Leader of the House and the Prime Minister would like the Foreign Secretary to have his cake and choke on it.

The English votes for English laws shambles continues apace, with the Constitution Unit concluding that its procedures are opaque and that no one understands them. Apparently, there are only three people who understand them: you, Mr Speaker; the chief Clerk; and someone who is now dead. I have checked Hansard, and I now hold the record for speeches made in the English Legislative Grand Committee. Following the great demand in the shires of England during the last election for English votes for English laws, I am pretty certain that no one was expecting the Scottish National party Member for Perth and North Perthshire to hold the record for contributing to this English quasi-Parliament.

Finally, no sane person is expecting the Government to be successful in the Supreme Court on Monday. In fact, everyone is expecting them to get a gigantic gubbing at the hands of our judges. So how quickly will we see the legislation on article 50 being brought to the House? Will the Leader of the House at last confirm that the Bill will be amendable, and that there will be an appropriate amount of time for all Members to contribute to the debate?

Mr Lidington: On that last point, it is obviously up to the Court when it brings in its judgment, and the Government will, as always, abide by the rule of law. If we need to bring forward legislation, we will do so. I have never come across a Bill, long or short, that has been incapable of being amended—when the amendments are in order—given sufficient ingenuity on the part of hon. Members. Whether a particular amendment is in order will of course be a matter for you, Mr Speaker, rather than for me.

I have looked at the report on English votes for English laws, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, and I found in it some proposals for certain procedural changes. I will take those into consideration as part of the review of EVEL that the Government are currently carrying out.

I always enjoy Scottish cake, be it a Dundee cake, a clootie dumpling or anything else coming from north of the border, but it is absolutely clear that what the Government are seeking to achieve in the forthcoming EU negotiation is the best possible deal in terms of economic opportunity and of future political relationships
between ourselves and the other 27 countries that will work in the interests of the prosperity and security of the people of every single part of the United Kingdom.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): The Supreme Court will be making an important decision in the next few days. It is now very much part of our constitutional structure, but there is a lack of parliamentary accountability in relation to its appointments. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate about the appointment of Supreme Court judges and the approval of such appointments by Parliament?

Mr Lidington: I hope that we do not go down the route in this country of allowing political considerations to play a part in the appointment of judges. In our current system, their appointment depends on a balance—embodied in numerous conventions over the years, rather than written into law—with Parliament and the Government respecting the judiciary’s place in our constitutional settlement, and I very much hope that that will always continue to be the case. There will be Justice questions next week—on Tuesday, I believe—when my hon. Friend may have the opportunity to question the Lord Chancellor on this directly.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): Ahead of the Christmas recess and what seems likely to be a dangerous winter in the NHS, is there not an overwhelming case for the Government to come to the House in their own time to explain what is happening with the funding of social care? Councils had been led to believe that there would be an announcement in the autumn statement and they were left stunned, as were Members on both sides of the House, when the Chancellor could not even mention the words. I am told No. 10 blocked a deal on social care—a funding package had been prepared—calling for more work on funding options. I do not know whether that is true, but I know that people working in the NHS have a right to know because they need to plan. Ministers need to come to the Dispatch Box and tell us what the hell is going on.

Mr Lidington: The Government, as the Secretary of State for Health has made clear, are engaged in some very serious and co-ordinated winter planning, and the NHS has winter plans in place at national, regional and local level to manage the increase in demand that we always expect at this time of year. The right hon. Gentleman referred to social care. Yes, all of us are aware of the pressures that exist in our constituencies. That is why the Government have made available the social care precept and the better care fund to make sure that additional resources are available to local authorities.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Last week, the all-party group on peninsula rail, of which I am the chairman, published its report on the future of the rail network in the south-west. May we have a debate, or for that matter a statement, about the Government’s reaction to it, especially on the pilot scheme for signalling?

Mr Lidington: I am glad that my hon. Friend has raised this matter, because the Chancellor announced in the autumn statement an additional £450 million to trial innovative digital rail signalling technology. The peninsula rail campaigners may be able to seek to benefit from that pot of money. I hope he will very much welcome, as a token of the Government’s commitment to the south-west, the £10 million of additional development funding announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer for the railway line from Exeter to Newton Abbot via Dawlish. I am sure all colleagues from the south-west will welcome that much needed work.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May we have a debate in Government time on openness and transparency within the BBC, so that we can explore its London-centric, anti-regions and anti-countries of the UK approach? Such an approach is exemplified by its nominations for the sports personality of the year, all but two of whom are from England and from which Carl Frampton—he has been recognised as the greatest boxer of the year, as a double world champion at two different weights—has been excluded, causing outrage across the communities in Northern Ireland. A debate on people’s ever growing concern about the BBC would be very timely.

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Gentleman makes the point powerfully. As he would expect me to say, the BBC is and rightly should remain independent of ministerial direction. However, I think the entire House will want to salute the contribution that sportsmen and women from Northern Ireland make to our national success, and long may that continue to be the case.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): North East Lincolnshire Council is currently involved in putting together a number of regeneration projects that will attract private sector investment. Such investment is essential to the regeneration of our provincial towns. Similar schemes have been put together up and down the country. Will the Government find time for a debate on this important issue, and on how the Government can support local authorities with these projects?

Mr Lidington: Such initiatives are important and it is right that they should be locally driven and therefore reflect the particular circumstances of individual towns, cities and counties. My hon. Friend may have the opportunity to seek a debate in Westminster Hall to highlight his area’s particular needs, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will welcome the initiative. I am sure that the Government will do what they are able to do to give support to local authorities and the private sector, which are rightly taking the lead.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): With reference to the Leader of the House’s answer to my hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House regarding the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, will he indicate what date is pencilled in for the money resolution to be brought forward?

Mr Lidington: As I said, the Government are working through the Bill’s costs and carrying out the legal checks to ensure that it is properly compliant. There are recent examples of private Members’ Bills having eight, 12 or
15 sitting days between Second Reading and the securing of the money resolution, so what is happening is not at all extraordinary.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Local authorities up and down the country are publishing their draft budgets for spending over the next year. Most have welcomed the Government’s commitment to a long-term financial settlement. May we have a statement in Government time on the number of authorities that have agreed a long-term funding settlement and, more importantly, on those that have not?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a good point that I will relay to Ministers in the Department for Communities and Local Government.

Mr Speaker: I was going to call Mr Spellar. Where is the right hon. Gentleman? Oh dear. The fellow has beetled out of the Chamber. It is a great pity.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): The board of Seqirus, a major vaccine-producing company, is to make a decision this month on whether to invest millions of pounds in the Liverpool site in my constituency or in another site in mainland Europe. I have been seeking a meeting with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but I do not yet have a date. The matter is now urgent, so may we have a debate in Government time on what the Government are doing to support the manufacturing industry given the uncertainty that our leaving the European Union is causing around such decisions?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady will acknowledge that if she looks at the list of significant inward investments into this country since 23 June, she will see that international businesses from both the manufacturing and the services sectors see the United Kingdom as a great place in which to invest for future growth. I am sure that that would be a most powerful argument to raise with the company in her constituency, but I will draw the particular case and its urgency to the attention of the Secretary of State to ensure that a Minister gets back to her.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Members will be avid readers of my “Westminster Life” column in the Peterborough Telegraph, which is published today. The latest edition recounts my useful round table business meeting to discuss illegal Traveller incursions. May we have a debate on that issue? Will the Leader of the House encourage his colleagues in the Home Office and the Department for Communities and Local Government to write to police and crime commissioners and local authorities to remind them that they have strong legal powers to deal with this distressing, persistent issue?

Mr Lidington: I can barely contain my patience to read my hon. Friend’s latest column. The problem that he describes is one that many of us have faced at various times in our constituencies. He rightly says that significant powers already lie in the hands of police forces and local authorities. Those powers are there to be used.

Home Office questions are on Monday 5 December, which will give my hon. Friend a further opportunity to press his case.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): The announcement this week by Ofcom on BT Openreach provides opportunities to improve broadband services to rural communities such as Glendevon, Cleish and Rhynh in my constituency. May we therefore have a debate in Government time on the minimum service improvements we can expect to see following this decision and how this decision will make Openreach more accountable to customers, particularly in rural areas in my constituency and beyond?

Mr Lidington: We are clear that we need a more independent Openreach, and it needs to offer genuinely fair and equal access to telecoms infrastructure to BT’s competitors. I know that Ministers, particularly those in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, will want to explore how this Ofcom ruling can help us to get broadband to rural areas as well as to those towns where fast broadband coverage is still inadequate. I am sure the hon. Lady will continue to put the case for her own constituents strongly.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): The Midlands engine plays a significant role in our economy. In the autumn statement it was announced that the Government will publish a Midlands engine strategy shortly. May we have a debate on that strategy, so that the region can reach its full global potential?

Mr Lidington: In our commitment to the Midlands engine, the Government are demonstrating in their policies that we are intent on building an economy that works for all. When the Business Secretary went to the US and Canada earlier this year, he saw at first hand the opportunities that there are for investment and economic growth on the part of Midlands companies. The autumn statement confirmed the arrangements for the Midlands engine investment fund. The British Business Bank will make its first investments from the Northern powerhouse investment fund in early 2017, and the first investments from the Midlands engine investment fund will follow very shortly thereafter.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Our NHS and social care services are in crisis. One local accident and emergency consultant told me that this is the most unprepared our NHS has been in the three
decades since he first qualified. Council leaders from across our country were led to believe by Department for Communities and Local Government Ministers that urgently needed funding for social care would be forthcoming in the autumn statement. In answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), the Leader of the House told us that the precept and the better care funding would fill this gap. I must let him know that that is just a fraction of what has been cut from social care since 2010. May we please have an urgent statement from the Chancellor about why this funding for social care was missing from his autumn statement and how he expects our services to cope over the coming winter months?

**Mr Lidington:** I simply disagree with the hon. Lady that the Government are approaching the winter ill-prepared. A Health Minister is chairing regular cross-Whitehall meetings to make certain that the NHS at the national, regional and local levels is adequately prepared for the challenges it is going to face. No one pretends that there are no pressures on the NHS or on social care, but I think the hon. Lady would have given a more balanced view had she noted that we have more doctors, more nurses, more accident and emergency attendances, more diagnostic tests and more money going into the NHS now than when her party was in office.

**Mr David Burrowes** (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): May we have a statement following the Foreign Secretary’s timely visit to Cyprus on Tuesday and the Prime Minister’s conversation with the President of Cyprus last week to reassure my Cypriot constituents that the stalled talks will resume and that we will have a just settlement for Cyprus at long last?

**Mr Lidington:** The Government remain very committed to doing all we can to support the UN and the leaders of the two communities in Cyprus in trying to bring about that settlement, which would be so much to the advantage of everybody living on the island. There is an historic opportunity, with leaders in both communities who are utterly committed to trying to get that settlement, in the common interest, and the Government will continue to do all they can to help foster the climate that might bring that agreement about.

**Alex Salmond** (Gordon) (SNP): May we have a debate entitled “The Bumbling Incompetence of the Foreign Secretary”? The Leader of the House has long experience entitled “The Bumbling Incompetence of the Foreign Secretary”? The Leader of the House told us that the precept and the better care funding would fill this gap. I must let him know that that is just a fraction of what has been cut from social care since 2010. May we please have an urgent statement from the Chancellor about why this funding for social care was missing from his autumn statement and how he expects our services to cope over the coming winter months?

**Mr Lidington:** The right hon. Gentleman really should not get carried away by the odd newspaper story. The Foreign Secretary, like the whole Government, is committed to getting the right deal in the negotiations on all fronts. Part of that, as the Prime Minister has set out, is accepting that, following the referendum result, freedom of movement as it exists at the moment cannot continue. There will be a need for a national immigration regime when we leave the European Union. Obviously, the exact relationship of this country to the other 27 in terms of the movement of workers, trade, investment and so on is a central part of those negotiations but, at the risk of repeating lines that the right hon. Gentleman has heard from Ministers so often, we are not going to give a running commentary on that detail.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) who speaks for the Scottish National party was slightly wrong. There is a Bill before Parliament now—the Withdrawal from the European Union (Article 50) Bill. That Bill is expected to get a Second Reading on 16 December but, as the Leader of the House knows, there is one slight problem if it progresses: Standing Order No. 84A(5) requires the Government to table a motion so that the Bill can proceed to Committee, because the Committee stage of another private Member’s Bill is taking place. Has the Leader of the House given any thought to that, and will he make a statement about when he will bring forward that motion?

**Mr Lidington:** At a time when the Supreme Court is about to consider all these matters relating to the triggering of article 50, it would be premature of me to speculate about possible future legislative needs.

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): Once again, I find myself speaking at business questions as a result of the utter, confounding confusion that exists between Government Departments over leaving the EU. This time it is the Secretary of State for Scotland, on last week’s “Sunday Politics” programme, and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs who have made contradictory statements. The former tells us that Scotland will benefit from the powers being repatriated from the EU, but the latter tells us that there will be a UK-wide approach. Can we have a statement from the Leader of the House, or from an appropriate Department, to clarify the doublespeak of this Government?

**Mr Lidington:** The hon. Gentleman is, uncharacteristically, oversimplifying the process of the negotiation. Let us look at one of the key areas of policy that is largely devolved—fishing. Clearly, at the moment, fishing policy within the common fisheries policy is devolved to the Scottish Parliament. There is also the issue of the United Kingdom’s future independent membership of UN conventions regarding fish stocks, and agreements with third countries that have the character of international treaties. External relations—the right to sign and negotiate treaties—is explicitly a reserved power under the devolution settlement. Therefore these matters do need to be resolved in the negotiations, which is why we are ensuring that Scotland and the other devolved Administrations are intimately involved in the preparation of our negotiating position. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union is visiting Edinburgh in the very near future and will be talking directly to Scottish Ministers and parliamentarians about that matter.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): On Saturday morning, I was out knocking on doors in Corby, and one of the key messages that constituents asked me to relay was the importance of infrastructure keeping up with new homes. May we have a debate at some point in the next
few weeks to discuss this matter, because it is incredibly important that we have the public services and infrastructure in place to support the new homes that are being built?

Mr Lidington: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. Like him, I represent an area that is willing and able to provide a significant amount of additional housing, but where there is understandable local concern about the pressures on infrastructure. I am sure that he, like me, welcomes the Chancellor’s announcement of a housing infrastructure fund, which will make money available to local authorities that want infrastructure improvements so that they can unlock additional land for new homes.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Today’s damning report from the Work and Pensions Committee condemns both Concentrix and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs for a gross failure in customer service over the tax credits fiasco. My constituent Nicola is one of the many thousands who have been failed and left to deal with the aftermath, with bank charges, overdraft fees, credit card interest and phone call charges. While the Government consider their response to the report, may we have a debate in Government time on fair compensation for all people who, like Nicola, have been left in dire straits?

Mr Lidington: On the point about compensation, there are existing arrangements whereby people can seek redress if there is maladministration. I agree with the hon. Lady, as the Select Committee report shows that there are important lessons that need to be learned. My hon. Friend the Financial Secretary and her colleagues will reflect on that report and there will be a full Government response in due course.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Like right hon. and hon. Members on both sides the House, I am always very grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for your generosity, understanding and forbearance, as was evidenced earlier when you allowed me, although I was late, to ask a question on exiting the European Union. Not for the first time, and despite allowing plenty of time, I have been late for business in the House this week because of problems with Southern railway and Network Rail. May we have a debate on the unnecessary industrial action by the RMT and ASLEF unions, which has been making many of my constituents and people across the south-east late for work and late getting home again to see their families for almost 12 months?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend speaks on behalf of a large number of hard-working men and women whose lives are regularly being disrupted in the way in which he describes. Positive industrial relations should be part of the backbone of a productive economy, but that needs to involve people being able to go about their business and to get on with their lives without unjustified disruption. Of course trade unions can and do play a constructive role, but we did need to introduce modernising reforms to ensure that strikes such as those that my hon. Friend describes happen only as a result of a clear positive decision by union members entitled to vote. Under the Trade Union Act 2016, we have provided for a 50% turnout threshold for all industrial action ballots and an additional 40% support threshold for key public services. We will shortly bring forward the secondary legislation to implement those reforms. That is evidence of the Government’s determination to tackle the problem.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Small businesses are often best placed to take advantage of new opportunities, and they are crucial in creating the good well-paid jobs that all our constituents so desperately need. I will be visiting many of the excellent small businesses in my constituency on Small Business Saturday, which was brought in by Labour. May we have a debate about the need to maximise the support for small businesses so that we can help entrepreneurs, their staff and the wider economy?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to endorse the hon. Gentleman’s tribute to small businesses, and I welcome the fact that he has highlighted Small Business Saturday, which falls this weekend. There will be questions to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in the week after next. I hope we can build a consensus across the House in support of measures that will make it easier for small businesses to grow and employ more people. I hope that the hon. Gentleman, for his part, will persuade his party to cease its criticism of the Government’s reductions in corporation tax, which greatly benefit small businesses.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): On 12 September, 18 October, 7 November and again on 17 November, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), told the House that the national shipbuilding strategy would report by the time of the autumn statement. On Tuesday, the Secretary of State for Defence made available Sir John Parker’s report, which will inform the national shipbuilding strategy, and said that the national shipbuilding strategy would not report until the spring. May we have a debate in Government time, or at least a statement, on why the House has been so badly misinformed regarding the national shipbuilding strategy?

Mr Lidington: The Parker report was delivered to Ministers ahead of the autumn statement, which was what, as I understand it, the Government’s pledge had consistently been. The report, as the hon. Gentleman says, was published earlier this week. It is a wide-ranging report making 34 different recommendations covering both Government and industry. It is only right that Ministers, having received the report themselves only last week, should want to consider those recommendations before coming forward with the strategy the hon. Gentleman wants. I hope he will acknowledge the Government’s continuing commitment to Scottish shipyards, which we have seen through the strategic defence and security review, and the placing of additional contracts.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, many parts of Greater Manchester were badly hit by flooding, but especially Stalybridge, Mosley and Hollingworth in my constituency. The reaction of the emergency services and the community was absolutely commendable. Understandably, people want to know that the same damage will not happen again, and the adequacy of local drainage has been questioned in particular. Last April, amendments were tabled to the Bill that became the Housing and Planning Act 2016...
that would have given more support to local authorities to improve drainage, but those amendments did not go through. May we have a debate on whether enough is being done to protect people from the risk of flooding and whether our drainage systems are fit for purpose?

Mr Lidington: I think everyone in the House would want to join the hon. Gentleman in his tribute to the emergency services in his and other affected constituencies, and would also express their sympathy to those householders and businesses that have gone through the awful experience of seeing their properties flooded. The Government are investing record amounts in flood protection and recently published their long-term strategic flood resilience review. I hope that review will provide some reassurance to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents, but I will highlight his concerns to Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am sure the Leader of the House will be delighted as I was to learn that Rouken Glen park was awarded the accolade of the UK’s best park in the Fields in Trust awards last night. I am also sure he will want to join me in endorsing the view that Rouken Glen is a fantastic place, in congratulating everyone involved on working so hard there, and in encouraging people to visit Rouken Glen. May we have a statement from him on that, please?

Mr Lidington: I think the best statement I can make is that the hon. Lady has encouraged me to think about a visit to her local park the next time that I am in Scotland.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): It is 10 years since the collapse of Farepak, when thousands and thousands of people lost their Christmas savings, but we still do not do enough to protect consumers who prepay and often find themselves at the back of the queue when companies fail. Will the Leader of the House urge the Business Department to get on with making a statement on the Law Commission’s recent report on protecting consumers who find themselves in these circumstances, which includes excellent input from my constituent Deb Harvey?

Mr Lidington: I think all of us who were Members at the time will recall the agony that constituents who lost their—usually modest and hard-earned—savings in that way went through. Obviously, my colleagues in the Department will want to consider the Law Commission’s report carefully. I note that questions to the Business Secretary fall on Tuesday 13 December, so the hon. Lady might be able to press her point then.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy was sent proof that Paul Newby, the adjudicator, has existing loans and shares that are dependent on income from the pubcos he is supposed to adjudicate, yet it took four months for the Secretary of State to respond to the then Business, Innovation and Skills Committee’s recommendation that the appointment be rescinded and to say simply that he was not going to look at the matter. That is not good enough. People are being denied the right to the market rent-only option that this House voted for, and Mr Newby is doing nothing about it. May we have an urgent debate in Government time on this matter?

Mr Lidington: That appointment, like all other Government appointments, is made through a process that is designed to ensure that all due diligence is adhered to when putting forward a long list and then a short list of candidates. My understanding is that, following the criticisms that were made, a look was taken at the appointments process in this case, and it was found that absolutely nothing untoward took place in making that appointment.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): On Saturday, I was among a congregation of hundreds at the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Acton to mourn the up to 10 million people who died in Stalin’s forced famine of 1932-33. The atrocity was exposed by British journalists, yet the British Government still fail to acknowledge it as genocide. Could we have an urgent statement on why we have not followed other countries in doing that? There was progress under the Blair and Brown Governments, but that seems to have stalled, like so many other things. These people feel like they have been swept under the carpet and they need our solidarity. They are under attack again.

Mr Lidington: With respect to the hon. Lady, it was not recognised formally as a genocide under those Governments. The principle that the Government follow, as I think she knows, is that, because the term “genocide” carries certain potentially criminal implications in respect of those alleged to have carried out genocidal acts, we believe that such decisions should be made by judges rather than by Governments. However, that should not diminish in any way our sense of horror at what happened in Ukraine during the 1930s. I remember going to see the memorial in the centre of Kiev, and the folk memory of that harrowing experience is still central to Ukrainians’ conception of themselves as a people and as a nation. We are right to remember the horror that took place then, and to do all in our power to try to make sure, through our foreign policy, that such events never happen again.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The situation for Christians in Iran has deteriorated markedly. Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, who was acquitted in 2012 after being charged with apostasy and sentenced to death, was recently re-arrested and charged, along with three church members, with “action against national security”. The church members are also appealing against a sentence of 80 lashes each for drinking wine during a communion service. That is unbelievable. Given that the UK has re-established ties with Iran, will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on human rights in Iran so that this House can urge Iran to ensure rights and religious freedom for all its citizens?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman, as he does so often, speaks passionately for religious freedom all around the world. I think that no one here would say anything other than that the Iranian Government have an appalling human rights record. That is a matter of great sadness, given the richness and diversity of Iranian civilisation
and culture, and the fact that the best Iranian cultural traditions actually accord respect to religious minorities.

Mr Liddington: On the hon. Gentleman’s first point, the Department has said today that it has ceased funding one of the international organisations that was criticised. Our work with the others is now subject to a programme to make sure that aid money goes to, and is effective in helping, the poorest, as is rightly DFID’s remit for all its spending.

Aleppo was raised in the course of exchanges on an urgent question earlier this week. No one here can avoid confronting the horror of what is happening in Aleppo—it is the most merciless slaughter of civilians. We should not, however, conceal from ourselves the complexity and difficulty of an airdrop operation of the kind the hon. Gentleman describes, given the presence of Syrian and Russian air defences, and the implications of what even a humanitarian airdrop in the face of opposition from Syria and Russia would mean in terms of a requirement for force protection, and considerable risk to UK and other personnel involved.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Last week in the autumn statement there was reference to a rise in insurance premium tax from 10% to 12% in June next year. That will undoubtedly have a detrimental impact on many businesses, families, young people and older people. May we have a debate about this, combined with the impact of Brexit?

Mr Liddington: I am sure that the hon. Lady will find opportunities to question Treasury Ministers about this, or to raise her concerns by way of an Adjournment debate. Of course, any tax rise is going to hit certain people and certain businesses, but my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was quite open in his autumn statement in saying that this particular tax increase was needed to raise revenue so that the Government can maintain their fiscal stance, and in order to free additional money for other spending priorities, which were largely welcomed in the House.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): A 20-year-old constituent of mine made an indelible and unforgettable impression on my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and me with the tragic story of his half a dozen abortive attempts to get the organ transplant that he desperately needed. Six months later, I attended his funeral. He died because of a lack of donors. Yesterday, the Welsh Government announced that, as a result of their pioneering and courageous legislation on the new law of presumed consent, 39 patients in Wales had had organ transplants. When can we get the Government to accelerate in this House a law that will allow the same process and the same advantage to be enjoyed throughout the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mr Liddington: I will certainly make sure that that point, which the hon. Gentleman and others have made, is considered by the Health Secretary and his team. Very many of us, myself included, know friends or family members who have literally been given a new lease of life through a successful transplant. All healthy adults need to consider whether they should make arrangements to make clear their wishes in advance of their death. It is also important that our medical professionals are trained in how to make an approach to families at a critically emotional moment when a relative is at the point of death, to ask them sensitively to consider whether to give consent for a transplant to take place.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May we have a debate or a statement in Government time about the use of agency workers to burst industrial action? I am thinking in particular of media reports and early-day motion 748, which names new Labour-controlled Glasgow City Council as having recruited agency workers to try to burst today’s industrial action about ICT privatisation. Can the Leader of the House confirm that such actions are illegal and that we should be enforcing stricter penalties on such rogue employers?

Mr Liddington: I am not going to get drawn into commenting on whether a particular action by Glasgow City Council is illegal. That is for the Scottish courts to determine.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Tomorrow will be exactly two years since the European Scrutiny Committee first asked for Members to be able to debate the proposed European ports regulation. That request has been made 10 times and ignored 10 times by the Government. In its eighth report of the current Session, the Committee described that behaviour as “a remarkable refusal by the Government to pay even lip service to accountability to Parliament.”

What is the response of the Leader of the House to that comment?

Mr Liddington: I have seen that. Indeed, I have had a conversation with the Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee about the matter and I am taking up the matter with Transport Ministers, though the hon. Gentleman will have noted that, during the exchanges at Exiting the European Union questions, the Minister of State said that the Government would vote against the regulation when it came before us for a final decision.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): When Scottish National party Members compare the Government’s austerity choices with the £205 billion cost of Trident, we are told that that is inappropriate because the figure is the whole-life cost of Trident. Yet last night, when we debated the SNP’s proposals on the pension arrangements with regard to the Women Against
State Pension Inequality Campaign, the Government tried to confuse matters by talking about the cost in 2026. What is the right fiscal approach for the Government?

Mr Lidington: The right fiscal approach is to ensure that we can continue to command the confidence of the international markets from which we borrow money to fund our deficit and our national debt, while paying down the deficit that we inherited in 2010—we are now two thirds of the way through the task—and at the same time, following tax and structural reform policies that will make our economy more productive. Many challenges still face us, but we should all welcome the following facts: that we have more people in the United Kingdom in work now than ever before; that UK living standards are at an all-time high; and that the statistics for both inequality and poverty are on a downward trend.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). The Department for International Development has published substantial policy documents today about which we need Ministers to come to the Dispatch Box and answer questions. However, I also noticed in today’s written statements that the Prime Minister has moved responsibility for the Britain is GREAT campaign from the Cabinet Office to the International Trade Department. Will a Minister from that Department come to the House and explain how it manages its Twitter policy and how it will advise the Foreign Office on the difference between the Queensferry crossing and the Forth road bridge?

Mr Lidington: Any of us who have visited Scotland, if only at intervals, will be aware of that important distinction. The Britain is GREAT campaign spans the international work of several different Departments, and I think that it has proved successful at highlighting the strengths of this country in investment, scientific opportunities, education and culture. That helps to attract more tourists and more investors to the United Kingdom, and we should welcome that.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson is currently finalising a duty of care in sport review at the behest of the sports Minister, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). Given the ongoing allegations of sexual abuse in football, will the Leader of the House ensure that Members can fully scrutinise and debate the review on its publication by granting a debate in Government time?

Mr Lidington: My understanding is that criminal charges are being brought against an individual and there are therefore sub judice issues that have to be taken into account, but I am sure that there will be opportunities to debate the policy strategy in detail. Although investigation of allegations of historical abuse is clearly a matter primarily for the sports governing bodies, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has assured the Football Association in particular that the Government will give it any support that is appropriate, and my hon. Friend the sports Minister has written to all sports governing bodies to make clear the importance that the Government attach to taking seriously and investigating allegations of historical abuse and also ensuring that they have in place adequate modern safeguarding arrangements.
Points of Order

11.44 am

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I happened to notice at business questions a few moments ago that 18 Members of the Scottish National party were present, with most standing, and that only 16 Members of the combined Labour and Conservative parties were present, including the Leader of the House. With your long experience of such matters, is there any procedural device that the SNP could employ to take advantage of our new-found numerical superiority?

Mr Speaker: No. However, I know that Members of the Scottish National party attend in large numbers principally because of the vast range of issues that they perfectly properly wish to raise on this occasion and secondly, doubtless because they enjoy my company.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP) rose—
Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I am coming to the hon. Lady—I am saving her up.

Brendan O’Hara: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would appreciate your advice on how I can get the record corrected. I believe that the Leader of the House inadvertently misled the House by suggesting that the Defence Secretary’s announcement on the national shipbuilding strategy on Tuesday was always the Government’s plan. However, on four occasions, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), has told us that the national shipbuilding strategy would report by the autumn statement. There can be no doubt that the strategy has not been delivered to the House as promised.

Mr Speaker: Members are responsible for the veracity of what they say in the House, but I have a sense—I may be mistaken but I doubt that I am—that the hon. Gentleman on this occasion is less interested in what anybody else has to say to him, and rather more interested in what he has to say to them. He has made his point in his own way with his usual force and alacrity, and it is on the record. Doubtless it will be communicated elsewhere to large numbers of his constituents, which I imagine will cause him to go about his business with an additional glint in his eye and spring in his step that would otherwise perhaps have been lacking.

Valerie Vaz: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise that my point of order is so long, but I have to make it clear and use words carefully.

I seek your guidance on a matter of importance that affects my reputation and that has implications for other Members. Following my presentation of a petition on behalf of my constituents, there was confusion between the Department for Communities and Local Government and Walsall Council on whether it was a planning application call-in, despite the fact that the petition did not ask for a call-in, and that DCLG guidance makes it clear that a call-in must be expressly asked for.

It appears that the Minister for Housing and Planning has decided to treat petitions opposing planning applications as requests for call-in, and that he has instructed his staff to contact planning authorities but not Members in accordance with that decision. Walsall Council blamed me for its decision to delay consideration of the application, which it said was caused by the petition. The council was wrong as a matter of planning law.

The Minister’s policy, if that is what it is, to treat petitions as requests for call-in has not been communicated to Members or to the House, and appears to treat each request from Members arbitrarily and in a way that is inconsistent with procedures that are set out in a previous written statement, and that are helpfully described in the Library guidance. That has resulted in reputational damage to me with Walsall Council and DCLG. So far, only the head of the planning casework unit has apologised to me. The Minister has made up that policy in breach of his own guidelines. He has not communicated it to the House, so the Journal Office, on which Members rely for advice on petitions and which is extremely helpful, is unaware of it. I seek your guidance, Mr Speaker.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand the hon. Lady’s point. I presented a petition, but in that case the Department contacted me first before deciding to call it in. In my case, the call-in was not automatic: the Department contacted me first.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman’s experience was obviously different from and, according to his own lights and probably those of the hon. Lady, preferable to hers. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her point of order as well as for its substantive content. I appreciate her concern. She is of course right that the petitions procedure is quite separate from planning law. Furthermore, it is a matter of public record that the petition she presented on behalf of her constituents did not request that the application be called in.

In setting out the facts of the case today, the hon. Lady may well feel that she has achieved her objective of putting the record straight. Moreover, I have little doubt that her concerns about the process will have been heard on the Treasury Bench, and that they will be conveyed to the relevant Minister. I hope that that is helpful.

BILL PRESENTED

Gender Identity (Protected Characteristic)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mrs Maria Miller, supported by Jess Phillips, Mrs Flick Drummond and Ben Howlett, presented a Bill to make gender identity a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010 in place of gender reassignment and to make associated provision for transgender and other persons; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February, and to be printed (Bill 106).
Backbench Business

Mr Speaker: We now come to Backbench business. The first item is a motion in the name of  Ian Blackford.

Since this is only the second occasion upon which these procedures have been invoked, it might be helpful to the House if I explain what is happening. This is an identical motion to that which was debated in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 15 November. When the question was put in Westminster Hall, the Chair’s opinion as to the decision of the question was challenged. As the motion has now been brought before this Chamber, under Standing Order No. 10(13) I am required to put the question on the motion without debate.

STATE PENSION AGE: WOMEN

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 10(13)),

That this House has considered acceleration of the state pension age for women born in the 1950s. —(Ian Blackford.)

The House divided: Ayes 2, Noes 106.

Division No. 101] [11.50 am

AYES

Blackman, Bob
Hopkins, Kelvin

Tellers for the Ayes:
Stewart Hosie and Pete Wishart

NOES

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Arkless, Richard
Austin, Ian
Bardell, Hannah
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blomfield, Paul
Bone, Mr Peter
Brabin, Tracy
Brashaw, rh Mr Ben
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Burgon, Richard
Cadbury, Ruth
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Cherry, Joanna
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Cunningham, Mr Jim
David, Wayne
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Kane, Mike
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Law, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Loughton, Tim
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Marsden, Gordon
Matheson, Christian
McCaughey, Callum
McCarthy, Kerr
McDonald, Stuart C.
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McInnes, Liz
McLaughlin, Anne
Mearns, Ian
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Morden, Jessica
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
Nicholson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Paterson, Steven

Tellers for the Noes:
Mike Weir and Deidre Brock

Question accordingly negatived.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Now that the House has unequivocally declared that this matter was not considered in the Westminster Hall debate a couple of weeks ago, what mechanisms are open to us to make sure that we can have a debate in this place so that Members can be heard and we can stand up for the 2.6 million WASPI women?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I presume that the hon. Gentleman might have raised the issue at business questions, and there is always the opportunity at the next business questions to highlight the result. Actually, there was a debate here yesterday, so the debate has already taken place. However, it is not for the Chair to decide future business; it is for the Government to decide. I am sure that through the hon. Gentleman’s good offices, the matter will not rest there. I am sure that he will be pressing once again for another debate.
Transgender Equality


12.2 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House notes the UK’s status as a pioneer in legislating for equality for LGBT people; welcomes the Government’s announcement of a new trans equality action plan; and calls on the Government to review its response to the recommendations of the Women and Equalities Committee’s report on Transgender Equality to ensure that the UK leads the world on trans equality rights, in particular by giving unequivocal commitments to changing the Gender Recognition Act 2004 in line with the principles of gender self-declaration and replacing confusing and inadequate language regarding trans people in the Equality Act 2010 by creating a new protected characteristic of gender identity.

The motion stands in my name, those of the hon. Members for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and many other hon. Members. I know many wanted to speak here today, but their other commitments in the House have precluded them from doing so. Their names are listed on the Order Paper.

The Backbench Business Committee has been most generous in allocating the time for this debate, which was inspired by the transgender report published by the Women and Equalities Select Committee in December 2015. I would like to thank, too, the hundreds of people and organisations who gave written and oral evidence to the Committee—evidence from more than 250 people and organisations. We were fortunate in having our specialist advisers, Stephen Whittle and Claire McCann, to advise us. Indeed, we had an incredible Select Committee specialist advisers, Stephen Whittle and Claire McCann, to advise us. Indeed, we had an incredible Select Committee staff, particularly David Turner, Gosia McBride, Sharmini Selvarajah and Helena Ali. I also thank my fellow Select Committee members, particularly those in their places today to speak in the debate.

This is a first—the first ever debate on the Floor of the House on transgender issues. The report published by the Women and Equalities Select Committee was the first ever parliamentary inquiry into transgender issues. As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Select Committee itself is the first ever such Committee charged with scrutinising the Government’s policies on equality issues. It was established by the House because of the pivotal role that these matters must play in creating a fairer society for us.

When we published our first report and chose to focus on transgender, a few people said to me, “Why are you choosing to focus on that above all other issues? Why use such an important platform to tackle the issues faced by such a small group? Surely there are issues that are higher on the list of priorities.” Others said that they had never met a trans person, and were not aware that they had any trans constituents. Well, it is estimated that more than 650,000 people in this country can identify with being trans: it equates to 1,000 people in every constituency, and that is probably a gross underestimate.

The evidence that the Select Committee received gave us an opportunity to gain some sort of insight into the prejudice, discrimination and ignorance that trans people endure every single day of their lives, but also the great joy that they experience when they are able to be recognised by the gender with which they identify. That is why this debate is important.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I welcome the debate, because it is vital for us to consider the issue of transgender rights, but should we not also be wary of creating gender-neutral environments that may prove more of a risk to women themselves? A recent case involving my old university, the University of East Anglia, which has gender-neutral toilets, revealed that a man had been using those facilities to harass women. He was charged and convicted. How does the right hon. Lady think we can protect women from male violence in gender-neutral environments?

Mrs Miller: That point is often raised when we debate the rights of trans people, but it is not a zero sum game. Giving rights to one group, or enforcing those rights, does not mean that rights must be taken away from another group. We must be careful in this place not to appear to undermine the rights of trans people to enjoy the protections that they are afforded under the Equality Act 2010. As for gender-neutral toilets, many organisations have had them for a great many years. An aeroplane does not have a men’s and a ladies’, and we do not see any significant problems on aeroplanes. We must ensure that people do not use, or perhaps misinterpret, the serious problem of threats to women in environments of that kind to undermine—even, perhaps, inadvertently—the rights of transgender people, which are important and which we, as parliamentarians, should uphold.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Does the right hon. Lady not agree that the point raised by the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) is a matter for criminal law, and has nothing whatsoever to do with transgender equality?

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman has made an important point, but I think the right hon. Member for Don Valley has the right to make the assertion that she did. I know that some organisations may be at risk of misinterpreting the rights that transgender people have, in the belief that they somehow undermine the rights of women. We need to get the balance right. As the hon. Gentleman says, if criminal behaviour is taking place, it should be dealt with by the criminal law.

This debate is important because it is our job to stamp out prejudice wherever it lies, and to ensure that, as a nation, we are fair to everyone. I think we should judge our success as a Parliament by the way in which we treat the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups in society, and, given the issues with which transgender people must deal, they certainly fall into one of those groups. In striving for the recognition of equality rights that trans people need to enjoy, we reject prejudice, and by doing that, we improve the ability of all who are struggling to be treated equally to achieve their aim.

Attitudes are not static. I think it incumbent on us in Parliament to continually re-evaluate what equality means—what it means to have a free and fair society that gives everyone the opportunity to succeed. If attitudes towards equality were static I would not be standing here today, and the hon. Ladies on our green Benches would not be sitting here today; the civil rights movement
in the US would not, in the year I was born, have outlawed segregation in schools and public places; Nelson Mandela would not have been democratically elected in South Africa; homosexuality would not have been decriminalised here in the UK in 1967; and we would not have equal marriage for same-sex couples. We need to continually challenge these norms and things that might be accepted, so we can be sure that equality evolves over time.

Trans people have not been dealt with fairly in this country—they have been marginalised. We know that is wrong, and the motion challenges us to consider what we can do better in the future.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Lady is making a strong speech, and I wholeheartedly support it. Will she join me in praising the work of many public sector organisations, including South Wales Police and the British Army, which has been praised for its work with trans communities and the wider LGBT community? It is by showing leadership in the public sector and through such organisations that we can deliver real equality.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point, and our Select Committee inquiry report looks carefully and closely at the challenges that public sector organisations face. I have to say that we found some were able to cope with them better than others. I particularly have been impressed by the way in which the Ministry of Justice has accepted the challenge around trans prisoners. I note the comments the hon. Gentleman makes about the police as well, and I hope other police authorities are able to follow suit.

The Select Committee report covered a huge range of issues, because that is what was required of us, making recommendations on hate crime, gender markings, prisoners and probation, media representation, schools and social care. I welcome the Government’s very positive responses to our report. Perhaps the Minister in her response today can indicate whether the Government have been able to look further at the issues on which the responses were perhaps a little less positive, because Committee members felt very strongly that every single one of the recommendations we put forward had merit and needed to be looked at, although there was a large number of recommendations—more than 70—so it was clearly difficult for the Departments to respond to them all in the time available.

Today is about looking at progress, so I will focus particularly on the strategic and legislative aspects of the Select Committee report, in the full knowledge that the great number of other Members here today will pick up on progress on the recommendations made for the NHS, child protection, offender management and schools.

The Government have committed to a new trans equality action plan to include a review of the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and a cross-Government review of removing unnecessary requests for gender information. All these steps are hugely welcome, but particularly the undertaking to look at training for specialist NHS staff to work in gender identity services, and tackling harassment and bullying of transgender people in education.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): The right hon. Lady mentions health, and the constituents who have contacted me felt that was an area of great inequality. Does she think it is a coincidence that 54% of trans people have been told by their GPs that they do not know enough about trans-related healthcare to even provide it?

Mrs Miller: One of the problems we uncovered through the evidence we gathered was that many doctors felt as disempowered as the hon. Lady implies, owing to a lack of training and, perhaps, continuous professional development in this area. However, I should say in response to her intervention that there were also some people who said that whenever they went to the doctor, even if it was somebody who had just a little knowledge, their transgender identity was always at the heart of the response they got from the NHS. We need to make sure that doctors understand the health issues transgender people have to deal with, but also acknowledge that not every health condition they have will be related to their trans identity. That is an important point to make at this juncture.

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): A constituent of mine came across a particular problem because she had reassignment surgery before the Gender Recognition Act 2004 came into effect. Fifteen years later, when she tried to get a gender reassignment certificate, she was asked for a great deal of information that was no longer available. The surgeon who had performed the operation was dead, the records were no longer available, and she had a terrible time trying to get the information. Surely that is unfair.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman highlights one of many problems with the Gender Recognition Act. That is why our Committee asked for an urgent review of it, and I am heartened to note that the Government have indicated they understand the sort of problem he outlined, and many others as well, and the very medicalised nature of the process people are asked to go through. That process is talking about something very personal, which is an individual’s identity. It is not something I would particularly like to be discussed by medics and lawyers in some room and in a very technical and quasi-judicial way. One of the recommendations of our report was self-declaration in that respect.

The other part of the Government’s response that I was heartened to read, as it is important for us in terms of planning for the future, was about the need to get the data right in this regard by better measuring the number of trans people in the UK, and also better monitoring people’s attitudes. If we are really going to tackle inequality in this area and really ensure trans people are able to enjoy the equality we all voted for in the Equality Act 2010, we need to make sure that we talk to the people with us and that there is the cultural change that is needed.

Perhaps today in her response, the Minister—who has been extremely generous with her time, thinking about these issues and talking to the Committee about them—will tell the House what issues in the 2011 action plan remain unaddressed, and what the status of the new plan is—when will it be published and how will the Government monitor its implementation? If we start to see this sort of certainty, trans people will have more
confidence in the fact that not just the Government but public services are starting to get to grips with the issues they have to tackle on a daily basis.

The Gender Recognition Act was pioneering in its time. We criticised it slightly a few moments ago, but it was put on a pedestal as being pioneering—albeit a little late for the constituent of the hon. Member for Angus (Mike Weir). Now it needs updating, however. In particular, concern was voiced to us about the medicalised, quasi-judicial application process that is used. The Government have undertaken to conduct a review of the Act, and perhaps to de-medicalise the process and, as the previous Equalities Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), said, to

“overturn an outdated system and ensure the transgender person’s needs are at the heart of the process.”

Again, I was very heartened by that very positive response from the then Equalities Minister in July of this year.

Where is that review at the moment? Has the process been streamlined and de-medicalised, as indicated in the response to our report? Will the Government be considering again the Committee’s recommendations around the principle of self-declaration, which I believe would again put this country at the forefront of trans rights on the global stage, so that again we will be leading, as I believe we would like to as a country, on all LGBT rights?

Finally, I want to talk about primary legislation underpinning the rights of trans people. In our report, the Select Committee made the simple recommendation to change the terminology in the Equality Act by making the protected characteristic “gender identity” rather than “gender reassignment”. The Committee was concerned that, based on the evidence and on the legal advice that we took, the current wording does not adequately protect wider categories of people. It provides for trans people in the process of undergoing gender reassignment, but not the many people who may not have clear legal protection—those who do not live full-time in their preferred gender, non-binary or intersex people, or perhaps children whose gender identity is less well-developed than that of an adult.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has recommended that a broader definition would be clearer and give more certainty. The current wording is outdated and confusing, and we believe that our proposed change will give a flavour of their direction of travel, in order to provide clear optimism for trans people in this country. I hope that it will also remind Ministers of the human cost of not taking the actions that are needed.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I want to set some parameters for the debate. The second debate is twice as heavily subscribed as this one, but both debates are important to the House and to those listening to them. I suggest that Members, including those on the Front Benches, speak for up to 10 minutes in order to try to bring this debate to an end by 2 o’clock.

12.21 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for accepting this debate, which gives us an opportunity to discuss the Government’s response to the “Transgender Equality” report. I should also like to thank LGBT Youth Scotland, Stonewall, the UK LGBT Consortium on Trans Organisations, the Equality Network and the Scottish Transgender Alliance. I also want specifically to thank Tim Hopkins from the Equality Network and James Morton from the Scottish Transgender Alliance for their invaluable briefings and their work with the Scottish Government to continue the progress of LGBTI equality.

As an advocate for LGBTI equality, I am very proud that the first report from the Women and Equalities Committee focuses on the problems faced by the trans community. In the spirit of true equality, every sector of society should feel truly equal and it is our responsibility as members of the Committee and in life to ensure that that is the case. I believe that the Government’s response to our report is woefully inadequate. We need to ensure that the individuals who contributed to the inquiry and those who experience daily discrimination feel that the Government are heeding their calls for more equality. Trans equality must be the priority of every Government across the UK. I know that the Minister shares my passion for equality and I hope that today’s debate will give her an opportunity to respond, to hear the cross-party calls and to take action. I should also like to thank my friends and fellow Committee members, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), for securing this important debate and for their continued commitment to the cause of transgender equality.

We have only to look at the statistics from any mental health charity to understand why this debate is necessary. When one in four of the children in Scotland who identify as trans face bullying, discrimination and hate crime on a daily basis, we must do more. Statistics from Mind indicate that more than 40% of trans individuals have contemplated suicide and that, tragically, some of them have ended their own lives as a result of their experiences. This group of people is among the most marginalised in society. Trans individuals face disproportionately high levels of mental health problems and very high suicide rates. Discrimination against members of the trans community is an everyday aspect of their lives. Transphobia is endemic in the workplace, when accessing healthcare, in public services, in schools, in the media, in the criminal justice system and online. A sizeable percentage of individuals face this discrimination and prejudice on a daily basis.
The existing legislation provides some protections, and they are to be respected and admired. There was a time when the UK was a world leader in its approach to transgender equality. The Gender Recognition Act 2004 allows a trans person the right to a gender recognition certificate, should they wish their affirmed gender to be recorded as such on their birth certificate. This was applicable whether or not someone had undergone surgery or hormone therapy. However, this does not allow for people in the trans community who do not identify as either male or female to be recognised and protected within the law. During our inquiry, we heard from non-gendered and non-binary people who felt that they had been forgotten in the legislation. Additionally, we heard that the Act was rooted in clinical methods, requiring consent through a psychological diagnosis of gender dysphoria. The criticisms levelled at the legislation reinforce how outdated it has become. The Government must make changes to the Act to allow an approach of gender self-declaration.

Similarly, the once world-leading legislation for the trans community in the Equality Act 2010 is fast becoming outdated. It gave members of the trans community protection from discrimination, but we have heard that its provisions are routinely breached in relation to the trans community. The Act uses outdated terminology such as “gender reassignment” and “transsexual”; these are now considered inaccurate descriptors. Such terms have given rise to the misapprehension that the Act provides only for trans people who have undergone medical gender-reassignment treatment. To clarify, the protected characteristic should be amended to “gender identity”.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the essence of today’s debate is that gender is a social construct, and that that should be recognised in law? It is not primarily a biological construct, but because the law is based on that outdated concept, it is failing us.

Angela Crawley: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I reiterate that the law must be updated to recognise an individual’s gender identity, which has nothing to do with their birth gender and everything to do with the gender that they believe they are.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend and other hon. Members on securing this important debate. Since 2007, the Scottish Government have been using the Yogyakarta principle, a fully inclusive definition of gender identity, in all their trans equality policy work. Does she agree that the use of that principle is desirable because it was devised by an international commission of jurists in recognition of the fact that gender identity is a human right?

Angela Crawley: Yes, and I will clarify again that the protected characteristic in the Equality Act 2010 should be amended to “gender identity”, which explicitly covers the whole spectrum of trans identities. This point was rejected in the Government’s response to the Committee’s report. Ministers believe that the current terminology is adequate, contrary to the testimony of the very people it affects.

I am prone to mentioning the word “Scotland” often in debates, and I shall do so again now. In 2017, we will mark the year of trans equality and the progress that has been made on this issue. In Scotland, we have committed to reforming the Gender Recognition Act 2004 in line with international best practice in countries such as Malta and Ireland. In Scotland, we have committed to ensuring that all trans, non-binary and intersex individuals feel protected, because it is their human right to have their gender identity recognised in law and in life. I urge this Government to follow the example not only of Scotland but of the many other countries that are leading this best practice.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The United Nations International Civil Aviation Organisation recognises M, F and X as gender markers on passports. A number of countries, including Denmark, Malta, New Zealand, India and even Australia—which is sadly not known these days for a liberal and open approach to border control—issue and accept gender X passports. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is high time the UK followed suit?

Angela Crawley: I wholeheartedly agree. One area that is not currently devolved to Scotland is the ability to change passports. I urge the UK Government to consider this important aspect of recognising a third gender—gender X—on passports. That could be done, and the Committee heard that it would be beneficial and would make a sizeable difference to individuals who travel for work, life and general leisure purposes. This is an opportunity to amend and correct that error.

I call on the UK Government to match the Scottish Government’s commitment: 2017 marks the year of progress on transgender equality in Scotland, and the UK can continue that progress. This debate highlights the need to address transgender equality and the remaining challenges that trans and non-binary people face. Although Scotland has made huge progress towards achieving LGBTI equality in recent years and is now rated the best country in Europe for LGBTI rights, the SNP is not complacent. We are determined to tackle the unacceptable levels of prejudice and discrimination that trans and non-binary people continue to face. I hope that, as we move into 2017, we can make it a year of progress for transgender equality not just in Scotland but across the UK. In Scotland, the SNP has pledged an important step forward for transgender equality by reforming the gender recognition law to meet international best practice, so that all trans and non-binary people are fully recognised and can access their human right to a legal recognition of their gender identity.

Scotland is the best country for LGBTI equality, and the UK can continue to lead on this agenda, too. One of the distinctive parts of our equal marriage law is its more progressive approach to transgender recognition, and the UK could follow that example as well. I am not simply preaching to the choir; a multitude of countries across the world are leading on this agenda.

I wish to finish with the words of Reina, one of many trans women who wrote to me before this debate. She wanted to give testimony about what it is like to be trans in a rural community in Scotland. She said: “Being trans is not a choice. It isn’t something where the person wakes up and just decides to be a particular way. Being this way is something that a person is born with, and which they have to try and struggle with throughout their lives, in a society that hates diversity and constantly attacks them.”
and their friends and family, and
“even kills them, for not conforming to the restrictive ideals of
control freaks. Life is hard and usually short for someone who’s
trans. There is a lack of respectful education and health care.
There is a lack of support and understanding.”
Her words exemplify just why we need to take action:
life is incredibly difficult for trans people, and the
changes we can make in this place will make a huge
difference to their lives. The Government must today
commit to the recommendations of the “Transgender
Equality” report, and offer the support and understanding
that this community definitely needs. I urge the Minister
to join me in making sure that 2017 is the year of
transgender equality not just for Scotland, but for every
transgender individual across the UK.

12.33 pm

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): It is always a pleasure to
follow the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East
(AP: Clare CRAWLEY, who is a great champion on trans
issues and LGBTI issues in general, and the Chair of
the Women and Equalities Committee, my right hon.
Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who
has championed this issue by making it the subject of
the Committee’s very first report.

I say a massive thank you to the Backbench Business
Committee. For the transgender community in the UK,
this is the first time such a debate has been held on the
Floor of the House of Commons, and it marks a very
special day for the 650,000 transgender or non-gendered
people in the UK. Just as we celebrated 50 years of
Schools Out in the Speaker’s apartments yesterday, I
hope that in 50 years’ time people will look back at this
day and say that it marked a remarkable change in how
people in the transgender community were considered
in the UK. I am very pleased that this debate has been
brought to the Floor of the House of Commons.

Although there is a lack of good data on the number of
trans people in the UK, as my right hon. Friend stated, estimates currently suggest that 650,000 people
in the UK are likely to be gender incongruent to some
degree. This is an issue that has an impact on a significant
number of our constituents. A number of constituents
who came to see me as a result of our Select Committee’s
inquiry suggested that this was the first time they could
come out and say they were a member of the trans
community. People often hide that and do not necessarily
want to stand up and talk about it, but the inquiry has
given them a huge opportunity to say that they are
represented in this place and in the rest of the country.

As colleagues will know, I am a prominent supporter
of LGBT rights. I have to say that the LGB part of the
community has not always gone out and celebrated the
T or the T + parts of the community. This is also a huge
opportunity for us to say that they are part of our
friendship group. We must make a big apology for the
fact that we have overlooked them as part of our
community for a very long period. In her time as the
new chief executive of Stonewall—she is not that new
to the post—Ruth Hunt has been a huge advocate of
the trans community. Following her apology to the
trans community, the work she has done as chief executive
has gone some way to repair the distrust and segregation
within the LGBT community.

I have been a member of the Women and Equalities
Committee since its creation in 2015. The report on
transgender equality was its first report. The Committee
received about 250 written evidence submissions, many
from individual trans people who wanted to tell us
about their own experiences, and there were five oral
evidence sessions. I am not speaking on behalf of the
Committee, but it is worth noting how it came to its
conclusions. The Committee took evidence from a range
of organisations conducting representative and advocacy
work within the trans community, as well as from
service providers of various kinds, academic experts
and six Ministers in a variety of Departments. I want to
take this opportunity to thank all those who gave
evidence throughout the inquiry, particularly those from
the trans community, which enabled the Committee to
produce meaningful findings and recommendations.

The report states:
“A litmus test for any society that upholds those values”—
fairness and equality—
“is how far it protects even the most marginalised groups.”

I welcome the Government’s commitment to equality. I
recognise that, as a country, we have led the way on
lesbian, gay and bisexual equality. Despite the welcome
progress, however, we are still failing that test for the
trans community. We know that trans people face
continuing transphobia, increased mental health issues,
discrimination in the provision of public and private
services, and bullying in our schools. The report made
several recommendations for the Government to consider.
I thank the Minister for the Government response, but I
want to highlight a number of areas that need further
consideration.

The report made it clear that the Gender Recognition
Act 2004 and the Equality Act 2010 need to be amended.
At the time, the GRA was a world-leading piece of
legislation, but it is now outdated and in need of revision,
as the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East and
my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke have
said, and we are falling behind many other countries.
The process for applying for a gender recognition certificate
is bureaucratic, expensive and even humiliating, and the
burden of providing documentation can cause people
significant distress. The process should be administrative,
not a medicalised, quasi-judicial one. It should be
underpinned by the principle of gender self-declaration,
which would allow for a dignified approach that maintains
the personal autonomy of applicants. After all, as Ashley
Reed, who created a petition on this subject, has said of
a person’s gender identity:
“Y ou are the only person who can come to that realisation, not
a panel.”

I welcome the Government’s commitment to review the
GRA, but I urge them to commit to adopting the
principle of gender self-declaration as well as to commit
to changing the process.

As the Bill my right hon. Friend presented earlier
today makes clear, the current wording of the Equality
Act 2010 is fundamentally outdated and, ultimately,
confusing. Terms such as “gender reassignment” and
“transsexual” have resulted in significant confusion over
whether trans people who have not undergone a medical
intervention are entitled to the same protection. The
report recommended that the protected characteristic
should be changed to “gender identity”, bringing the
wording in line with the Yogyarkarta principles and
resolution 2048 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the
Council of Europe. The Government’s response to that

recommendation was that they believe the current wording of the 2010 Act is adequate because people are protected through the provision on discrimination due to perception. However, that response is inadequate and I hope the Minister will clarify that statement. The 2010 Act bases the protection it provides for transgender people on the process of undergoing gender reassignment. Many trans people, such as non-binary, intersex people or young people whose gender identity is less well developed than that of an adult, may not have legal protection. I urge the Government to reconsider their rejection of the Committee’s recommendation. What steps have been taken to keep the matter under review, which the Government promised to do?

Away from the legislative changes, I now turn to some specific areas that need improvement, the first of which is the treatment of trans prisoners. Until recently there were no official statistics on the number of transgender which is the treatment of trans prisoners. Until recently some specific areas that need improvement, the first of Government promised to do? taken to keep the matter under review, which the Committee’s recommendation. What steps have been taken to keep the matter under review, which the Government promised to do?

The report also said that holding trans prisoners in solitary confinement was not fair or appropriate, and I am sure that the whole House agrees.

Last year, there was the example of Tara Hudson, a transgender prisoner from Bath, who was born male but had lived her entire adult life as a woman. Tara was sent to an all-male prison. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities, the hon. Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), for supporting me in helping Tara to get into a prison appropriate to her gender, but lessons still need to be learned. Tara, who has lived as a woman her whole adult life, has undergone six years of gender reconstruction surgery and I, like many in the Chamber, would define her as a woman. Her detention in a male environment was not only physically damaging but dangerous from a security perspective.

In summary, we are a forward-thinking and progressive country and have led the way in ensuring that marginalised groups receive protection under the law. We have made huge strides over the decades in improving the rights of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. However, we must do more for the trans community. The Women and Equalities Committee report is groundbreaking and I hope its publication will be celebrated in 50 years’ time as a day of huge change for the trans community in the UK and around the world.

12.43 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate—the first on trans issues in this Chamber. It was a privilege to have been a member of the Women and Equalities Committee for the inquiry, although I subsequently stood down due to my Front-Bench role.

Many of us have been strong supporters of LGBT rights for many years, but until the Committee’s inquiry I knew relatively little of the extent of the issues facing transgender people. We heard moving accounts of people’s transitions and subsequent experiences and also from parents who have supported their children through the process of transition. It was also helpful to hear from service providers, academics and health specialists and from those providing representative and advocacy work within and for the trans community. I thank all of them for providing extensive evidence and for responding to our questions.

A cultural shift is going on in this country around issues of gender. There is greater acceptance of gender differences among young people. Our report identified the need for changes in the law and significant cultural, policy and process shifts in the fields of health, criminal justice, education and others. It also revealed that individuals experience high levels of harassment on a daily basis. That harassment can undermine careers, family life, incomes, living standards, access to services, quality of life and physical and mental health. It is no secret that a disproportionately high number of trans people have reported attempting suicide—an extremely sobering and distressing fact. The sooner we advance trans equality through legislative, policy and cultural change in our public institutions, the sooner there will be fewer trans people in the position of wanting to take their life because they are not getting the necessary care and support and the respect they deserve.

Mrs Miller: Does the hon. Lady share the concern I felt when I read that the number of hate crimes against trans people has tripled over the past five years? Does she, like me, hope that more will be done on education to ensure that that intolerance is stamped out?

Ruth Cadbury: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right that there is an awfully long way to go in the recognition of trans people’s rights. Education is an important part of that. On that issue and others, the Committee discussed the need for adequate, high quality, universal, age-appropriate sex and relationship education in all our schools.

We have seen some progress in trans equality over the past few years. Trans and non-binary characters are actually being played by trans and non-binary actors.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making a powerful and heartfelt speech. Does she agree that a challenge facing the LGBT community is having people from all parts of our community, particularly the transgender community, represented in the media and getting proper coverage? The Press Gallery is sadly quite empty today, but we need the media to be better educated so that they can properly represent the transgender community.

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We must congratulate those media organisations that are doing this. With Laverne Cox playing Sophia in “Orange Is the New Black” and Riley Carter Millington acting as Kyle in “EastEnders”—the first trans actor to play a transgender character in British soap history—things are moving in the right direction. Trans people are becoming more visible and that is something to be celebrated.
If we look at America, however, any advances made in trans equality there have been threatened by state legislatures introducing bathroom Bills, which have been described as a solution in search of a problem. Such Bills are malicious, misconceived and directly threaten transgender people. The election of Donald Trump does not fill me with much joy for the future rights of transgender people in the US. A bathroom Bill would never be passed here in the UK, but we must keep an eye on the situation abroad and ensure that the British public are well informed so that harmful attitudes do not form here.

It is time for the law and our public services to catch up. On education, the Committee recommended:

“More needs to be done to ensure that gender-variant young people and their families get sufficient support at school. Schools must understand their responsibilities under the Equality Act.”

A survey this year in further and higher education found that bullying and harassment of trans students and staff appear to be commonplace. Furthermore, with nearly half of non-binary gendered respondents to the survey reporting that they are considering dropping out of their course and three quarters stating that they did not find their place of learning supportive, it is clear that we have to do more.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ruth Cadbury: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I need to make progress.

Will the Government assure the House that steps are being taken to create a more trans-inclusive environment in post-school education for trans students and staff? The Government’s response to the Women and Equalities Committee report on trans equality said that the Minister for further education would be writing to sector umbrella bodies highlighting the need for specific gender identity training and the need to ensure trans equality. Has that happened?

On health, we know that there has been a massive increase in the number of people, particularly young people, wanting/needling to transition, and many are identifying as non-binary, yet the delay they face in getting access to health and support services is far too long. Furthermore, GPs are too often acting as gatekeepers, preventing people from even entering the transition pathway. I was moved to hear of the experiences of trans young people who were denied support at the crucial time as they approached puberty. It has been clear from our inquiry that trans people encounter significant problems in using general NHS services that have nothing to do with their trans status due to the attitude of some clinicians and other staff when providing care for trans patients; we heard of the “trans cold”. That is attributable to a lack of knowledge and understanding, and in some cases even to out-and-out prejudice. It is therefore essential that there is sufficient training for GPs and a range of other clinicians to understand trans identities, so that people get the treatment that they want and need and that is appropriate.

Turning to criminal justice, with every news story that a transgender woman has been sent to a men’s prison, our frustration grows further. Our report made it clear that there is a clear risk of harm when trans prisoners are not located in a prison appropriate to their affirmed gender, and that they should get the right support there. It is unacceptable that in 2016 we have a criminal justice system that does not protect all groups on an equal basis, especially as this is costing lives.

In conclusion, I am proud to now be a Member of Parliament in the country that has gone further than most in recognising lesbian, gay and bisexual rights, but the UK is not the leading country in the world on the rights of trans, non-binary and intersex people. There has been progress, but not nearly enough. Time has not allowed me to cover all the issues raised in our report, but the Government’s delayed response—it took seven months—to our report raises concerns for us. The coalition Government’s 2011 advancing trans equality action plan remains largely unimplemented. I repeat the Committee’s recommendation: the Government must take trans equality seriously and draw up a comprehensive strategy, with an action plan that addresses the full range of issues covered in our recommendations—and soon.

12.52 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I have listened with real interest to the arguments made by Members about how the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and the Equality Act 2010—the first legislation I ever whipped—ought to be amended to better protect trans gender equality rights. I hope the Government take these arguments seriously and respond appropriately, even if it takes them a further couple of months to do so.

I want to focus on the health aspect of the excellent report by the Women and Equalities Committee: the services provided for transgender people by the NHS. Trans people experience worse health, both physical and mental, than the general population. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has found that a higher proportion of transgender people say that their physical health is “poor or very poor” compared with other LGBT communities and non-LGBT communities. Levels of poor mental health are also higher in the transgender population, with about half of young trans people and a third of trans adults reporting that they have attempted suicide. It is therefore imperative that transgender people have full access to general medical services—appropriate ones.

Transgender people also have specific health needs; untreated gender dysphoria, which, as Members will know, is medically defined as when a person experiences discomfort or distress because of a mismatch between their biological sex and gender identity, can and does take a real toll on someone’s mental health. Dr John Dean, the chair of the NHS national clinical reference group for gender identity services, has said that “not treating people is not a neutral act—it will do harm.”

I could not agree more with Dr Dean. Some trans people’s health and wellbeing would be greatly improved by gender confirmation treatment through our specialist gender identity clinics. Trans people have to be able to access those treatments on our NHS if they need them.

Angela Crawley: The Committee heard from individuals who had gone through harrowing experiences. They had gone to quite extreme lengths to receive the treatment that they wanted in order to have their gender identity recognised in countries where the practices were not as safe as they would be here in the UK. Does the hon.
Lady therefore support the aim that the UK must ensure that we can cater for everyone who needs to access these health services?

Lyn Brown: I do indeed. The Committee’s report demonstrated that our NHS is not providing even a basic service, let alone a good service for trans people. The Committee report found:

“The NHS is letting down trans people”,

One of the first problems identified by the report was discrimination faced by trans people when they tried to access general medical services. Dr James Barrett, president of the British Association of Gender Identity Specialists, told the Committee:

“The casual, sometimes unthinking trans-phobia of primary care, accident and emergency services and inpatient surgical admissions continues to be striking.”

CliniQ, a specialist sexual health and wellbeing service provider for trans people, told the Committee that “there is at best considerable ignorance and at worst some enduring and mistaken and highly offensive stereotypes about trans people among the public at large, amongst whom we must unfortunately number some health professionals.”

Sadly, this discrimination has real consequences. Terry Reed, of the excellent Gender Identity Research and Education Society, told the Committee that trans people were often nervous about accessing services because they were “not treated sympathetically” or even “politely” by doctors and staff. Brook, an organisation that provides sexual health and wellbeing services and advice for young people under 25, told the Committee that “prejudice against trans people among medical staff” was one of the reasons for poor health outcomes in trans people.

In addition, trans people report real difficulties in accessing specialist treatments and gender identity services. GPs have a legitimate role in acting as gatekeepers to NHS specialists, but I am afraid there is evidence that prejudice and ignorance among our GPs is preventing those who experience gender dysphoria from receiving the services they need. Dr James Barrett has said that there is a “persistent refusal” on behalf of some GPs to make referrals to gender identity clinics. The Beaumont Society has heard of one trans person being told by their GP at their first assessment—and let us think about how much courage someone needs to go to their first assessment:

“You’ll be taking money away from more deserving cancer patients.”

How wicked is that? It is a complete disgrace.

Where someone experiencing gender dysphoria is referred to a gender identity clinic it can take a very long time for them to receive specialist services such as hormone therapy or genital surgery. The process requires an independent assessment from two separate consultants, and a large amount of information needs to be gathered by the consultants about the individual before they can begin to proceed. That process typically takes months and spans several consultations. An additional precondition for genital surgery is that the patient must undergo at least a year of “real-life experience” of living “in the role” of their affirmed gender—it is an enforced pause. I have read the guidelines that explain the rationale behind this enforced pause, and I understand that the social aspect of changing one’s gender role is challenging and that clinicians do not want people to take on surgery until they are fully aware of those challenges, but that does not explain why the pause is often much longer than 12 months. The Government should assess the arguments made by some in the trans community that decisions over whether to go ahead with surgery should be based on the informed consent model. Under that model, doctors could immediately approve medical interventions if they are satisfied that a patient is fully aware of the implications of their decision. It is my understanding that the model is already used in parts of the United States of America. Given that it has already been tried and tested, the Government should be in a position carefully to assess its strengths and weaknesses, and bring that back to us.

It is important that the Government understand that delays in receiving treatment can, and do, cause real suffering. In the 2012 trans mental health study, one trans person said:

“Not having had my gender confirming yet has a constant effect on undermining my self-esteem and self-confidence as well as social transition—I hate every day that I have to live with ‘boy parts’ and I can’t wait to get rid of all recognisable ‘boy bits’.”

Another person told the same study:

“Permission for my chest surgery was delayed and I waited double the usual waiting time. This caused me to go into a deep depression. I had panic attacks when I left the house. I lost my job and then found I couldn’t leave the house.”

Such suffering could be prevented if we improved the speed at which our NHS works for trans people. Delays should not be any longer than is strictly necessary from a clinical point of view.

As a result of the problems that I have outlined, the Select Committee recommended that the Government conduct a root-and-branch review of how NHS services can be improved to better serve trans people and completely stamp out transphobia in our NHS. I am disappointed—I am sure that I speak for many Members here today—that the Government did not accept this clear recommendation. Instead they responded by stating that they will look into broadening the terms of reference of NHS England’s existing task and finish group for gender identity services. When such systematic failure has been identified, the Government should question the governance arrangements that are in place, rather than relying on them even more. I say that gently to the Minister and hope that she has had those conversations with her opposite numbers in the Health team. I invite the Government to give fresh consideration to a root-and-branch inquiry as part of their commitment to the cause of gender and transgender equality.

1.2 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am very pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and other hon. Members have secured this debate. It is important that transgender equality is discussed and understood, because it is central to who we are as a society.

People who are in this position might be vulnerable by virtue of the fact that their path in life is very different from that of the majority. Given the proportionately high levels of mental ill health and suicide that we have heard about today, it is our responsibility to acknowledge
that, and to recognise that we are all different—people are people—and that we need to make the path for transgender people as smooth and easy to negotiate as possible.

One of the things that I love most about my constituency is its diversity. I have no particular insight into the gender identity of our local people, but just as I absolutely value the huge variety of faith groups and our excellent community groups, such as East Renfrewshire Disability Action, which supports people with disabilities, it is vital that I stand up and be counted as someone who supports every effort to deliver protections and real equality for people of all gender identities. That is the least that they should expect.

Equality, community and standing up against prejudice are the responsibilities of all of us. Scotland is an open and tolerant country, and it is my job, and the job of my Scottish National party colleagues, to work every day to achieve those principles. We must continue to push towards being that better nation that is committed to delivering gender recognition laws to ensure that we have increased protections and equality for transgender people. I encourage the Minister to recognise the importance of the fact that people must have the ability to define their gender identity.

I am pleased that ILGA-Europe—the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association—rates Scotland as the best country in Europe for LGBTI equality, but it is essential that we put in place practical steps to make the lives of transgender people better.

Before I came to this place, I was responsible for making sure that diversity, equality and inclusion were at the heart of every aspect of life in my workplace. It has been useful to reflect on that experience when considering how best to move forward in this area. I was focused on equality and employment law, and on how we could push on to do more and to make more things possible. The legal frameworks are vital in providing a roadmap for organisations and for Governments. We need to make the process easy and explicit so that there is a clear understanding of what is needed and expected. Legislation in this area should be aspirational and forward-looking. That is what we seek to put in place in Scotland as we reform gender recognition laws, and it is vital that we do so.

In my previous role, it was evident that providing an environment where young people could flourish and be whoever they were, with confidence, had a material impact on their lives. The fact that we had a very explicit, non-negotiable outlook on equality had a positive influence on how people behaved and on the discussions they had. That allowed young people of all gender identities to thrive and to succeed. We need that explicit framework from the Government, including clear terminology, so that confidence and understanding can continue to develop in all our communities.

Carol Monaghan: As a teacher, I know that much of the bullying that young people experience is due to their being excluded. The bullying can be subtle, so it is very important that we are explicit about what is happening. Simply excluding someone from activities or friendship groups is a form of bullying. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to call it out as that?

Kirsten Oswald: It is incredibly important to make such points. They are vital for education and society at large. We all need to call these things out when we see them.

The Scottish Government’s positive and unwavering stance of supporting LGBTI equality has been incredibly influential and has made a significant difference. That is a great starting point as we aspire, as we must, to go further and ensure that we do everything that we can to eradicate prejudice and enable everyone to achieve their potential.

The young people who thrive in situations where success and equality are at the fore are also influential. They take their outlook into the world—their peer groups, families and communities. Just like the young people whom I heard about on Radio Scotland earlier in the week, they will influence and inspire those with whom they come into contact. I was blown away by their stories, and by their mums, who were powerful and passionate advocates of their transgender children. Their voices and experiences shone through. No one could fail to be moved by their stories—stories of brave, strong people who are different and facing up to the world, and of all the worries and concerns that go with that.

I was pleased to hear one mother say that we have come a long way over the past few years. That is undoubtedly true, but there is more to do and it takes all of us here to stand up to be counted and to push further. We all have a responsibility to challenge those who treat people differently, or who marginalise them, because they do not fit into the boxes that society has traditionally tried to fit people into.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Given that there are relatively few transgender people in the population, a family with a transgender child in a rural community might well feel that they are only people in the world who have to address this issue. That is why it is so important that events such as this debate are publicised as widely as possible, and that there is enough support to ensure that nobody feels that they have to be transgender on their own.

Kirsten Oswald: That is an incredibly valuable comment. This is about all of us. We must all support people who need our support and are entitled to it. After all, there may come a time when we need the support of others. We do not need to look too far away to find that intolerance and misinformation can be spread by people who are in positions of power and should know so very much better than to peddle nasty, divisive nonsense.

I was interested by the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) about schools. The influence of education and supportive schools was key to the experience of the young women I talked about. Their support for the TIE—Time for Inclusive Education—campaign interested me. Inclusive education pays off hugely by advancing equality and making sure that all our children—and, by extension, all adults—have opportunities to achieve their potential. For far too long, transgender, non-binary and non-gendered people have experienced discrimination, disbelief and far, far worse. Young people are the key to transforming our society, and we need to support them fully to do that.
[Kirsten Oswald]

I end with some wise words from one of the ladies on the radio programme: no one size fits all. We do not expect that to apply to any other aspect of our identity, so why on earth should it apply to gender? That is what this comes down to. We are all a sum of our parts. All our identities are complex, but fundamentally people are just people. We are all different and our legislation must reflect that. Those principles are set out in Scotland’s national plan for human rights, which actively defends the right of everyone in society to be treated fairly, and with dignity and respect.

1.10 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Backbench Business Committee and right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House for securing this important debate.

Transgender people make an enormous contribution to our society. As well as allowing us to discuss the difficulties that transgender people face each day, I hope that this debate can be used to celebrate transgender people across the UK. The hate and prejudice that lurks in our society is sickening, but what is remarkable is the positivity that shines in contrast to that. Ranging from the brilliant author and historian Jan Morris, to the late businesswoman and documentary star Stephanie Booth, some of our most remarkable people in Wales identify as transgender.

The obstacles standing between transgender people and equality, however, should be a cause of concern for all of us. In this House and in wider society, we often talk of working towards a more equal community, but in practice that is a distant future for transgender people. The lack of awareness and education about the issues that transgender people face is shocking, and the lack of action to tackle the problem is more so. In recent months and years, efforts have been made to increase awareness of the difficulties that transgender people face. Although there is still a long way to go, the contribution made by organisations ranging from news outlets to film production companies has been incredibly important.

Channel 4’s “Born in the Wrong Body” season raised awareness of how life is for transgender people before, during and after transition. The BBC has made similar productions, including “Just a Girl”, which tells the powerful story of young trans people. There have also been great initiatives by public bodies and institutions. I was proud to march at Pride Cymru this year and saw South Wales Police—my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) mentioned this—marching with special shoulder patches to demonstrate their support for the LGBT+ community. Similarly, the British Army recently won the PinkNews public sector equality award for its work supporting LGBT personnel, including those who identify as transgender.

Such schemes are incredibly important to contrast with the discrimination and prejudice that is part of day-to-day life for transgender people in the UK, which at their worst can create unimaginable danger and put transgender people in immense harm. In 2015, 582 incidents of hate crime against transgender people were reported in the UK. This figure has trebled in the past five years, as was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), the Chair of the Select Committee. Those incidents included hate speech, transgender hate crime, sexual assault and other violence, yet of the last year’s 582 incidents, only 19 led to prosecution. That cannot be acceptable.

Transphobic violence is a global problem. So far in 2016, it is estimated that at least 26 transgender people have been murdered in the United States, whereas in Brazil, it is estimated that around 60 were murdered in the first month of this year alone. Free & Equal, the UN campaign for LGBT equality, has claimed that such reported numbers account for only a fraction of the true figure as victims often do not feel safe enough to come forward.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is making a very strong speech. He, like me, is wearing a World AIDS Day ribbon. On the global context for trans people, is he aware of the challenges for trans people who have HIV? Men who have sex with men are 19 times more likely than others to have HIV, but trans women are 49 times more likely to have HIV. Special attention needs to be paid to the provision of HIV services globally for the trans community.

Chris Elmore: I thank my hon. Friend. His contributions in the House are always of interest and I am glad that he has been able to raise that important point.

The UK, like every other nation, has a long way to go to ensure that transgender people are safe from violent crime. A start would be to ensure that everybody feels safe and secure in reporting a crime of which they are the victim. Organisations such as Stonewall have been working relentlessly to encourage transgender people to report the violence that they face, but many victims say that they are concerned that they will not be taken seriously. Both the police and the Government must work harder to get the message across that if victims of violence report a crime, they will be taken seriously, and will be safe and secure.

For many transgender people, finding and maintaining work can be far more difficult than it is for others. A survey by the Gender Identity Research and Education Society in late 2000 found that, post-transition, two in three transgender people had left their job, either because they were forced to do so or because they felt there was no other choice. Although it is thought that conditions have improved since the date of that survey, there is still far more work to be done. More recently, to mark International Transgender Day of Visibility 2016, a less varied poll revealed that around 36% of transgender people left their job due to their transition.

The Equality Act 2010 states that people cannot be discriminated against in the workplace because of their gender reassignment, though far too often the Act is ignored. Thousands of transgender people each year in the UK are made to feel uncomfortable, intimidated and subjected to unwanted comments. The trade unions Unison and PCS have both been campaigning to make transgender people aware of their rights at work, and have worked alongside transgender people to fight cases of unlawful discrimination. Unfortunately, there is only so much that trade unions can do to protect people when discrimination can be so rife. In the same way as
victims of transgender hate crime often do not come forward, many who are discriminated against in the workplace are afraid to report the fact, though this is underpinned by a lack of support they often receive. Unlike other forms of workplace discrimination, there is a lack of high-profile cases of transgender people being discriminated against, meaning that many are not fully aware of their rights or the procedures to make a claim.

Unfortunately, for many transgender people, discrimination does not begin only in the workplace. The education system in the UK is often woefully inept at accommodating transgender people. It is estimated that currently only 5% to 10% of transgender people begin transitioning under the age of 18, but those who do are often failed by their schools, colleges and sixth forms. A report earlier this year by Susie Green, chair of the Mermaids charity, claimed that transgender pupils are more likely to have poor attendance and attainment records, and are often seen as a problem for schools to overcome. Although schools often want to do their best to accommodate transgender pupils, most are not equipped with the right knowledge or resources to do so.

Addressing the difficulties that transgender people face in school often focuses on physical accommodation. Efforts may be made to provide gender-neutral facilities but, although that is incredibly important, there is often not enough focus on why transgender people fall behind academically. A number of local authorities now produce guidance for head teachers, but equally important are the NGOs and charities that deliver awareness training and attainment records, and are often seen as a problem for schools to overcome. Although schools often want to do their best to accommodate transgender pupils, most are not equipped with the right knowledge or resources to do so.

Those who begin transitioning at university can face similar issues. A 2014 report by the National Union of Students showed that 28,000 transgender students were studying in the UK, yet more than half had seriously considered dropping out. The same report also found that one in three transgender students had faced some form of bullying or discrimination. Student unions across the UK have been fighting to make campuses more welcoming for transgender students, and universities themselves have usually been willing to learn and adapt. I pay tribute to those universities that have adapted to support people who identify as transgender.

From school to university to the workplace, transgender people face discrimination at each turn in their life, and the persistent prejudice and danger can manifest itself in mental health issues. A recent study in the US journal *Pediatrics* claimed that these issues can arise if a trans person is not able to express their identity or if they do not feel accepted. PACE, the LGBT mental health charity, claims that 48% of transgender people under the age of 26 have attempted suicide, compared with only 6% of all adults under 26.

Similarly, as other Members mentioned, reports by Mind have claimed that LGBT people in general are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety, with other studies demonstrating that transgender individuals are particularly at risk. That in turn can lead to people abusing alcohol and recreational drugs. Although there is little research into the prevalence of substance abuse among transgender people in the UK, the US national transgender discrimination surveys of 2008 and 2009 showed that over a quarter of participants had abused drugs or alcohol.

Unfortunately, the high rate of mental health issues in the transgender community is a problem that can be exacerbated by a lack of sufficient mental health facilities. The truth is that there is a serious lack of facilities for those with mental health issues in the UK. According to the King’s Fund, 40% of trusts saw a cut to their mental health budget in 2015-16, which has led to “widespread evidence of poor-quality care”.

Mental health charities have voiced their concerns about these cuts, with Mind recently expressing concern that they fall squarely on patient care. Better mental health services would benefit everyone who finds themselves needing them, but considering the high proportion of transgender people needing help with their mental health, better services would specifically help those who are the focus of our debate.

The discrimination and prejudice that transgender people are met with for living their lives is a stain on our society. For these people, simple everyday tasks that we take for granted can be laborious and tiresome when they face unequal treatment at every turn. Our schools and workplaces are often woefully inept at accommodating transgender people, and the protection that they receive from harassment and violence is far from sufficient.

We owe it to the transgender people in each of our constituencies to come together to take concerted action to help to deliver equality for everyone, and we must start by recognising the scale of the problem. In this week alone, around 10 to 15 incidents of hate crime against transgender people will be reported to the police. Over the course of the month, more and more transgender people will leave their universities and places of work. We cannot claim to be working towards an equal society if we do not include transgender people in that vision. I sincerely hope that today’s debate will help to raise awareness of the issue and mark the start of a journey to make the UK inclusive for everybody.

1.21 pm

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): I am hugely grateful for the opportunity to take part in this debate. I am also grateful to all the right hon. and hon. Members who brought this issue to the House and to all those who have spoken. As the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) identified, this is an historic moment: we are standing here today raising an issue that is very important to equality and to transgender people across the UK and, indeed, the world.

According to the International Bar Association LGBTI law committee:

> "Trans persons are arguably the most marginalised constituent within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender...society. While considerable media attention has focused on the global debate for marriage equality, trans-specific issues are often largely not considered."

That reinforces the importance of ensuring that gender identity is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.

The contributions on both sides of the House have been incredible. My hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) has been an incredible champion for equalities: she has worked tirelessly with
other members of the Women and Equalities Committee, she hosts regular briefings for the SNP group and she sheds light on the various issues. We are all busy people, and it is very important that we work with our colleagues on both sides of the House to understand them, and she does an incredible job of helping us to do that.

The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) talked about gender equality training, which is also important. My hon. Friend, the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) mentioned that she was a teacher, and it is important that teachers, doctors and practitioners across society have the proper information so that they can support transgender people who come forward, in whatever context that may be.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) spoke passionately about mental health, the diversity of her constituency and her being the sum of many parts. The hon. Member for Ogmor (Chris Elmore) spoke of the worrying figures in the US, and another Member spoke about President-elect Trump. The make-up of his Cabinet, and the views that he and they have expressed, should worry us all, and we should speak out against such views at every turn.

As a modern and allegedly forward-thinking democracy, we simply cannot afford to leave any section of our society forgotten or marginalised. The people of the nations of the UK—whatever their race, gender, religion or sexuality—must be able to play a full part and have a full life in our society.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a very passionate speech. Does she agree that there are sometimes various levels to transgender people? They could have disabilities and also be from black, Asian or minority ethnic communities, and it is incumbent on all of us to make sure all those equality layers are protected.

Hannah Bardell: I could not agree with my hon. Friend more, and she is a doughty champion for equalities. The issue of intersections in our society—how they meet, how they interact with each other and how we support them—is hugely important.

As a relative newcomer to the LGBTI community, I have to say that one reason I am particularly glad we are having this debate is that it is of the utmost importance that we better familiarise ourselves with the language surrounding this topic. I will be honest: I was not wholly familiar with all the language and terminology. As someone who came out relatively recently, I felt there was almost an assumption that people would be totally familiar with all aspects of the LGBTI community and LGBTI life. However, like many, I am on a journey of discovery and learning, and I have to say that, after the research I did today, and having listened to the contributions from both sides of the Chamber, I feel more enlightened, and I hope others do, too.

When I was growing up, there were not enough LGBTI role models for me, and others have spoken about powerful role models, particularly in the trans community. We are now seeing actors and others coming forward—people such as Jack Monroe—and speaking so openly and passionately about their lives. There are also people taking on roles in various soap operas and normalising members of the LGBTI community and representations of them.

I read one of Jack Monroe’s interviews when I was preparing for the debate, and the passion about confusion and experimentation with identity came across. Fox Fisher has also been a fantastic role model, and has made some incredibly pioneering and powerful films about transgender issues and people’s journeys. We should take a moment to congratulate and commend all those in the transgender community who fight on a daily basis, as well as all the charities and other organisations, many of which my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East mentioned, because they are at the forefront every day of the battle for equality.

Language is very important, because the truth is that correct language is not being normalised in our society and particularly, as has been said, in our media. We should be working towards a day when all our names can be preceded by Mx, because people should not have to choose their identity. For example, whether I, as a woman, am a Ms, a Miss or a Mrs defines my marriage status, which seems ridiculous. Why is it that, on the most mundane forms, we are still required to identify our gender and our marital status? I find it maddeningly unnecessary.

Beyond language, there is a huge amount of work to do, as many have said, on the Gender Recognition Act 2004. It is time to simplify the procedure for the self-declaration of gender and to put an end to the requirement for medical or psychiatric evidence. It is time that we allowed 16 and 17-year-olds access to the same process granted to 18-year-olds and up. It is time to fully and properly recognise trans, including non-binary, people in the Gender Recognition Act.

The LGBT Consortium provided some excellent briefing ahead of today’s debate and crystallised some of the really worrying challenges facing the trans community. It explained:

“When someone applies for a gender recognition certificate they are assessed by a panel...they never meet”.

Imagine someone who has perhaps spent years struggling to work out who they are, facing that panel process to be assigned. They do not meet the panel and, worst of all, there is no appeal. This is not like applying for a job; this is about people’s lives and identities. We must make sure that any process anyone has to go through is properly sensitive to their situation and to the challenges and battles they have had to go through.

The Scottish Government are publicly committed to all those changes to the Gender Recognition Act, and I hope the UK Government will now follow suit, because countries such as Australia, India, Denmark and Nepal are actually ahead of us on this front. They have the option on their passports to place an “X” next to the holder’s gender. Of course, no one’s gender makes them any less or more of a citizen of a country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East said, the UN’s International Civil Aviation Organisation has an internationally acceptable gender marker for passports.

Angela Crawley: Ireland, Denmark, Malta, Norway, Argentina and Colombia—and soon Scotland. I should add—already recognise the process of self-declaration. Will the UK follow their example?
Hannah Bardell: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She has helped me move my speech along and come to my closing remarks, because I was going to make that point. I hope that the Minister will alight on it.

I want to speak briefly about a recent encounter that I had with a local organisation called Glitter Cannons, a West Lothian LGBT group. I spoke to a young person who had gone through the process of coming out as trans in high school. She spoke movingly about the experience of PE and of which changing room she was going to go into and how that was managed at school. She said that, after some education, her teachers were able to give her good support, but the challenge was incredible.

Our First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has pledged to radically reform gender recognition law for transgender people and those of non-binary gender. I hope that if Scotland can do that, the UK can do it as well. At the end of the day, the UK has a long way to go before it treats transgender people properly, with the dignity and equality that they deserve. Mr Deputy Speaker, you and Mr Speaker, who is not in his place, have done a huge amount. I appeal to you and all of those in the House authorities to make this place, though it seems very much in the dark ages at times, as forward-thinking, progressive and open as possible for people across the LGBT community and beyond. This is not just about dignity and equality, but about doing what is right for all our citizens, whoever they are, so that they can live their lives as they choose, freely and fairly.

1.31 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is genuinely a pleasure to speak in this debate. Although some of it has been harrowing to hear, it is absolutely appropriate that we do hear it. I was shocked to hear that this is the first debate we have had on the subject in this Chamber.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on securing this debate. I want to put on the record my thanks and gratitude to all members of the Women and Equalities Committee for their continued sterling work, not only on transgender issues but on championing equality across the board. The quality and depth of the Committee’s inquiry are evidence of the very best work of this House.

The Committee’s report makes clear the extensive list of issues that must be addressed if we are to tackle existing discrimination and transphobia, and ensure that trans people can live fulfilling lives. I was shocked to hear the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) say that there are 650,000 transgender and transfluid people. Both he and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke are right to say that we need to get proper data so that we can have a properly resourced response.

The UK has come a long way on LGBT rights, and I am proud to be a member of a party that achieved the equal age of consent, repealed the vile section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 and paved the way to equal marriage. I also thank the right hon. Lady for the incredible work that she did on that. We have further to go—there is always further to go—but I think that this House can be proud of the progress that we have made on LGB rights. However, to our collective shame, the same cannot be said about the rights of the transgender community.

Transgender people form a highly diverse community, with a number of different trans identities, including those who define as non-binary and non-gendered. Sadly, however, more often than not, what brings the trans community together is stark experience of inequality, discrimination, transphobia, abuse and violence. The consequences of that relentless hate are clear to see. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth for giving concrete examples of the living hell that some people endure. Almost half of trans people in Britain have attempted suicide at least once, and 84% say that they have thought about it. Those, of course, are the people we know about.

I want to make a plea from the Dispatch Box: whatever you believe about the issue of trans and gender identity, however strongly held your beliefs and however much you may morally disagree, please recognise that there are people in this country who are facing daily abuse and who are dying, all because of their self-declaration. Please, just see them as people.

This House either leads in improving the lives of trans people, or it is responsible for standing by and allowing intolerance, hate, violence and vilification to continue. I am sure that that is not the House that we are part of. Challenging the discrimination and transphobia that have resulted in almost half of trans people attempting suicide is not just a moral imperative; it is fundamental if we are to really create a tolerant and equal society. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) for outlining so passionately and emotionally the violence that trans people face on a daily basis.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights LGBT survey found that two in five trans people have been attacked or threatened with violence in the past five years. The Women and Equalities Committee identified a significant issue of under-reporting of transphobic abuse and violence. It recommended that the Government focus on building trans people’s faith and trust in the police and the Crown Prosecution Service. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for mentioning the good work that South Wales police are doing.

Fundamentally, if the perception persists that the police are biased against trans people—to be fair, that perception is largely because of the way in which they have been dealt with in the past—it will be impossible to build faith in those institutions. If a trans person is not heard or taken seriously when they report a crime, there can be no justice. If a trans person never even makes a report, for fear of the police response or of being exposed during the criminal justice process, we cannot punish the perpetrators.

The Government’s own hate crime strategy “Action Against Hate”, which was published in July, recognises the need to work closely with the transgender community to ensure that solutions are put in place to increase faith in the police and the CPS and that they meet the needs of the trans community. Will the Minister update us on that work? Which community organisations have the Government met, and what changes are they planning as a result?
The Government have also indicated that they will look to strengthen hate crime legislation. Will the Minister update us on the progress on that work and on the new guidance on how prison services are to treat trans people with regard to self-definition? I thank the hon. Member for Bath and my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) for their work on that. Will the Minister confirm whether the new guidance also covers immigration and detention facilities?

As we have head, discrimination and transphobia start at a young age. According to the “Youth Chances” survey, more than four in five young trans people have experienced name-calling or verbal abuse, and three in five have experienced threats and intimidation. I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore, who said that we need to look at the underlying reasons that trans children are failing in school, rather than just at the logistical infrastructure issues. More than a third of young trans people have experienced physical assault.

The Women and Equalities Committee called on the Government to ensure that transgender issues should be taught as part of personal, social, health and economic education, and that teachers should be trained to feel confident in delivering it. That will go some way to ensuring that children grow up with a commitment to tolerance and an understanding that all people should be free to live with dignity and self-expression.

Labour and many campaign groups outside this Chamber have been calling on the Government to reintroduce a statutory, high-quality PSHE curriculum for all children in primary and secondary schools. I am pleased to say that, yesterday, the Chairs of five Select Committees did the same. To date, the Government have refused to do so. How long do they plan to go on ignoring the sheer weight of evidence that early intervention, through statutory PSHE, is a necessary tool in preventing hate crime and transphobia and in supporting children to grow up with respect for themselves and others? The Children and Social Work Bill will come to the Floor of the House on Monday, which presents the Government with the perfect opportunity to do the right thing and protect all children by tabling an amendment to that effect.

I now want to focus on the Gender Recognition Act 2004, and to reinforce what was said by the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East. There remains a fundamental lack of understanding and awareness of the experiences and lives of trans people, and I echo the pleas that have been made—let us actually get some data on this. We need to understand the implicit and explicit discrimination that is happening against the trans community. That is compounded by the existing gaps in trans people’s legal rights and protections under the 2004 Act and the Equality Act 2010. The 2004 Act fails to provide an option for people who do not wish to undergo a formal process of gender reassignment, who do not conform to gender stereotypes and who do not wish to follow a different pathway from the one set out under the Act. The process of facing the gender recognition panel set out in the Act can cause distress and humiliation, and it is based on outdated medical concepts. The process is totally impersonal and unaccountable, and there is no right of appeal.

One campaigner spoke to me about her experiences. Sick of waiting for between five and seven years to receive treatment on the NHS and to follow the stipulated pathway, she went abroad for medical procedures. When she returned, the gender recognition panel insisted on gynaecological examinations and psychological tests, all at her own expense, in order for her to receive a gender recognition certificate. In the end, they refused her certificate—twice. Fundamentally, the process set out in the 2004 Act medicalises trans identities, strips individuals of personal autonomy and denies the trans community of the recognition that they can determine their own lives.

As part of the Government’s response to the Committee’s Report, they have committed to a review of the 2004 Act to de-medicalise the gender recognition process, and that is welcome. Will the Minister update the House on the Government’s progress with that review? Will she indicate whether the Government plan to take forward the Committee’s recommendation about self-declaration and self-determination?

The Equality Act 2010 is another fundamental piece of legislation that Labour is proud of, but that Act, too, needs updating. Terms used in the Act, such as “gender reassignment” and “transsexual”, are outdated and considered by some to be offensive and misleading, and they may not cover all members of the trans community. The Women and Equalities Committee report recommended that the Government amend the protected characteristic of gender reassignment to ensure that the largest possible number of people are afforded protection. The use of language such as “gender reassignment” and “transsexual” is both too vague and too specific, and it fails to provide clarity about who the public sector equality duty applies to. What plans do the Government have to update those terms?

The problems are compounded by the significant cuts that have been made to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which upholds the public sector duty of equality. Recommendations in the report refer to the ability of the EHRC to look into complaints, but the Government imposed a 25% cut to the EHRC’s budget in the November 2015 autumn statement, having already imposed a 67% funding cut over the course of the coalition Government. That drastically reduces the impact that the EHRC can have in fulfilling its duty. Will the Government urgently halt further cuts to the EHRC, and will they produce an analysis of the impact of the cuts on the wellbeing of those with protected characteristics and on the commission’s ability to fulfil its roles properly?

I want to speak briefly about the NHS. To be honest, my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) has spoken so powerfully about it that all I want to do is to ask a couple of questions. Gender identity clinics that provide specific healthcare for trans adults and young people are stretched far beyond capacity. That is leading to dangerous waiting times that regularly exceed the statutory 18-week limit and, in some cases, to poor quality of care. We have been told that all gender identity clinics are out to tender. Can the Minister confirm whether that is true, and can she tell us how many clinics are currently breaching the 18-week limit?

Fundamentally, this debate is not just about trans people; it is about the sort of open, tolerant, supportive country that we want to live in. This debate is an
opportunity for the Government to set out their plans to help one of the most vulnerable and vilified communities, and I hope that the Minister will take this opportunity to do so.

1.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): It is a great pleasure to take part in this incredibly important debate on transgender equality—indeed, it is the first debate on transgender equality—and I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for securing it. I put on record my welcome for the passionate and thoughtful contributions of hon. Members from across the House and add my voice to the praise for the Women and Equalities Committee report, which was a really important milestone in Parliament’s consideration of trans rights. I thank the Committee for its thorough and groundbreaking review, and we welcome its recommendations on how we can further tackle trans inequality.

The Prime Minister has made it clear that the Government’s mission is to make Britain a country that works for everyone. We want a society where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow. That, of course, includes members of the trans population. We want them to be safe, healthy and free from discrimination, and we want a Britain that works for trans citizens.

I am proud of the UK’s strong legislative framework that protects trans people, but I am aware that progress in the acceptance and recognition of trans people has not kept pace in any way, shape or form with that of the lesbian, gay and bisexual community. I am also aware that transgender people suffer particularly high levels of inequality—from mental health to hate crime, and from bullying in schools to discrimination in employment—and we have heard many hon. Members speak passionately about all those things today. As the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) mentioned, mental health and suicide are big concerns. A young trans person in England today is nearly twice as likely to have attempted suicide, and nearly three times as likely to have self-harmed, as are their non-trans peers. That is utterly unacceptable. It has been said that trans issues are too difficult to tackle and too marginal to take notice of, and that it is too hard to implement change. We say that that is wrong. Trans people deserve dignity, respect and a life without discrimination.

I welcome the words of the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore). As he says, we should take this opportunity to celebrate our trans community, especially the brave and inspiring individuals—from within the trans community and outside it—who do so much to fight against the prejudice, discrimination and disadvantage that we have heard about so movingly and passionately from so many hon. Members.

Tackling transgender inequality is a not a new initiative for us, and we continue to be recognised as one of the most progressive countries in Europe for LGBT rights by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association. In 2011 we issued the world’s first transgender Action plan to address the everyday challenges faced by trans people, and the majority of the commitments in the action plan have been completed. We are in the process of collating progress updates, and we will publish a summary next year. Recently we invested £2.8 million to tackle homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in schools that have no measures, or ineffective measures, in place to deal with it. We have also published practical and clear guidance for employers and service providers on how to deal fairly and sensitively with transgender employees and service users. We have absolutely no intention of ending our commitment to tackling transgender inequality.

In July we responded to the Women and Equalities Committee report and set out a further set of ambitious actions. One massive and key commitment was to review the Gender Recognition Act 2004. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) has said, it was a groundbreaking measure when it was introduced—I think we sometimes forget how groundbreaking it was—but the world has moved on incredibly since then, and it is right that we review how it is working now. We have begun a stakeholder engagement programme to look at how the gender recognition process can be improved, and at the legislative and non-legislative means that we would need to use to do that.

The Committee recommended that we move towards self-declaration of gender. We recognise that, as the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) rightly pointed out, the gender recognition process needs to be quicker, less bureaucratic and definitely less medicalised. However, we want to see more evidence on the case for change to a self-declaration model. A couple of other jurisdictions have just begun to implement such a model. We will continue to monitor the implementation of the alternative gender recognition process in other countries, and we will analyse the very good evidence that the Committee published to inform our work.

Hannah Bardell: Briefly on gender recognition, will the Minister engage with those countries that are at the forefront of progressive policies, take evidence from them directly and work with them to see how we can implement their models?

Caroline Dinenage: Yes. Some of the legislation is very new, including that of our friends in the Republic of Ireland. We will keep it under review and we are determined to learn all the lessons of best practice from around the world, as indeed we always have.

Angela Crawley: On that specific point, will the Minister meet Angela Constance, the Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities in the Scottish Government, to have that discussion, given that Scotland is now embarking on that process? Perhaps there could be a shared learning experience to ensure that we take matters forward for trans equality.

Caroline Dinenage: Yes, I am more than happy to do that and I am keen to collaborate in any way with those from whose experience we can learn.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke presented her Bill today. We have not yet heard a convincing case for introducing gender identity as a protected characteristic. The Equality Act, and criminal, hate crime and employment legislation all offer protection for trans people. However, we will continue to keep an open mind, listen to testimony and monitor evidence to find ways to improve the lives of trans people.
[Caroline Dinenage]

My opposite number, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), asked about hate crime. We have improved the recording of hate crimes against LGBT people to support more effective prevention and action. Police forces are now required to collect those data, and the first set of data was published as official statistics in 2013. We have committed to review legislation on hate crimes and we are currently considering the options. The Crown Prosecution Service also recently launched a consultation on draft guidance on prosecuting cases of offences involving transphobic hostility.

The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East spoke about gender markings and gender X on passports. As she pointed out, UK passports currently recognise only male and female genders. Legal recognition is more broad than just changing passports and would need to be considered across Government. Introducing a third category, such as that denoted by an X in a passport, would require a change in UK primary legislation. However, on gender markings, as set out in the response to the Select Committee report, the UK has agreed with the International Civil Aviation Organisation to lead on a survey of member states on gender and passport markings. The gender questionnaire was circulated in October and member states had until the end of November to provide their views. We will review the responses, compile a report and submit it to the working group early in 2017.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Recognising that it is only 51 years since “transgender” was first used, I think the Government’s words on page 23 of their response to the ICAO are important because, as they rightly point out, we are now identified more by facial recognition and other things rather than by asking, “Is this person wearing trousers or a skirt?”

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend never ceases to amaze me with his encyclopaedic knowledge of all manner of important issues, and this is no exception. He is right that we must keep pace with modern technology and always keep it in mind when we make Government policy and change legislation.

Several hon. Members, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Bath, who has campaigned hard on the issue, talked about managing offenders. When I was a Justice Minister, my hon. Friend and I worked closely on a number of particular incidents that he raised. Managing transgender offenders has been a major concern and we have taken action. A number of events involving transgender prisoners in autumn 2015 highlighted the need for the policy on their treatment to be given a more fundamental reappraisal. When I was in the Ministry of Justice, I led on that work and last month the Government published their review and confirmed the position. That is why we will, from now on, manage anyone received into services run by the National Offender Management Service in the gender with which they identify rather than the sex assigned to them at birth.

Sarah Champion: Will the Minister confirm whether that includes immigration detention centres?

Caroline Dinenage: I will come to that. Detailed guidance has been provided to staff on how to implement the changes. An advisory board has been set up to inform policy and establish best practice on the treatment and care of transgender and non-binary offenders in prison custody and under the supervision of the national probation service. I will write to the hon. Lady about immigration detention services. I know that the advisory board had its first meeting on 25 November.

Several hon. Members spoke passionately about health, particularly the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown). As she said, ensuring accessible and prompt health services for trans people is of continued concern. I am pleased that good, collaborative, progress is being made. Discrimination against trans people in the NHS is not allowed and is unacceptable. NHS England has convened a number of multi-agency symposiums to begin to address this issue. The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) will be pleased to know that NHS England and the General Medical Council have acted on the Select Committee’s recommendations by publishing new guidance on GP’s responsibilities in treating trans people. We are also tackling the very long waits to access gender identity services, and we are beginning to see results: the average waiting time for patients to receive reconstruction surgery at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust has dropped from 94 weeks to 61 weeks, and is getting better.

Lyn Brown: The Minister is doing a remarkable job on the Front Bench at the moment, so I thank her. May I ask her to push her colleagues in the Health team on a root-and-branch review of transgender and LGBT health, as the Select Committee requested? That is fundamental, rather than having small working groups working on small bits of the matter.

Caroline Dinenage: I will of course pass that sentiment on to my colleagues in the Department of Health.

NHS England has increased financial investment in gender identity services from £26 million to £32 million this financial year. In addition to funding, we need to increase capacity in this specialist. That is why a joint initiative between NHS England and Health Education England was launched on 20 October to develop a programme of work to address national workforce and training constraints in that specialty. The planned outcomes will be recommendations for the future workforce, and will include curriculum development, continuing professional development and general awareness training among NHS staff.

The GMC and NHS England are also currently considering piloting a formal process for accrediting competencies in gender identity. To provide a better service nationwide, we will revolutionise service provision. We are seeking new providers to host gender identity clinics, and we will tender for them via national procurement in 2017. We will ensure that they can deliver the requirements of the updated service specifications for adult services. That means not only clinics offering better services, but ensuring better geographical spread.

Deidre Brock: Will the Minister confirm that she will review spousal consent, which puts a person’s right to have their true identity recognised in the hands of someone else? It does not happen in Scotland. Will the Minister look to the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014 to see how the issue might be sorted out?
Caroline Dinenage: It sort of happens in Scotland, but it is a different legal process. We will continue to monitor cases whereby married trans people are victimised by spouses with malicious intent. However, it is important to say that marriage is a contract between two individuals and it is right that both partners should have an equal say in the future of their marriage when there is a fundamental change.

NHS England’s new service specification will reflect the standards of care and will be out for consultation in the new year. NHS England has already published a new service specification for children, and a clinical commissioning policy for prescribing cross-sex hormones to gender-variant young people. The new policy is consistent with international guidelines and best practice.

Having a positive experience of childhood is vital, especially for trans children as they come to realise who they truly are. A number of Members, including the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth, said that schools have an important role to play in ensuring a positive experience.

My Department is commissioning research to understand whether social work training has sufficient coverage of gender variance. The initial research will be concluded by the end of March 2017, and we will use the findings to decide whether additional training materials should be made available. Outstanding and remarkable work goes on in some of our schools to support our trans students, which I have seen myself. I personally intervened to make changes after visiting a school where a headteacher raised the issue of recording pupils’ desired gender on school records. New guidance was subsequently issued in April—pupils can now sit their exams and receive certificates in their correct gender, which not only reflects who they are, but reduces the risk of their being outed in later life.

Other work that was not in the Select Committee report is under way. We are funding questions in the British social attitude survey on public attitudes towards trans people; issuing guidance on the provision of gender neutral toilets; and publishing guidance in the civil service on how to survey trans staff within Government Departments.

I hear the comments that the Government have not gone far enough or fast enough on trans equality. My response is to watch us as we deliver sustained and embedded change. We have shown that we can achieve major social reform—after all, we are the Government who introduced same-sex marriage, a defining milestone in equality. We will achieve the same milestone for our trans community by revising the Gender Recognition Act, and through other major initiatives.

I thank the Women and Equalities Committee for its report. We will continue to listen to all the voices on this important matter and deliver positive change for the trans community.

2.1 pm

Mrs Miller: This has been an historic debate and I thank everyone who has taken part for making it such a positive one. Better protecting trans people does not mean diminishing the protections in place for women. It is not a zero-sum game and we should not allow those who attempt to paint it as such, and who try to undermine the position and legitimate rights of trans people, to succeed.

The debate has given the House and the whole country an opportunity to hear about the progress that the Government are making on the treatment of prisoners; on passport gender identification, on which Britain leads the way; and on reducing waiting times for NHS services. My hon. Friend the Minister, a fellow Hampshire Member of Parliament, is to be applauded for the energy, action and positive approach she brings. I look forward to continuing to watch her work unfold, but I also look forward to continuing to press her in the Select Committee on the recommendations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the UK’s status as a pioneer in legislating for equality for LGBT people; welcomes the Government’s announcement of a new trans equality action plan; and calls on the Government to review its response to the recommendations of the Women and Equalities Committee’s report on Transgender Equality to ensure that the UK leads the world on trans equality rights, in particular by giving unequivocal commitments to changing the Gender Recognition Act 2004 in line with the principles of gender self-declaration and replacing confusing and inadequate language regarding trans people in the Equality Act 2010 by creating a new protected characteristic of gender identity.
UK Fishing Industry

[Relevant document: Eighteenth Report of Session 2016-17 from the European Scrutiny Committee, Chapter 5, Fisheries: catch quotas and effort limitation for 2017, HC 71-xvi.]

2.3 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the UK fishing industry.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate. The hon. Members for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) and for South Down (Ms Ritchie) spoke alongside me before the Committee last month, and the hon. Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) also put their names to the motion.

The debate has been an annual occurrence for some time, giving the Government an opportunity to hear MPs’ concerns and update them in advance of the December Council of Ministers. I thank the Committee for returning it to the main Chamber, as opposed to holding it in Westminster Hall, which unusually hosted it last year.

Giving the fishing industry such prominence in the European referendum reflects its importance. I can conclude only that our debate last year catapulted it to the front of people’s minds and made it central to the necessity to leave the EU. The only shame is that it was not given such high priority previously.

Many Members will know of my town’s history and of how big a role fishing played in it because I have spoken about it often. Although fishing has largely left Great Grimsby, the seafood industry continues to thrive. I take every opportunity to speak on the subject because fishing remains a big part of Great Grimsby’s identity.

The legacy of the post-cod wars industry demise still has victims, and the search for a solution to the Government’s failure properly to compensate fishermen who lost out on pensions because of maladministration remains on my radar for the widow of one such fisherman. The Great Grimsby Association of Fishermen and Trawlers has been fighting for 40 years for justice for the fishermen of Great Grimsby. They are still fighting for James Greene, who sadly passed away this year having not received what I believe to be his full entitlement. The association continues to pursue the case on behalf of his widow. Will the Minister meet me and offer his assistance in the case? I appreciate that this is not the place for details, but for the ombudsman to insist that the compensation scheme will pay the maximum of £20,000 only to those who were at sea continuously for 52 weeks a year for 20 years is plainly nonsense. Given the experience of those fishermen of the original compensation scheme, and of the subsequent scheme to rectify the errors and oversights of the previous one, he will understand the association’s caution in accepting official agencies’ assessments.

The debate on the future of the UK fisheries industry is more pressing than usual owing to the decision that the country made in June to leave the European Union, which will surely have far-reaching consequences for the industry. As the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan said in our session in the Backbench Business Committee, fisheries may have more at stake than any other industry over the next few years of negotiations with Europe.

Those in the fishing industry have been given reason to be hopeful about the future. During the referendum campaign, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) came to my constituency for a Vote Leave flotilla along the Humber, when he said:

“If we leave the EU, we can help our industry recover, perhaps taking our cue from Iceland.”

The hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) said that Brexit would allow Britain to “re-establish national control for 200 nautical miles”.

Those promises were not made by campaigners who had no prospect of being in a position to follow them through. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden is now the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union; the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth remains as the Minister with responsibility for fisheries; and the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), another leading light in the Vote Leave campaign, is his boss as Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. They could not be better placed to implement what they pledged just a few short months ago.

It is therefore disappointing that we have heard nothing in five months from the Government on their plans for the industry. Neither the Brexit Secretary nor the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretary made any mention of fisheries in their party conference speeches. For the Government to achieve what the leave campaign promised British fishermen, they need to put the industry at the top of their agenda. I wrote to both Secretaries of State before the summer recess asking them how they planned to deliver on their promises. The Minister who replied had no answers to the questions I asked, and gave me no assurance that the Government have thought about how they can secure what communities such as mine expect.

The fact is that, although it is very easy for leave campaigners to blame the EU for the decline of the fishing industry, their version of history is partial at best. The sharpest fall in the employment of fishermen occurred between 1948 and 1960, which was before Britain joined the European Economic Community. Iceland has lost more fishing jobs than Britain since the end of the cod wars; the number of those employed in the Icelandic fishing industry has halved since the 1980s.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The hon. Lady makes an excellent point about the nature of fisheries. One hundred years ago, about 24% of the Icelandic population were involved in fisheries, but it is now down to about 4.3%. I was in Reykjavik in June at a fishing firm that hoped to have even fewer people working in fisheries, such is the technological drive for improvement in the industry.

Melanie Onn: Fewer people are involved, and the hon. Gentleman shows that being outside the European Union is not necessarily a panacea for the fishing industry. The Government have a lot to live up to. The fact is that the common fisheries policy came about when fish stocks were falling, new environmental concerns were discovered, and new technologies reduced the number of workers per vessel, as he says. That is not to say that the common fisheries policy is perfect—I do not think
anybody would suggest that—or that the UK will not benefit from no longer having to abide by it. My point is that selling false hope, by suggesting that we will return to the wars of the 1950s summit because the CFP will no longer apply to us, just is not fair.

We simply cannot assume that being free from CFP regulations and quotas will allow our fishermen to do whatever they want. There will still need to be restrictions on quotas and fishing zones to prevent overfishing and trawler wars. Look at what happened in Canada. It is in charge of its own waters and cod fishing has been a major industry there for 500 years. In 1992, overfishing had caused stocks to collapse to such a low level that the Government had to order a ban on catching cod. More than 20 years on, the moratorium remains in place. British fishermen understand this. For example, the National Federation of Fishermen’s Organisations’ model for the industry post-Brexit retains the landings obligation, albeit a reformed one.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. I wonder whether she noted the words of the Secretary of State for Scotland, who on 15 June said that “the idea we would go back to a position where we were entirely in control of our own fishing is not one that is realistic.”

Melanie Onn: I thank the hon. Gentleman for drawing that to my attention. I was not aware of that, but I have to accept that that position is not realistic. The fact that the idea was shared throughout the referendum campaign as a key point for fishing communities, which have really felt the brunt of economic decline and a collapse of their main industry, bordered on the irresponsible.

For the UK fisheries industry to see a good outcome from Brexit, it needs to be a Government priority. We cannot simply impose a 200-mile limit to achieve what the Minister promised. He will need to win it in negotiations with the EU. That will mean sacrificing other things. That is why the Government’s silence has been so worrying. It suggests that fisheries are not being given the importance required to secure what was promised. Nissan has already been given its own special deal. When can I tell the chief executive officer of Grimsby Fish Dock Enterprises to expect his invitation to No. 10?

When I wrote to the Secretaries of State for Exiting the EU and for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs before the summer, I asked what conversations they were having with appropriate representatives of the Icelandic Government. There was no answer in the reply, but they will need to have those conversations to secure a 200-mile exclusion zone. Why have they not already begun discussing the new opportunities that will be available to British vessels once we have left the EU? We cannot return to the conflict of previous years, but that is the risk if they do not start speaking to our neighbours.

The fisheries Minister visited Cleethorpes and spoke to my local paper during the referendum. He knows what an emotive subject this is for people in my area. He sought to give them hope that Great Grimsby’s fishing fleets of the past could return. I was therefore genuinely angered to read his comment in the press a month ago that it will be fishermen in the Channel and the west country who will benefit from post-Brexit reforms to fishing quotas. How convenient that he omitted to mention before the referendum that he did not foresee Brexit benefiting fishermen in the Humber!

I am also very concerned about the effect of Brexit on the fishing industry that exists today in Great Grimsby, which is mainly food processing, manufacturing and trading. Grimsby fish market is the largest in the country, and huge quantities of fish are imported from Iceland and Norway to be processed and then sold in Britain or exported to mainland Europe. Because of the global nature of these businesses, they are vulnerable to changes in the value of the pound. Many businesses in Grimsby are based outside the EU, but pay no tariffs on fish imported from Norway and Iceland because of their membership of the European economic area. Of course, no tariffs are paid on the £900 million of seafood Britain exports to the rest of Europe. If we no longer enjoy tariff-free trade with these countries, I fear the fish processing industry will really suffer. Many manufacturers in Grimsby are already working to fine margins, so any increase in cost could force them to reduce staff numbers, or well-paying employers, such as Icelandic Seachill, may have to reduce their wages and worsen conditions for staff. The other likely outcome is that families across the country who have been feeling the squeeze for a decade will be asked to pay more for fish. They will choose cheaper, less healthy alternatives instead—I know that the Minister is very keen to encourage people to eat more fish.

Businesses, as well as the thousands of people employed in the fish trading and processing industries in Grimsby, need reassurance from the Minister today. Fishermen want to hear that the Government understand the need to prioritise their industry, so that they can deliver on what has been promised.
Many crews on our fishing boats are central and eastern Europeans. Their labour is needed, so we need to ensure that everything is in place.

Mr MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman mentions eastern Europeans, and this is a sore point for Hebrides fishermen at the moment because we cannot get the numbers of them in and boats are left tied up. There is a boat for sale in Scalpay because it has lacked a crew since August. We are dying to get people in from the Philippines, but blockages put in place by the London Government are choking the Scottish fishing industry.

Neil Parish: It is perhaps not quite the British Government who are “choking” the industry, as the hon. Gentleman says. I do accept, however, that there is a perception among those coming to work from central and eastern Europe about whether they are welcome here, and therefore whether they want to come. The value of the pound has also made working here not quite as lucrative, so there has been a knock-on effect.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): This issue has an impact on fishermen and the fishing industry in the west of Scotland and in County Down, where we have three fishing ports. We rely, by and large, on the efforts of non-EEA fishermen. We have found that the blockages are coming from the Home Office. We urgently need statutory regulation to address this issue, otherwise our fishing industry will die.

Neil Parish: The hon. Lady puts her powerful point on the record. We cannot necessarily hold the fisheries Minister responsible for everything that the Home Office does, but the hon. Lady makes the very good point that we need support and labour not only from inside the EU, but from outside it, so that we can man our fishing boats.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): To reiterate the hon. Lady’s point, the Scottish and Northern Ireland fishing industry is in crisis. Will the hon. Gentleman use his position to help us to speak to the Home Office and build a case for allowing non-EEA fishermen to work in the west of Scotland and Northern Ireland fishing industry? We face a crisis and we need all the help we can get.

Neil Parish: I understand where the hon. Gentleman is coming from, although there is a limit to my influence and power. That said, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee will be carrying out an inquiry on fishing, which is probably more urgent now. Part of that inquiry will involve looking at and taking evidence about all these things—support, labour and how we run our fishing industry. I can give him a commitment about that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) rose—

Neil Parish: I give way to the hon. Gentleman for Northern Ireland; I am not sure of his constituency.

Jim Shannon: It is Strangford. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not know that—I thought that everyone in the House knew of Strangford. It must have slipped his mind.

The hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), two SNP Members—I am sorry, but I cannot remember their constituencies—and I met the previous Minister to make a definitive case for the retention of the Filipino fishermen to ensure that the boats in Scotland and Northern Ireland could survive, but it was not agreed to. Responsibility therefore lies not with Europe but—I say this with the greatest of respect—with the Immigration Minister. There is a scheme for seasonal—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity to make a speech later, if he leaves enough time after his intervention.

Neil Parish: I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I knew his name, but not his constituency—for his point, which I am sure that the Minister has registered. We are hearing the strong view that this is about not just how and where we fish and what we catch, but the labour to man our fishing boats. The situation in Scotland and Northern Ireland shows how integrated and inter-reliant our fishing industry is.

As we move into this new world, securing access to other waters will be a great challenge, but we will probably also have to share our waters with those who have historically had rights here. Perhaps we can use that fact in our trade negotiations as we move towards a new policy. The adage is that when we entered the EU in 1972, we gave correct figures on the size of our catch, but others inflated theirs, meaning that when the catches were cut back, Britain ended up with very low quotas. From Grimsby to Scotland and all around the country, we can start to put that right.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman suggests that the fishing industry could be used as part of trade negotiations. The Scottish fishing industry learned a sore lesson when it was previously sold out in negotiations. We need assurances that that will not happen again, and that the industry will not be a pawn in trade negotiations.

Neil Parish: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. We must make clear our ability to take our fishing rights out to the 200-mile limit, as well as where exactly we will have those rights and how we will deal with others’ historical rights. If we can get the whip hand—if we can secure 200-mile rights—we can get a very good trade deal, as well as a very good deal for Scottish fishermen. It will be interesting to see how we unravel what has been in place for 40 years. I know that the Minister is confident of getting these rights back to 200 miles. It will take some doing, but if we can achieve it, we will be in a very good position.

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman talked earlier about the prospect of the fisheries Minister facing long nights in Brussels, but it strikes me that we have to negotiate with the EU and other nations. We already have talks with Norway about fishing quotas. The process will be extremely complicated, so how confident is he that post-exit trade talks will produce a better deal than that which we get from the CFP?

Neil Parish: I think that the hon. Gentleman was asking that question of the Minister rather than me. We look forward to hearing from the Minister how he believes this will work. It can work, however, and if we secure these rights, it can work extremely well.
As we move forward with fisheries policy, we will have to put in place conservation measures. It must not be open season to fish everywhere all the time. Norway can close a zone within 24 hours if it is being overfished. It can react much more quickly than other nations because it is one country reacting for one area, so there are some positive aspects even with conservation.

If I may, I will throw a few ripples into the pond, as I am not averse to doing. In the future, might we move from a system of quotas to one of fishing effort and days at sea? How will we control fishing in the future? We do not want discards—a lot of work has already been done about that, but there is still more to do. We want to land all the fish that we catch and to promote different species of fish in the country so that we eat much more of what we catch. One problem now is that 70% to 80% of what is landed on Newlyn harbour in Cornwall goes straight to France or Spain because we do not eat those types of fish.

There is a lot of positive work that can be done. I want the Minister to carry on fighting in Brussels to secure a good deal for our fishermen that will see us through the next few years. Then, yes, let us get these rights back, but as we get them back, let us manage our own fishing sensibly. If we let others into our waters, let us get something back under reciprocal arrangements. That is the way we can build this key industry back up. In Ireland, where there are open borders between Northern Ireland and the Republic, these things will have to be dealt with even for fishing. I will die in a ditch over the need to keep open the border between Northern Ireland and southern Ireland, not only on land but on sea, because there is no doubt that that is the future for Ireland. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to speak and thank Members for their interventions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I hope that we will not need to apply a formal time limit, because this is a good-natured debate in which I expect all hon. Members to be courteous to others by limiting their speeches to just under 10 minutes. That way, everyone will get a fair chance.

2.27 pm

Mr Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab): I will attempt to do exactly that, Madam Deputy Speaker, with a brief contribution.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) not only on securing it, but on her speech. In our annual fisheries debate, we remember those who have lost their lives at sea over the year in what is still the most dangerous peacetime industry. We thank those who work to keep fishermen safe, particularly the volunteers at the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, and those who work with and support fishing communities, such as the Fishermen’s Mission.

In my experience, fisheries debates follow a familiar pattern: we bring a shopping list from the fishermen and fishing organisations in our constituencies, and then the Minister responds to the debate and goes off to the Fisheries Council. In all honesty, we are often more interested in what he brings back from Brussels than in what he says at the end of the debate—I mean no disrespect to the Minister, but that has been the pattern of fisheries debates for as long as I can remember.

Today will be very different, however, because this is the first post-referendum, pre-exit debate, and we and the wider audience outside the House, particularly fishermen, will be looking carefully for signs of what exiting the EU will mean for UK fishing.

I know that the Government are reluctant to share their exit plans for fear of damaging negotiations, and it might be that in some policy areas they do not actually have a plan, but they cannot say that about fishing, because in every one of the five general elections I have fought, my Conservative opponent has stood on a platform of getting out of the common fisheries policy. In 2010, the Conservative candidate in my constituency, who is now the excellent hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton)—I imagine her seat does not have a big fishing fleet—launched her campaign in Fish quay in North Shields with the slogan “A Fresh Face for the Future”. I remember that because I launched my campaign the next day holding a rather large fresh salmon under the slogan “Fresh Fish for the Future”. That was the end of the sloganising for that campaign.

The serious point is that Conservative policy has for two decades been about getting out of the common fisheries policy, so surely the Minister must have worked out what that means. As well as fishermen, the public, especially those who voted leave—I voted remain, but if I had been a fisherman, I would have voted leave—were encouraged to believe that the UK would have greater control of the 200-mile exclusive economic zone. They were also encouraged to believe that there would be a 12-mile limit, which is essential to protect the inshore fleet, which is the mainstay of the North Shields fleet in my constituency.

If the UK has more control of our waters, we should have control of—or at least a fairer share of—what is caught in those waters. We need a fit-for-purpose management system that is based on proper science, with scientists working alongside fishermen, as far as possible in real time. We need environmental standards that are at least as high as those we enjoy inside the European Union. I do not think fishermen should have anything to fear, because someone who is a fisherman has to be conservationist and an environmentalist—that is their livelihood. Given that much of the prawn and shellfish landed at North Shields are put on to lorries and taken to the continent for consumption, we also need to make sure that we get a fair trading agreement. When the Minister responds to the debate, I hope that he will at least begin to sketch out what such a policy will look like. That is what we are looking for, and all the people he is going to meet at the Fisheries Council will be looking for those signs, too.

I want to raise two local issues. I make no apology for having raised them before, because we are now working and thinking in a different context. The first is about access to the Farne Deep, which is the most important prawn fishery. The prawn fishery is the most important element of the viability of North Shields. I thank the Minister not just for the action that he and his Department have taken to protect and safeguard stocks, but for the action he has taken, and plans to take, to deal with the twin-rigged trawlers that are doing a great deal of damage to the marine environment. Does the Minister believe that exiting the common fisheries policy will
2.36 pm

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell), and, like him, I am going to say a few words about my local fishery in a moment. We have been the beneficiaries of the expertise of my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), and I agreed with the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) and, indeed, the right hon. Member for Tynemouth when they pointed out that fishing is a dangerous profession. Every year, lives are lost at sea. The fishermen in our constituencies are going out, day after day, in some of the most demanding conditions imaginable.

Before I come on to the CFP and the future, I would like to say something about the Wash. The Wash fishery is one of the most successful in Europe. More than 100 boats fish out of King’s Lynn, and for every job on the boats, there are probably five onshore—engineers at a small boatyard, for example, and specialist businesses dealing with re-equipping and re-fitting fishing gear. Some engineers specialise in hydraulics, but there is an entire onshore industry that supports the fisheries. There are some important fish processing businesses, as well, including John Lake Shellfish Ltd and Lynn Shellfish. Between them, they employ a significant number of people.

Fishing is very much part of Lynn’s heritage, as superbly portrayed in the True’s Yard Fisherfolk Museum in King’s Lynn, which depicts the story of the old North End fishing quarter of Lynn. It was, of course, Queen Elizabeth I who granted Lynn fishermen the right to “free and uninterrupted use of the Fisher Fleet for ever and ever” and a day. King’s Lynn was, in fact, the first port in the UK to join the New Hansa, a consortium of ports in Europe that were originally members of the Hanseatic League.

Fishing is thus an incredibly important part of my constituency, and the mainstay of the Wash shell fishery is the shrimp harvest. There are other target species, including cockles, whelks, mussels, some crabs, lobsters and some whitefish. Let me say a few words about the shrimp fishery first.

Shrimp is an all-year-round fishery, so it is incredibly important to keep the processing plants open all year. One of the leading fishermen in King’s Lynn is John Lake, who said to me the other day that it was “the glue” that holds “the entire fishery together”. The Minister will know that the 2016 harvest was a record one. There were superb catches. The Wash shrimp fishery is now the best in Europe, and quite a lot of the catch is exported, so the lower pound has been highly beneficial. On average this year, exports have been between £350,000 and £400,000, which is obviously good for the balance of payments. This is bringing in a great deal of resources and money to the fishermen.

As the Minister also knows, a potential crisis is looming. Already 40% of the original fishing grounds in the Wash are no longer available because of the RAF bombing range and the exclusion zone around the 1,000 or so offshore wind turbines. The number of conservation areas has been increased, and there has been an increase in sand extraction. For those reasons, fishermen have lost 40% of the fishing grounds that were available about 20 years ago. That makes it even more remarkable that we have had a record shrimp harvest.

There is a potential problem coming our way, and I should like the Minister to look into it. The Eastern Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority is consulting on the introduction of a permit scheme that could lead to a significant reduction—about 14%—in the shrimp grounds. There have been suggestions of possible damage to soft, muddy or mixed sediments. However, one fisherman told me that beam trawlers have been going out into that part of the Wash for 200 years, and one really strong north-east gale will do far more damage in one day than they could do in a year.

This is coming from the European Union: EU regulations are putting pressure on EIFCA. I urge the Minister to look at this matter urgently, especially given that we are leaving the EU. Perhaps he could call a meeting with members of EIFCA and talk it through with them.
We want proper evidence. We want a peer-reviewed survey, and we want a proportionate, common-sense approach to the problem. The Minister has already made a pledge to look at it, but I urge him to look at it again, because the fishery will be under a great deal of pressure if that does not happen. One of the great jewels in our crown will be lost, and that is an incredibly important consideration in my constituency.

The cockle fishery has a shorter season, but the stocks have been prolific recently, and the fishermen have been helped by the fall in the pound. In this case EIFCA raised the quota from 2 tonnes to 3 tonnes per vessel, which has been beneficial. We have therefore had a good season. However, there has been an ongoing debate about methods of cockle fishing. The suction dredging technique is preferred by the bigger commercial fishermen, but the artisanal fishermen use prop washing: they anchor the boat and turn the engine on, and the boat then goes round in a circle stirring up the sediment. When the tide goes down, the boat will alight and the hand-raking will commence. That is the traditional artisanal way of fishing, and because it is successful and is popular among the artisanal fishermen, suction dredging has been banned for the last few years.

However, there are parts of the Wash where prop washing cannot take place, because the stock of cockles is too sparsely distributed. The technique only works in areas where there is a concentration of cockles that can be stirred up. In recent years, significant amounts of stock have simply gone unfished. Let me give the Minister an example. Fishermen told me the other day that in the Boston main fishery, on the western side of the Wash, between 9,000 and 10,000 tonnes of large cockles—which are worth roughly three times as much as the smaller ones—went unfishable, and went to waste. That is between £9 million and £10 million worth of stock, at about £900 a tonne, so it was an appalling waste. Had suction dredging been permitted on an ad hoc, one-off basis, the harvest could have been extended and a great many extra cockles could have been brought in, to the benefit of the fishery.

I hope that the Minister will deal with those points when he winds up the debate, but if he does not have time to do so, perhaps he will write to me.

Let me end by saying that I think there are massive opportunities post-Brexit, although things will not be in any way easy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Twerton and Honiton pointed out, difficult and challenging negotiations lie before us, but surely, with a certain amount of imagination and innovation, we can ensure that those bilateral and trilateral arrangements are put in place, and we can reset our fisheries policy so that we do more than we have in the past to ensure that we do not begin our fisheries debates every year by remembering people who have been lost. Let me also pay tribute to the work done by the Fishermen’s Mission and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution in helping to keep our fishermen safe.

On a happier note, there is good news in our fishing industry, which is often not reported. It comes after many years of decline. In 2005, for example, 90% of the stocks around UK waters were overexploited, but that has now fallen to 45%. A great deal of progress has been made in the last 10 years. The story of cod recovery in the North sea is thanks to some of the difficult decisions that we took when we were in government, and plae and sole are doing well too. We need to spread that good news around the rest of our waters, because it translates into real people’s lives and incomes in regions such as mine. In the last 12 months, the markets of Brixham and Plymouth experienced record landings in terms of value.

First, I should like the Minister to assure all of us that he will continue the successful policies that have led to this improvement—policies which, to give him credit, he has continued since we were in office—which whether from inside or outside the EU. Secondly, I should like him to reassure us that the overall environmental objectives that successive UK Governments have fought to achieve for sustainable fisheries will be continued and embedded in UK law. We need to complete the network in marine protected areas. We also need fully to embed the birds and habitats directive, the bathing waters directive, the urban waste water treatment directive, the water framework directive, and the marine strategy framework directive in UK law through the great repeal Bill that the Government are proposing. I hope that the Minister will reassure us that that will be done.

I also hope that when the Minister goes to the Council in December, he will take a very tough line on bass. The state of bass around our waters is catastrophic, although that was completely avoidable. We have done far too little, too late. I cannot understand why we in this country do not adopt the policy that operates in the Republic of Ireland, where bass is treated solely as a recreational species. Many Members may not realise this, but if we look at the big picture, it is clear that recreational angling contributes more to our overall economy than the commercial catching sector. However, it does not have such a loud voice in the negotiations. The commercial sector will be breathing down the Minister’s neck when he is in Brussels, but I hope he will remember the words of the millions of anglers in the country—as well as those who run bed and breakfasts, and all the other services that anglers support—who say that they want a better deal on bass. We need a complete moratorium on commercial bass catching with no exemptions next year, with some allowance made for the recreational catching need.

I hope the Minister will not forget about the good progress that the Government have made on marine litter. That may not appear to be a big issue, but it is a huge issue for the marine environment. I congratulate the Minister for his successful plastic bag charge and on the proposed microbeads ban, but that ban must include detergents and other household products, not just cosmetics.
I do not doubt that many catchers in the UK commercial fishing sector did vote to leave the EU, partly based on a long-time grievance that they got a terrible deal under the then Conservative Government when we joined the Common Market, but my fear, which I think is shared by many in the industry, is that just as they were done over on our way in, they may be done over on our way out. There are two main reasons why they worry about that.

First, there is the simple arithmetic of 26 against one in the negotiations, which will obviously make the Minister’s job very difficult. There will be an early test of that at the forthcoming Fisheries Council, where he knows as well as I do that it is those late night deals that matter, and the relationships built up with fellow Ministers over the years are what enable us to get the good deals for our own industry. I cannot help thinking that some of the chaos and antics and confusion around the Government’s messaging on Brexit will not be helpful in that endeavour. I wish him well in those negotiations, however, in a couple of weeks’ time.

The second reason why the industry is nervous is the level of priority the Government will be prepared to give this sector, which after all represents a relatively small part of our economy compared with all the other sectors referred to—the manufacturing sector, the financial services sector and even the farming sector. There is a real worry that the fisheries sector will lose out because the Government will not take it seriously enough.

Another interesting long-term trend in fisheries is that, as several other Members have pointed out, it is now more of an import-export industry than a pure catching industry. Both imports and exports have grown exponentially and steadily over recent decades, partly because of our taste for white fish—cod and haddock—and partly because of our relative lack of enthusiasm, which I regret, for some of our more exotic, but not terribly exotic, species, which we therefore export in large quantities to the continent. I do not know whether anyone can guess what the main catch in terms of value is in the south-west at the moment. It is cuttlefish, a non-quota species, and almost all of it goes straight to the fish markets of Italy, to grace the tables of our Italian friends and relatives, and I am sure they enjoy it very much. We catch the best crab and lobster in the world and many in the industry, is that just as they were done over on our way out, they may have to invent a whole new system or rely on a different sort of satellite system? This is crucial, because it is about fair play for the fishermen, and also confidence for the consumer that the fish being caught is caught legally and sustainably.

The point my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) made so excellently is that there are huge expectations, and hopes have been raised not just by the Minister but by the other Brextremists in this whole fisheries debate. My worry is that the recipe for what they are proposing is also a recipe for potential conflict, a race to the bottom and environmental degradation. I hope the Minister can give some clarity and demonstrate that he will have a sensible approach to the fishing industry that will not lead to that, and that he can give us some outline of a realistic long-term plan that recognises the need to collaborate over a finite and mobile resource, that catching will continue to have to be restricted in order for stocks to recover and thrive, and that that is what is really in the interests of our fishing industry, not conflict and a return to some mythical golden age that some imagine might be the case.

I want to ask the Minister about enforcement as well, as that is a matter of great concern that has not been raised yet in this debate. Regrettably, there has been a huge cut in enforcement under this Government. In 2010, there were 1,500 at-sea inspections; that figure halved by 2015. In fact there is less enforcement now than there has ever been. There were 40 foreign boats fishing off the coast of Devon and Cornwall this week alone, as they are perfectly entitled to, and of course under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea rules boats are entitled to come through our waters, but how is the Minister’s 200-mile limit going to be enforced when we do not even currently enforce the rules as they stand? What naval assets can he assure the House will be available to do this work? What access will we have to the vital EU monitoring system? Have we got guarantees that we will still be able to participate in that, or will we have to invent a whole new system or rely on a different sort of satellite system? This is crucial, because it is about fair play for the fishermen, and also confidence for the consumer that the fish being caught is caught legally and sustainably.

The point my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) made so excellently is that there are huge expectations, and hopes have been raised not just by the Minister but by the other Brextremists in this whole fisheries debate. My worry is that the recipe for what they are proposing is also a recipe for potential conflict, a race to the bottom and environmental degradation. I hope the Minister can give some clarity and demonstrate that he will have a sensible approach to the fishing industry that will not lead to that, and that he can give us some outline of a realistic long-term plan that recognises the need to collaborate over a finite and mobile resource, that catching will continue to have to be restricted in order for stocks to recover and thrive, and that that is what is really in the interests of our fishing industry, not conflict and a return to some mythical golden age that some imagine might be the case.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We now have even more Members who are enthusiastic about taking part in the debate, so I ask hon. Members to speak for something under eight minutes, please.

2.54 pm

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be called to speak in the debate, and to follow the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw). I wholeheartedly endorse his opening comments, in which he paid tribute to the bravery of the crews and of their families who wait behind in terrible weather, wondering whether they are going to see those brave fishermen come back.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) on securing the debate. I pay tribute to her predecessor, who was a great stalwart of the industry but who drew a completely different conclusion from her on these matters. Frankly, I think he was right.

Brexit offers the most wonderful opportunity for our marine environment and for those who work in it. We should not underestimate that. We said that we would leave, which will mean leaving the common fisheries policy and re-establishing our control right back to 200 miles.
and the full exclusive economic zone. I was the shadow spokesman on these matters 11 and 12 years ago, opposite the right hon. Member for Exeter.

Mr MacNeil: As a supporter of the UK remaining in the single market, I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will spell out the importance of tariff-free access for shellfish and other goods from Scotland, the UK and elsewhere going into the European market, and into France and Spain in particular.

Mr Paterson: I am not recommending staying in the single market because, as the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU said, a couple of weeks ago 20 countries were accelerating their sales into the single market from outside faster than we were doing from within. However, I am fully in favour of zero tariffs.

Mr MacNeil: 

Mr Paterson: I have answered the hon. Gentleman’s point, and I am going to carry on.

Eleven years ago, I spent a fascinating two years going all round the British Isles. I went to wonderful places such as Whalsay in the far north, Northern Ireland and right round the coast of Britain. I saw tragically damaged communities and marine environments. I also went to Norway, the Faroes, Iceland, Newfoundland, the east coast of the United States and the Falklands. I saw improving marine environments and prosperous fishing communities in those areas. I saw wealth being grown there. I drew conclusions from this, and I wrote a consultation paper, which I published.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman is right. The common feature of all the jurisdictions he mentions is that their fisheries management systems have the fishermen at their heart. This is not a question of where control is exercised; it is a question of what we do with it. Whitehall is just as capable as Brussels of excluding fishermen from fisheries management.

Mr Paterson: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his helpful intervention. I draw his attention to the paper that I launched in Scotland in 2005, on which we fought the 2005 election. It advocated the establishment of national and local control, which is exactly what he is talking about. He is absolutely right. In that paper, I concluded:

“The Common Fisheries Policy is a biological, environmental, economic and social disaster; it is beyond reform. It is a system that forces fishermen to throw back more fish dead into the sea than they land; it has caused substantial degradation of the marine environment; it has destroyed much of the fishing industry, with compulsory scrapping of modern vessels and has devastated fishing communities.”

I am absolutely clear that leaving the CFP would give us the chance to change all that.

The first thing we would change is the craziness of the quotas. At the moment, we throw back more fish dead into the sea than we land. A Scottish fisherman told me this morning that he estimates that a 50% discard equates to 1 million tonnes of healthy fish being thrown back each year, worth £1.6 billion annually and the equivalent of 2 billion fish supper. That is criminal insanity. We are across the gulf stream, and we have deep waters with a strong supply of food. The industry could have a tremendous revival if we revive our marine environment.

We must replace the current quotas and turn them into the equivalent of days at sea. I saw this happening with great clarity in the Faroes, where it is mandatory to land everything. The Minister in the Faroes told me, “We might not like what we find, but we know exactly what is going on.” Let us compare that with the problem that the Ministry of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), will have when he goes to the Council next week. The EU fisheries policy is based on information that is guaranteed to be at a minimum 50% inaccurate and probably six months out of date.

Let us compare that with the Falklands, where—I saw this when I was there—the figures are transmitted to senior scientists in London overnight, and if a vessel collecting hake is taking too much bycatch, it is told to steam on.

Let us compare that with Iceland, where—I have been there, too—at an hour’s notice, vessels are told to steam on if they are catching too much of a certain species. That is proper control and, to go back to the point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), it is the sort of power we could give back to our local fisherman and those with an interest in the local marine environment.

I am absolutely clear that we have to switch from the current quota system. If we have any quotas, it is inevitable that we will have discards. During the referendum campaign, I gave a speech in Looe and, on the harbour-master’s wall, there was a helpful tin sign with pictures of all the fish. I say all the fish, but, hang on, there was no picture of a haddock. What is the biggest thing fishermen are catching off Looe at the moment? It is haddock. They have not even got a quota, so they are chucking them all back. It is absolutely crazy. We should land everything, and everything with commercial value should then be sold. That is the only solution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) bravely got the discard ban through, but, unfortunately, it cannot work while we have quotas. As long as we have quotas, we will have a discard problem. We should move to controls based on days at sea, we should land everything, we should have accurate data—and no cheating—and it would be immensely cheaper and easier to administer. That would provide very accurate data for our local scientists, local fishermen, local recreational interests and local environmentalists to use in deciding how to handle the fishing.

I am looking at the clock, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will mention a few other points that were in my paper. Before I do so, will the Minister—if he will take a note—get a derogation and do a trial on the basis of days at sea? The Dutch have done a trial on electric pulse beaming, starting off with six boats in the first year and going up to 100 boats after six years. I would like the Minister to choose a mixed fishery area—possibly the south-west, where he comes from—for an immediate trial converting existing quotas into days at sea to see whether we can replicate the huge success of the Faroes in improving the marine environment, growing stocks and bringing back prosperity.

As part of our administration of fisheries, it is very important that we plan temporary closures. For boats taking too much bycatch, absolutely hourly management can, with radio, be given to local scientists and fishermen
if we create the right framework. In my paper, I proposed having fisheries management authorities, which would be a combination of all the parties I have mentioned. I would have inshore authorities for out to 12 miles—in the channel, it would go a little further—and a smaller number of them for out to 200 miles. They would work on the basis of local knowledge, with local scientists, and adapt techniques to their area.

There is one issue that I find extraordinary. When I went to New England, I saw selective gear being developed at Manomet, but when I came back to the UK I found out it was banned. The hostility of the EU to modern technology is bizarre. I would like to have a regime in which we actively promoted selective gear so that we could take out certain species surgically when fishing. On that, the ability to control the system has been enormously helped since I wrote the paper; because there has been a great improvement in GPS tracking, satellite observation and communications. We can put cameras on nets and on boats, so it is now very hard to cheat.

One of the Labour Members mentioned improved supervision, and we will have to put more money back into this to ensure that people do not cheat. However, we will be in an enormously better position if we take back control, give power to local interests—not just the fishing industry, but scientists, councils and recreational fishermen—to decide what is good for their area, to adapt selective gear to that area and to agree permanent closed zones for spawning if necessary or temporary closed zones if there is too much fishing. If we do that, we will see an immediate improvement in the marine environment, and the jobs and prosperity will then come back. Leave means leave, which means going out to 200 miles and establishing local and national control.

3.4 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), who brings his customary clarity and simplicity to today’s arguments. However, I disagree with a great deal of his analysis of the problems. It must be stressed rather more than it has been that taking back control is only part of the answer. There is then the question of what we do with it.

If we are to construct our own domestic fisheries management system, there is an opportunity to put fishermen, conservationists and scientists at the heart of fisheries management—proper regional and local management—and to use scientific advice. The right hon. Gentleman said that 50% of such advice was wrong. I doubt that, but I do know that it is at least two years out of date by the time it informs the decision-making process. We need a better way of using that information to inform the process so that whether we use quotas, days at sea, closed areas or whatever, the information on which we rely properly and accurately reflects the stocks in the water.

We must not forget that even if we leave the European Union and even if we have control over the waters as others have suggested, that would not be the end of our interaction with the common fisheries policy. We share waters in the North sea, the English channel and the western approaches in the Irish sea, and other countries have historic rights of access to our waters. If they continue to mismanage stocks in a way that was unfortunately a feature of the past, that will have continuing impact on our fishermen, too.

I wish the Minister well as he goes to the December Council meeting. In the light of everything else, it will perhaps be a trickier negotiation than in recent years, but the environment will be slightly less febrile than when the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) was fisheries Minister. I go back 12, 13 or 14 years in such debates, and back then we thought it possible that the spawning stock biomass of North sea cod had reached a point from which there would be no recovery. In fact, we have seen a quite remarkable recovery in North sea white fish stocks, but that has not happened by accident—a thought that occurred to me as the right hon. Gentleman was explaining the changes. I think around 47% of stocks are still overfished—too high, but a significant improvement on where we were. That improvement is a consequence of the changes made in fisheries management, in particular the creation of regional advisory councils, and of the significant pain that was borne by the fishing industry and communities during the decommissioning programmes of 10 years ago.

The attractions of this opportunity to the catching sector are pretty obvious, but there are concerns for the future beyond that sector. The processing sector heavily relies and has relied for many years on the availability of workers from other EU countries. Those people want to know what their future will be. If we have to have a set of World Trade Organisation rules and there are tariffs on that, that will have a seriously disadvantageous impact on processors, which will also hit the catchers. That is why it is crucial to get clarity as early as possible.

Like the right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell), I want to bring a few items from my shopping list to this debate. The Minister has already heard my worries about the Faroese deal on mackerel. There was enormous scepticism among the Scottish pelagic fleet, the Shetland pelagic catchers in particular, when the deal was brokered a few years ago. However, they did accept that they would give it a go. They gave it a go, and it is clear that that scepticism was, if anything, understated. This deal really is not working, as was highlighted recently by the report from Seafish, which pointed out that in 2015 Faroese boats caught almost 33,000 tonnes of mackerel in EU waters, mostly in Scotland’s, while Scottish boats got absolutely none from the Faroese waters. Worse, if the Faroese boats choose to land their fish in Scotland, they are then penalised by their Government. The Minister will know that the talks on the next iteration of this deal are to be held in Brussels on 6 and 7 December, so may I instil in him the strongest possible resolve in tackling this, because the imbalance of this deal becomes more egregious with every year that passes?

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman is concerned about the fact that this document excludes the question of those parts of the fishing industry that I suspect would be of concern to him in relation to the joint management with Norway. The European Scrutiny Committee drew attention to that and I wonder whether it is a matter of concern to his constituents.
Mr Carmichael: Without actually knowing what “this document” is, I am not sure; I am afraid that my eyesight is no longer good enough to be able to read the titles of Members. Wittingly or otherwise, the hon. Gentleman has hit on a very important point, which is that although we always get excited about the December Fisheries Council meeting, the real deal is the one done with the EU-Norway talks. That is where the shape of the fishing entitlement of the fishermen in my constituency is determined, and we look forward to hearing from the Minister exactly how we will interact with those talks in the future. A trilateral discussion surely seems sensible, but we will wait to hear what he intends in that regard.

Mr Paterson rose—

Mr Carmichael: I am sorry, but I want to keep within the time limit if I can.

The landing obligation also continues to be a source of concern, as a result of the so-called “choke species”. This year, stock levels of cod, haddock and whiting in the North sea are particularly healthy—they are there in abundance—but there is a real danger that they could be excluded as a result of having these choke species. Again, that is an example of why it is so important that when the science is used to inform the decision-making process and quota it is accurate and up-to-date. It would be utterly perverse if Shetland’s white-fish fishermen were to be punished for fishing in waters where the stocks were healthiest.

Other Members have also spoken about the position on non-EU crew members, which has been particularly acute in my constituency. The basic problem is not just the indifference of the Home Office; the way these rules operate, if they are allowed to operate, means that they are pushing fishermen into fishing where the immigration rules allow them, rather than where is safe or where the fish are to be found. Surely the Minister should be speaking to the Home Office about that.

3.13 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): This annual fisheries debate provides the opportunity for MPs to reflect on the main issues confronting the fishing industry. The EU referendum result holds special significance for the UK fishing industry, which is a key sector of the UK economy. It is also important that we consider the impact of Brexit on the fishing industry in the UK.

The UK fishing industry is a significant part of the UK economy, providing employment and supporting local communities. The industry is also important for the sustainability of our marine resources. In the UK, fishing is a valuable source of income for many fishermen and their families. The UK fishing industry is also important for the UK’s food security, as fish is a major source of protein in the UK diet.

As the Minister considers those thoughts, I want to bring Members’ attentions briefly back to the December Council negotiations. The Minister, who is from my neighbouring constituency, will fully understand that the Cornish fleet is unique in its diversity. I understand that the ultra-mixed fisheries in the south-west present a real challenge in these negotiations. It is important that we view the outcome of this month’s negotiations as an overall package, as opposed to an isolated issue. Progress continues to be made towards maximum sustainable yields, which, in the end, will deliver the security that the fishing industry needs. However, in the Minister’s negotiations, it is essential to balance progress towards maximum sustainable yields with protection for the livelihoods of fishermen around the coast of west Cornwall.

While we are still in the EU, can the Minister please work hard to ensure that the maximum sustainable yield timetable is not allowed to become a dogma? It is better to take a little more time and safeguard the integrity of Cornish fisheries. With that in mind, proposals to cut monk by nearly 12%, megrim by 28% and pollock...
by 20% would cause considerable difficulty to fishermen in my constituency and it is not absolutely clear that the science supports such significant reductions. I particularly liked the suggestion from my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) regarding days at sea. I am sure that the over-10s in my constituency would welcome that idea.

Finally, sea bass fishing is once again a hot topic and affects sea anglers, the inshore fleet and the over-10s. All agree that we need to achieve a sustainable supply of bass. I know what the Commission is proposing and accept that hook and line fishing offers the best chance to allow fish stocks to recover. However, I urge it please to consider the broader commercial fishing fleet. The Commission’s proposals are misguided and harmful. As they stand, every bass caught in a net will be discarded dead, every bass caught in a beam trawl will be discarded dead and any bass caught in a trawl over the 1% catch will be discarded dead. It makes no sense to penalise dead and any bass caught in a trawl over the 1% catch they stand, every bass caught in a net will be discarded by catch by forcing them to discard this valuable fish.

There is much more that I could say, but, in summary, I ask the Minister to be bold about the UK’s fishing vessels in west Cornwall that pick up bass as a bycatch by forcing them to discard this valuable fish.

There is much more that I could say, but, in summary, I ask the Minister to be bold about the UK’s fishing vessels in west Cornwall that pick up bass as a bycatch by forcing them to discard this valuable fish.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) did very well on the time limit. He was well under the time limit and no discarded minutes—excellent—but I now have to ask hon. Members to take about seven minutes or everyone will not get in.

3.20 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): These debates are difficult for many of us who are pro-European by nature. I am a pro-European but I concede that the common fisheries policy has ill served the fishing industry since its introduction. This is one area where the Scottish National party has tried over many years to get powers back—unsuccessfully, as it transpired. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), who at the time represented the constituency of Banff and Buchan, introduced his Fisheries Jurisdiction Bill, which was backed by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and others from parties around the House.

It has always struck me that the regulation of fishing was not one of the powers that the EU should have. However, during this time of negotiation, we should bear in mind the importance of the single market to our seafood sector. In 2015 Scotland exported £438 million worth of seafood to the European Union. It is our second largest food and drink export after whisky, both of which are produced very well in North East Fife. We have the European maritime and fisheries fund, which is worth £107 million to Scotland, and the rural and coastal communities fund. Maintaining our coastal communities goes beyond the fishing industry to include other industries as well.

Although we are pro-European to our fingertips, we have to be honest with ourselves about the European Union. I do not think that the fishing industry has always been best represented by the United Kingdom as a member state. It was, after all, the United Kingdom Government back in the 1970s who described our fishing industry as being “expendable” when we joined the European Union. Indeed; my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) is right that it was a Conservative Government who described the industry as expendable. As the powers come back, what is there to say that that attitude has changed since the 1970s? That is a concern for fishermen and fishing communities the length and breadth of the United Kingdom.

It was not just the Conservative party. I sometimes fear that this place never quite got to grips with devolution in 2010. I sincerely hope, for the benefit of our fishing industry, that this Government get to grips with devolution and will respect the powers that have already been devolved to the Scottish Parliament and to those in Cardiff and Northern Ireland as well. I remember that in 2010 the Labour Government decided to send the Minister with responsibility for bees to a crucial fishing industry meeting, rather than sending the Minister who had the greatest responsibility for our fishing industry, Richard Lochhead. More recently, a Liberal Democrat Minister was sent to the salle d’écoute—that is, the listening room, for the benefit of Conservative Members—in 2006 during crucial negotiations.

Devolution has changed the context in which we have these debates. I sincerely hope that our fishing industry will be respected during the process of the UK leaving the EU.

Mr MacNeil: My hon. Friend is making a fine speech and a fine point. When we look at the UK’s exclusive economic zone and the 200-mile limit—just about only my constituency reaches that far—there are 773,000 sq km under UK control, but of that 462,000 sq km are Scottish and 311,000 sq km belong to the rest of the UK. That means that when we get the powers back from Brussels, as the Brexiters have promised us, we must ensure that there is no grab in London and that the mismanagement of Scottish waters is not simply transferred from Brussels to London.

Stephen Gethins: As usual, my hon. Friend makes a good point.

Finally, as Conservative colleagues are thinking about this issue, I would like to refer to Conservative MEP Ian Duncan, who said Scotland should play a leading role in international fisheries negotiations post-Brexit. He said:

“All future negotiations between the UK and external partners such as Norway, Iceland, the Faroes or the EU must include Scotland not just as a full partner, but as primus inter pares”—he went to St Andrews, so he could not help using a bit of Latin, and it means first among equals. He went on:

“It is clear that in the future, Scotland will need to play a key role on all external fisheries management bodies.”

When the Minister responds, I hope he will bear those words in mind, as well as the fact that devolved Administrations have certain responsibilities. There is fine produce in Anstruther and Pittenweem, as well as...
across Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom, and it deserves to do much better than it does under the common fisheries policy.

3.25 pm

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) for securing this important Backbench Business debate. Her constituency includes one of the UK’s biggest ports, which has been badly affected by the CFP. I also pay tribute to her predecessor, for the reasons my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) gave.

As many of my right hon. and hon. Friends are saying today, the CFP is a fundamentally failed system. Any attempts to conserve our fish stocks through the CFP have always meant too little sovereignty for London and too little decentralisation from Brussels. To understand what the UK’s future fisheries policy should look like, it is important to examine what has happened over the last four decades.

The principle of equal access to the European Community’s fishing waters was agreed without any basis in the treaty of Rome. Fisheries became a common resource, and all member states’ fishing vessels were granted equal access. The 30th of June 1970 was also the day the UK handed in its application to join the Common Market, and because equal access had become EU acquis, the UK was obliged to accept that principle, even though it had no legal precedent. We abandoned our territorial waters when we became members of the European Community. As we all now know, joining the European Community also meant that we abandoned our sovereignty.

Many points highlight the absurdity of the CFP. First, there is the conservation policy of national quotas. The quotas, imposed in 1983, are a prime example of a decision taken in Brussels but left with each member state to implement. As has become all too clear, the consequence of centralisation is overfishing. Because the CFP is centrally managed, local authorities in countries such as Spain turn a blind eye to abuse. The system also results in the wholesale dumping of fish—a practice that was common among member states but illegal in, for example, Norway. That is proof that the EU quota system is unfit for purpose. The second point is decommissioning to reduce fishing effort. Since 1992, Britain has been required to decommission its fishing fleet because our waters have been overfished—by 19% in 1992, and then by 40% in 1996.

Many members have spoken out against the CFP over the years—my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union being one of them. He has also spoken positively about the Icelandic system, where fishing quotas are market based and tradable. That system creates an incentive to conserve fish for the future.

Now that we are leaving the EU, we must leave behind centralised quotas, equal access and subsidised ships. That will not bring back the estimated 115,000 UK jobs we lost due to the CFP, but I believe it will recreate new jobs along the coast. Equally importantly, we must regain control of our territorial waters. There are many challenges ahead of us in the upcoming Brexit negotiations, but, from a political and environmental perspective, the Government have a massive opportunity that must not be missed. I urge them to consider the example set by Iceland and to introduce fair, tradable national quotas, making the best use of our resources and, most importantly, making them sustainable so that they are protected for the future.

3.30 pm

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): As is customary, I would like to take this opportunity to pay my respects to those who have lost their lives at sea over the past year, and to pay tribute to the work of the RNLI volunteers, our coastguards and the Fishermen’s Mission. They all play an essential role in the lives of our fishing communities. Earlier this year, I joined the crew of Fraserburgh lifeboat on a training exercise to raise awareness of its “Respect the Water” campaign. Every time I go out on the North sea, I am reminded of the dangers that our fishermen face in their day-to-day working lives.

More fish were landed in my constituency last year than in Wales and Northern Ireland combined. In fact, Peterhead and Fraserburgh alone landed about three quarters of the quantity of fish landed in the whole of England. No communities anywhere in the UK are more heavily dependent on fisheries than those of the Buchan and Banffshire coasts, and the industry supports thousands of jobs onshore, offshore and in the wider supply chain.

The UK’s decision to leave the EU has enormous implications for our fishing and fishing-related industries and coastal communities. It might present significant opportunities, chief among which would be the possibility to right some of the historical wrongs of the common fisheries policy. However, there are also big uncertainties, as well as questions that have not yet been answered and, indeed, possible risks for some sectors.

The nature and timing of the UK’s exit from the EU, and the tone of the negotiations, including on what type of Brexit the UK pursues, will be of enormous consequence to our fishing industries, both onshore and offshore. It is no secret that many fishermen voted to leave the EU, and the main driver for that among those whom I have talked to is the failures and frustrations of the CFP. When I ask them what they want, however, most of them say that they want to be in a similar position to Norway: outside the EU and the CFP and able to negotiate for ourselves; but within the single market and able to export produce easily to lucrative EU markets and to take advantage of free movement.

Scotland exported fish and seafood worth more than £438 million to EU countries last year. That represents nearly two thirds of our entire food exports, so the industry is hugely important. We need to maintain that ease of market access, but we also need to acknowledge that access to many of our non-EU export markets is currently facilitated via EU trade agreements. It is absolutely imperative for our fishing industry that the UK does not fall off the cliff edge of a hard Brexit. That would create huge problems for parts of our processing sector, and a bonanza for our neighbours—and competitors—in Norway and Iceland.

The other benefit of retaining single market membership is that there is no part of our fishing industry that does not rely on the free movement of labour. That is particularly acute in the processing sector, where EU nationals make up a large proportion of the workforce.
Callum McCaig: Aberdeen no longer has a fishing industry—it is safe to say that it was lost to the advent of oil, not to the EU—but it retains a processing sector, a significant proportion of whose workforce comes from elsewhere in the European Union. Does my hon. Friend agree that the sector is at risk if there is no protection for those workers?

Dr Whiteford: Of course I agree with my hon. Friend. That point has been raised by Members from many parts of the UK.

A significant proportion of the fish caught by Scottish boats is already landed in ports overseas, notably in Norway. If we were to lose any processing capacity in Scotland because of labour shortages, we would lose part of the high-value end of our supply chain. We would lose exports and revenue and, critically, we would jeopardise hundreds of local jobs that the free movement of labour has anchored in our geographically peripheral coastal communities.

I am desperately disappointed that the UK Government have chosen to use the status of EU nationals living and working in the UK as a bargaining chip in their Brexit negotiations. That has not just set a poor tone for what lies ahead, but created uncertainty for businesses and for ordinary, hard-working folk who have made their homes in our communities and do not deserve to become pawns in this unedifying game.

In or out of the EU, it is overwhelmingly in the interests of our fish processors and exporters to stay in the single market. Whatever our eventual constitutional destination, even the most ardent Brexiteers recognise that we will still have to negotiate with neighbouring coastal states over shared stocks and reciprocal access to our waters. It would be absolutely daft to get ourselves into a position where we can finally ditch the problems with the CFP and recover access to the fish in our own waters, but be unable to get that fish to market. In that regard, I was surprised to hear the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) say that he was in favour of leaving the single market, because I was looking the other day at a video clip of him on the “Murnaghan” programme saying “only a madman would actually leave the market.”

I do not know what has prompted this turn of insanity, but I think the right hon. Gentleman should clarify.

Mr Paterson: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me a chance to clarify. Perhaps she should have watched the Andrew Neil programme a little later, on which that ridiculous video was completely shredded. A number of us—about four or five—who campaigned to leave were absolutely and totally misrepresented—[Interruption.] I went on to say, if the hon. Lady will just restrain herself for a moment, that there are about two countries in the world—I think it is Somalia and North Korea—that do not sell into the single market. We want to sell into it.

Dr Whiteford: I am very confident that I have quoted the right hon. Gentleman correctly from the clip I saw. I think it is exactly that kind of two-faced language that discredits politicians and makes people doubt our integrity on issues that we are concerned about.

Mr Paterson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it parliamentary to talk about “two-faced language” when I have just explained that I was wholly misrepresented by that ridiculous video?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I would have jumped up anyway if the right hon. Gentleman had not. I think that the hon. Lady should withdraw “two-faced”.

Dr Whiteford: I will withdraw “two-faced”, although I said that it was that type of two-faced behaviour that discredits politicians. I did not make any reference to the right hon. Gentleman, although I think my context is very clear. I am happy to withdraw.

Arguably the biggest opportunities for the fishing industry in the current scenario will be: the ability to negotiate more effectively on our own behalf in future negotiations, rather than as part of the EU; and the possibility of securing a fairer share of the resources in our waters. A report published in October by the NAFC Marine Centre demonstrated that more than half the fish harvested in Scottish waters is caught by non-UK boats. I do not understand how anyone can see that as fair and equitable. The situation cannot be allowed to continue, and it must be addressed as a priority.

Inevitably, the run-up to next week’s fisheries talks has been somewhat overshadowed in this debate by Brexit considerations, but there are two major issues that I want to bring to the Minister’s attention. The first is the implementation of the discard ban. I know that I have been banging on about this for years, but the situation is urgent. Even if article 50 were triggered tomorrow, our demersal fleet would still be subject to the ban in 2018 and 2019. I do not think that there is a realistic way of implementing it in its current form, and I also do not see how it can be easily enforced.

There is a consensus about the idea that it is undesirable to throw marketable fish back into the sea, but I am not sure that we are any nearer to finding a way to make the discard ban work in the mixed fisheries of the North sea under our current quota allocations and arrangements. It has been relatively straightforward to do so in the pelagic sector, but there is a major problem for the white fish fleet with so-called choke species, such as hake and saithe, which are abundant in our waters but for which we have insufficient quota. Selective gears, quota swaps and other avoidance measures will take us only so far, and we absolutely must not get ourselves into a position where boats are tied up because of this. That cannot be allowed to happen.

We should focus our energy on securing healthy stocks that are sustainably harvested. Reducing discards is obviously one part of that, but it is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. I hope that the Minister will make addressing the situation a priority at the December Council, because we urgently need a workable solution.

The other issue on which I want to push the Minister echoes a point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael): the untenable situation regarding the EU-Faroe bilateral deal on mackerel. The deal that was reached in 2014 allows the Faroese fleet to fish 30% of its coastal stocks of mackerel in Scottish waters, and that is not an acceptable or sustainable position. I think that a reduction is an achievable goal, so I hope that the Minister will work for it.
Finally, I want to make a key point. Our fishing industry has unprecedented opportunities to recalibrate and to flourish on a sustainable footing, but the biggest risk that we face is that those potential opportunities will be squandered and traded away in the wider Brexit negotiations. We know that there will be many competing priorities in the days ahead, and it is vital that fishing is not simply thrown into that mix to be horse-traded away against bigger, more powerful and more vocal industries, or strategic interests, as we try to secure trade deals. We need to recognise that our abundant fishing grounds are an invaluable natural resource and that we have a responsibility to steward them sustainably in the interests of our maritime communities and for future generations. Fishing has probably more at stake in this process than any other UK industry. I want assurances from the Minister that we will not see a repeat of the 1970s, when fishing interests were subjugated to other strategic economic priorities. The UK Government has had it tough in recent years. I suggest that the UKFP should include the following ingredients. First, we need to start with a clean sheet of paper, rather than simply transferring the common fisheries policy into UK law through the great repeal Bill and then amending it. We must have our own bespoke fishing policy, and I would like it to include promoting the end of discarding sensibly and pragmatically, and working with neighbouring countries to manage shared fish stock sustainably.

Secondly, the UKFP should be set in a wide context, recognising the role that fishing can play in regenerating coastal Britain, reversing years of social and economic decline, rebalancing the economy and improving productivity. Thirdly, the UKFP must be underpinned by science. That means a pivotal role for the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, which is based in Lowestoft in my constituency. It has a key role to play in ensuring that we better manage our rich and precious marine resources, and in monitoring and enforcement. It is vital that the Government commit to ensuring that Brexit does not lead to a reduction in funding for scientific research.

Fourthly, the management of fisheries needs to be localised. The fundamental structural flaw of the CFP is that fisheries are managed from a distance. That said, I recognise the great work done by my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) to address that concern. Local management needs to involve those working in the industry on a day-to-day basis, and could well mean a role for enhanced inshore fisheries and conservation authorities. If we put in place a management system in which we can be confident, it could lead to an enhancement of the British fish brand, which will be important in marketing fish both at home and overseas.

Fifthly, we need to address the elephant in the room of reallocating quota. I acknowledge that that is not a straightforward task, but it is not right that 61% of English quota is held by three foreign companies, and that only 1.5% of national fishing quota goes to the smallest category of boat, even though they make up 75% of vessels. Quota should be available only to active fishermen. I recognise that the Minister has done much to address that and to rebalance quota in favour of the under-10 metre fleet, and that there may well be legal issues to address, but the whole industry must come...
together to find a way forward. As things stand, I do not support a system of individual transferable quotas, but there could well be a case for setting up a small-scale producer organisation that can give smaller boats a voice and greater control to help to rebalance the industry. Finally, special emphasis must be placed on supply-chain building all the way from the net to the plate.

To sum up, we have a great opportunity ahead of us to put in place a new policy framework that gives the fishing industry all around the coast a fresh lease of life. To grasp that opportunity, we need to have in mind at all times the three R’s: repatriation, reallocation and regeneration.

3.47 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) for securing the debate along with other hon. Members. I also pay tribute to those in the fishing industry, including fishermen, fish producer organisations, the Fishermen’s Mission and those in the processing sector. It is clear to me that the processing and catching sectors are vital if we are to create a fishing industries economic hub.

Two of the County Down fishing ports in Northern Ireland—Ardglass and Kilkeel—are in my constituency. They are vital to those two economies. We wish the Minister well and fair speed in advance of the negotiations in Brussels, but the most important thing apart from quotas and the total allowable catch allocations is the crewing of trawlers, which I mentioned in an intervention. The Minister and his Government colleagues will be aware of the serious problem that fishing crews have had in recruiting local people to work in our fishing fleet. That has resulted in qualified and experienced non-European economic area crew being drafted in to work on fishing vessels, particularly in Ireland and Scotland.

As the Minister may know, that is not the first time I have raised that issue with the Government—I have raised it with him and with his colleagues in the Home Department. I and colleagues representing constituencies on the west coast of Scotland, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), had a meeting back in January with the then Immigration Minister, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire). So far, there is no resolution. Recently, two Scottish National party colleagues representing west of Scotland constituencies and I met the new Immigration Minister. Again, there has been no resolution. To that end, we make a plea to the fisheries Minister today for that urgent meeting for the fishing industry with his ministerial colleague from the Home Department to resolve this issue, with representatives of the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation along with the UK Fishing Industry.

Mr MacNeil: Does this not typify the problem with the United Kingdom? Switzerland has 26 cantons. Half the visas are controlled by the cantons and the other half are controlled centrally. In the UK, where those in Westminster do not understand the issue, we are struggling. We are on bended knee trying to get people into our fishing boats. It is very frustrating.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very helpful intervention. Let me make it quite clear that without intervention and regulations our fishing industries will be tied up. That is not scaremongering; that is a fact.

On total allowable catches and the December Council, we have improving science for many Irish sea stocks. Nephrops remain our number one priority. The annual International Council for the Exploration of the Sea advice indicates increased stock levels, which we hope will translate into increased catch opportunities in 2017. A greater increase than the 9% currently proposed would be very welcome.

Irish Sea haddock represents another good news story. It is disappointing that our fishermen have had to wait so long for an increase in the quota for haddock, but I urge the Minister to make up for lost time and all the science-based arguments he has had to hand to secure the maximum possible increase at the forthcoming Council. I understand that haddock and Irish Sea cod are due to be benchmarked by ICES in the new year. There might be a temptation to hold back at the Council until the benchmarking exercise is completed. I urge the Minister to push for the maximum scientifically justified quota increases in the week after next—that is vital.

Another issue for us is Irish Sea herring. I realise that herring has a tendency to drop down the list of ministerial priorities in Brussels negotiations, but I urge the Minister to keep that stock, which is vital to my fishing community in Ardglass, on his radar. It was the first of the stocks to be certified to Marine Stewardship Council standard, and there remains a frustrating gap in terms of developing a management plan for this fishery.

The Minister will be making decisions on the third tranche of marine protected areas in the near future. Will he ensure that the joint negotiating committee engages fully with the industry and other relevant agencies in Northern Ireland before making its recommendations to him?

The issue with the voisinage agreement, a unique and historic fisheries agreement between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, has now become more apparent due to Brexit. I urge the Minister, in his discussions with the Irish Government—I met them some weeks ago—to ensure that they remedy the specific legislative challenge on this agreement, which is the result of a decision made by the Irish Supreme Court. We must ensure that Northern Irish fishermen are allowed to fish in Irish waters, and vice versa.

There is an issue relating to the Isle of Man and scallops that impacts on west of Scotland fishermen and fishermen from the County Down ports. They must be able to obtain licences.

In summing up, I want to highlight the need for the economic hubs to be established in Ardglass and Kilkeel, where much good work has been done to try to work with all the engineering industries. The Minister has seen this matter at first hand during his visit. We want a proper negotiation and the best possible deal, notwithstanding the impact that Brexit will have on the industry.

Several hon. Members rose—
Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. There is still an informal limit of seven minutes, but it has been broken every single time since I have been in the chair. Unless we stick to it, I will have to apply a formal limit.

3.54 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I will do my very best, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I was glad to appear before the Backbench Business Committee with my neighbour, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), to secure this debate, and I congratulated the Committee on allocating it to the main Chamber.

My constituency has a rich maritime history. I remember from my childhood that Grimsby was always referred to—as the world’s premier fishing port. The House of Commons Library referred me to an article from The Economist last year stating that Grimsby had had the world’s biggest fishing fleet, with more than 600 trawlers, as well as the world’s largest ice factory, which still stands today and is a derelict reminder of things past. Cleethorpes and Grimsby, though they value their own identities, are one, and the fishing industry has been an essential ingredient of the local economy. For decades, it was built on fish, and the industry remains vital.

I obviously join those who have paid tribute to the many fishermen who have given their lives. I am old enough to remember the hush that fell over the streets of Grimsby and Cleethorpes when a trawler was lost—a silent, cold, eerie feeling. Today, the fish market, fish processing and a handful of near-water vessels provide the jobs, and it is on today, tomorrow and, as the motion mentions, the future that we must now focus.

The importance of fishing and its associated industries is highlighted by figures provided by the Commons Library. Last September, 3,500 people—5% of those working in the local authority area—were employed in the manufacture of fish products in north-east Lincolnshire. Last year, the Minister visited Grimsby seafood village, which sits in the part of Grimsby docks that is in my constituency, and he will recall how the premises’ owners and tenants and those who worked there were focused on the future. Its website reads: “Where tradition meets technology”.

The Minister will appreciate as well as any of us the opportunities for the industry that Brexit can provide. He visited Cleethorpes during the referendum and will have appreciated the strong feelings of local people. In the North East Lincolnshire Council area, 70% supported leave, which came as no surprise to me, and in many ways was a verdict of failure on the CFP. The industry was sacrificed in the original Europe negotiations and has never fully recovered. The National Federation of Fishermen’s Organisations described the CFP as “dysfunctional” and the fishing industry as having been “expendable” in those negotiations of the 1970s. It is absolutely right.

When I raised that point in the House this morning during Question Time, I was heartened by the reply from the Minister of State in the Department for Exiting the European Union:

“I can assure my hon. Friend that the fishing industry is at the forefront of our considerations. We have already had several meetings with the industry’s representatives and will continue to do so.”

It must remain at the forefront of our considerations. The NFFO and the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation recognise the opportunities that life outside the EU can bring. Their briefing note to MPs ahead of this debate says that “there are real opportunities for sustainable economic growth that Brexit can deliver for coastal communities” and points out that Brexit provides “the structure for an ambitious new fisheries management regime that will ensure significant economic benefit for fishing communities once the UK regains control of its Exclusive Economic Zone.” They believe that this will “pave the way for environmentally sustainable, high yield and profitable fisheries.”

On 2 October, The Sunday Telegraph business section carried a feature on the Grimsby and Cleethorpes area headed “Optimism”. The author said that as she left Cleethorpes railway section, she saw a sign saying “Fantasy Land”, when it should of course have read “Fantasy World”. I put that to one side. When she attended an event on the newly refurbished Cleethorpes pier, one of the speakers was the chief executive of the Government agency, Seafood. He is quoted as saying that there are “plenty of reasons to be positive.”

I am sure that we would want to go along with that.

I know that it has been a priority for the Minister to regionalise the management of our fisheries rather than have them micro-managed from Brussels, and that he has achieved some considerable success in that respect. We can now look to a future when we can make those decisions for ourselves. Brexit must deliver fair national quota shares that broadly reflect the resources located in UK waters; a 12-mile exclusive zone providing adequate protection for our inshore fleets; balanced and proportionate access arrangements; the opportunity to manage the UK’s fisheries resources in a flexible and responsible way; and an arrangement that will allow EU-UK free trade in fisheries products.

Steve Norton, who until last month was chief executive of the Grimsby Fish Merchants Association told me yesterday that although there are uncertainties, we have a unique opportunity to right the wrongs of the past and give the industry hope for renewed prosperity. He went on to say that successful negotiations could create new jobs and sustainable growth. The industry has confidence in the Minister, and I hope that in his winding-up speech, he will be able to provide some reassurance on the points that I have raised.

4.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I want to cast Members’ minds back to films and TV—“The Perfect Storm”, for example, and “the Trawler Wars”, which I believe captured the pressures that fishermen are under.

Back in January, I was speaking to one of my constituents, a fisherman from Portavogie, who was pondering the year ahead. He said to me, “Jim, everything should be looking good for 2016. We have more prawn quota, quayside prices are stable and the cost of fuel is lower, but there is one big shadow hanging over the industry—will I have any crew?” Some Members have spoken about that. I told my constituent about the meeting that I, the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) and colleagues from Scotland held with the then Immigration Minister, who is now the Secretary of
State for Northern Ireland. Twelve months later, this issue still rankles and is still a matter of concern. We need to move it on. Indeed, it has deteriorated further.

Questions about fishing mainly or predominantly outside the UK’s 12-mile territorial limit mask a wider issue for the larger part of the fishing industry—not just the part I represent in Strangford, but right across these islands and especially in Northern Ireland and Scotland. I refer to the failure to recruit UK citizens to begin a career on our fishing vessels.

Brendan O’Hara: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the ban on recruiting non-EEA crew and the over-zealous actions of some Border Agency staff are forcing boats to get tied up, which is having a huge economic impact on already fragile communities in the west of Scotland and Northern Ireland?

Jim Shannon: That is quite clearly happening. I subscribe to what the hon. Gentleman says. Boats from Portavogie were boarded by the UK Border Agency in the Clyde the week before last and had to return home single-handedly, which should never have happened.

It is easy to identify the problems; the question is how to fix them. One huge step forward was taken on 23 June when the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland voted to leave the EU. I have every confidence in that, as we move forward to the future. Every man, woman and unborn child in Portavogie voted to leave the EU, as did the majority of people in my constituency.

At her party conference a few months ago, the Prime Minister unveiled the great repeal Bill and discussed the proposal whereby, come Brexit day, much EU legislation could be transposed into UK legislation. It is logical to conclude that 40-plus years of European legislation cannot be replaced overnight, and that it will take time systematically to work through it and to replace and amend diktats from Brussels to make them fit for purpose. Nevertheless, the fishermen I represent did not vote to leave the EU only to have the common fisheries policy replicated in UK law.

When it comes to the negotiations, the Minister needs to be aware that the CFP, as it is now, is certainly not one that the fishermen of Portavogie want to see replicated in the future. There are some things we need to keep, but not that. Portavogie had 130 boats when we joined the EU; there are now 65 boats, which is down to EU red tape, bureaucracy and a stranglehold, preventing people from moving forward.

There are those in Northern Ireland who do not understand why fishermen voted for Brexit. The reality of what my constituents had to cope with could be summed up by one EU rule—the Hague preference. Since 1991, that EU rule, which was enshrined in the last review of the CFP, has effectively forced British fishermen in the Irish sea—predominantly those from Northern Ireland—to surrender more than 10,000 tonnes of cod, valued at almost £30 million, to their colleagues in the Republic of Ireland. That is but one instance in which our colleagues in the Irish Republic may express solidarity with their friends in Northern Ireland, but reality speaks louder than words. It will be interesting to see how matters progress.

The Hague preference regime affects more than just the UK’s allocations of cod in the Irish sea, but cod is often regarded as the iconic species for our entire fishing industry. The cod wars of the 1970s in Iceland were the manifestation of a policy that witnessed the demise of the UK’s distant water fleet, with fishermen displaced into British waters which, by that stage, were under the competence of Brussels. We well remember the solidarity that was afforded to the UK’s fishermen by European colleagues during those tense days: we remember what they did for us.

I am keen to make progress, because I am conscious of the time. In 2008 the EU agreed what was described as a long-term cod management plan. Thanks to my party colleague in the European Parliament, Diane Dodds, the cod plan has been “defanged”, if I may adopt a phrase used by industry. At a stroke, the unjustified cuts in total allowable catches that have remained a feature in the Irish sea can be stopped—and indeed, I hope, reversed—in 2017. We are eager to maintain sustainable fisheries.

The maximum sustainable yield highlights another inconsistency in EU policy. Other Members have mentioned the imminent introduction of the discard ban, so I will not say a great deal about it now, but according to the EU, which effectively drafts the advice provided by ICES, more cod equals a zero TAC, against the background of a discard ban. One EU policy means that cod cannot be retained on board, while another means that they cannot be discarded. There is no logic in that. Illogical and inconsistent policies from the EU contribute to the undermining of confidence in the fishing industry, and hence to a lack of new recruits to the fleet.

I have three asks for the Minister. Pragmatic and sustainable fisheries management in the Irish sea calls for decisions at the EU’s December Fisheries Council that will secure a realistic cod TAC that reflects bycatches in the nephrops and haddock fisheries, an increased TAC for area 7 prawns reflecting the positive scientific advice that is already on record, and at least a 60% increase in the haddock TAC, reflecting the valuable resource that is available for harvesting today. Those decisions cannot be delayed.

Brexit clearly offers many opportunities for our fishing industry to contribute to the economy of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I get frustrated sometimes when I hear the negativity coming through. We start from where we are: our island nation is surrounded by some of the most productive seas in the world, which produce a resource of which so many others have been eager to avail themselves. Let us hope that our fishermen, and British fishermen, avail themselves of that resource. That will enable us to grow our marine economy and specifically our fishing industry, and to secure a traditional UK industry that UK citizens can be proud to be part of. In the meantime, Minister, I ask you and the Government to work with the industry, during what is a transitional period, to resolve the issues on non-EEA crew.

On Wednesday morning, in Westminster Hall, there was a debate on the seasonal agricultural workers scheme. The Minister referred to Marine Products Exports Development Authority schemes. I suggest an MPEDA scheme to deal with the EEA issue. We need to keep our ships and boats on the sea. I have asked for a meeting
with the relevant Minister, which my hon. Friend the Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) and I will attend with all our local fishing representatives.

I wish you well in your negotiations, Minister. I ask you to maintain and increase the quotas. We encourage you, Minister; you have our full support as you proceed with the negotiations.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I remind Members that when they say “you”, they are speaking to the Chair. The Minister should be referred to in the third person.

4.9 pm

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I enter the debate with a certain amount of trepidation, having listened to speeches from both my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), who is a great advocate in this regard.

Before I go further, let me pay tribute to Terri Portman, in my constituency, who helped me to ensure that—hopefully—my speech will be well informed. I also thank Dave Pessell, who runs Plymouth Trawler Agents, and the Devon Wildlife Trust, which has been incredibly helpful to me in this whole matter.

I am going to let you in on a secret, Madam Deputy Speaker: since I last spoke in one of these debates, I have been elected chairman of the all-party group on fisheries, so hopefully I know a little bit of what I am going to talk about. I succeeded my good friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), who has been made Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

My Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport constituency includes a centuries-old fish market that now sells 6,000 tonnes of fish and shellfish annually and is the second largest fish market in England. About 40 fishing boats unload their catch at Sutton harbour daily, but up to 70% of what is sold in Plymouth is imported overland, which I am told is called overlanding.

Plymouth has a global reputation for marine science engineering research, which includes the Royal Navy, the National Marine Aquarium, the Plymouth Marine Laboratory and the Marine Biological Association, which, interestingly, was set up in the 1870s to explore whether we could ever overfish our waters.

Since my election six years ago, I have called and campaigned for UK fishing waters to be brought under national control. I feel it is the fishermen who are best placed to conserve our fishing stocks; after all, why would they not want to do so, given that they would be destroying their own livelihood? While I voted and campaigned for us to stay in the EU, the whole business of the common fisheries policy has been a running sore for the fishing industry, most certainly down in my neck of the woods. It is a totemic issue.

I feel that this decision provides our fishing industry with a unique opportunity to rebuild. Plymouth’s fishermen and women who supported that did so because they feel there are real opportunities. Now we as a Government have the chance not only to undo but to deliver on that challenge. Many fishermen in the south-west feel they were simply forgotten on the way as a discussion was taking place about other matters, too.

Whatever mechanisms are developed to manage and allocate fishing opportunities in the future, the south-west fisherman must never lose out again. I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister agrees with that, as he also represents a south-west seat.

Currently the UK and south-west fishermen fishing off our coast receive just 10% of haddock catches in our waters compared to France taking 66%; for monk, it is 18% to 59% for France; for whiting, it is 11% to 60% for the French; and for cod, it is a staggering 8% against 73% for France. We can therefore see why south-west fishermen feel so strongly that they were not considered when the original deal was done, and we must not allow that to happen again. But beyond the catching opportunities that must be resolved, there are many other areas where Government can offer to assist, building on good work already done by fishermen and helping our fleet become more sustainable and safer and take advantage of opportunities in this vital sector, to deliver the best economic value to the UK post-Brexit.

Locally, some pioneering initiatives are being worked through between the local authority and the industry. They will rely on assistance from the European maritime fisheries fund, and as we look to the future post-Brexit we must endeavour to fund and deliver programmes that continue to offer support to these innovative types of work-streams, and also make sure that fishermen operate in a safer environment; that is a big issue that many Members have talked about in this debate.

My fishermen are very keen to do a number of things, and I will want to show my hon. Friend the Minister many things when he visits Plymouth in the new year. Sutton harbour has an opportunity to develop a very good set of facilities in order to be able to deliver an effective fishing industry. One thing it is looking at doing is delivering an academy to make sure people can be taught not only how to fish safely but understand the concept of what is happening. We have a lot of fishermen with 40 years’ experience and we must do more to engage with their knowledge to ensure that the academy is established.

We need to use this opportunity to deliver for our fishermen in the south-west, very much along the lines of what my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) advocated earlier. I have fought my parliamentary seat regularly, and in the run-up to the 2005 general election he came to my constituency and we met several recreational fishermen. [Interruption.] I already have a copy of the report, thank you. We certainly need to ensure that we do not give the French, or anyone else, the opportunity to get the better of us. As the old Napoleonic toast said, it should be a case of “confusion to the enemy” if they will not let us participate as we want to.

4.15 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) on securing the debate. I shall follow the lead of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colville) in informing the House that I have an unpaid adviser, Mr John Ashworth, who is sitting in the Gallery today. He has supplied me with information on historical fishing rights, which will be the key point of my remarks.
[Kevin Hollinrake]

Before I begin, however, I want to plug the town of Filey in my constituency. I do not know how many hon. Members have visited this beautiful town, but I would strongly recommend it. It has beautiful beaches and a historic promenade. It is pretty old fashioned, and has fantastic fish and chips. It was once a thriving fishing town, but today it has only seven small boats. They are licensed by the Environment Agency, but all the licences will expire in 2022, ending any heritage fishing in the town. I know that the Minister is willing to try to find a solution to this problem, and I appreciate his support. We would like to see fishing retained in the town. In the 1960s, there were around 20 cobles in the town, but they have all gone. There is a widespread belief that the common fisheries policy has been responsible for the decline, so it is little wonder that there was a massive cheer from that seaside town on 24 June when we voted to leave the European Union. The fishing industry sees leaving the EU as an opportunity to design a brand new, clean-slate domestic fishing policy—I do, too—but, sadly, life is never quite that simple.

This is all about historical rights. To understand what is involved, we have to go back to a time that pre-dates our membership of the EEC. Back in the early 1960s, our Prime Minister was Harold Macmillan and the chief negotiator in our mission to join the EEC was Edward Heath. Our application at that time was vetoed by the French President, General Charles de Gaulle. At the time, our nation’s fishing limits were being extended from three to 12 nautical miles, so the historical rights did exist prior to our membership of the European Union.

The Government decided to hold what became known as the London fisheries convention of 1964 to sort out the arrangements for the future 12-nautical-mile zone, especially in relationship to our European friends. We split the zone into two, with a 0-to-6-mile limit zone and a 6-to-12-nautical-mile limit. It was decided by the countries involved to give the coastal state exclusive use of the 0-to-6 mile zone and partial use of the 6-to-12-mile zone, allowing France, West Germany, Ireland, Italy, Holland and Belgium into that zone as they had habitually fished those waters. Perhaps this was a sop to the French, to persuade them to agree to our EEC membership, but it was to no avail because our application was blocked.

These arrangements came into legislation when we finally joined the EEC. Some would say that Edward Heath was too obsessed by our entry into the EEC to challenge the legality of the regulations, which set in train the decimation of the British fishing industry, the lifeblood of our coastal communities. The extent to which we can now clean the slate is open to question, and I hope that the Government will have the answers. If we remove ourselves from the common fisheries policy, we will presumably revert to the 1964 convention and the historical rights that the then fisheries Minister Mr Alick Buchanan-Smith referred to in his parliamentary answer of April 1981. We are able to give two years’ notice under article 15 of the London convention, but would that wipe the slate clean or would rights provided for under the 19th century conventions and regulations still have effect?

Once we have untangled those legal knots, I know and welcome that the Government will listen carefully to thoughts and ideas from across the fishing industry. Clearly it is important to consult widely to identify and articulate the optimal solution. The two main fishermen’s federations are obvious stakeholders, but will Ministers consider other views and interests to ensure that we provide new, small business opportunities for young and old and, of course, ensure environmental protections and the sustainability and recovery of fish stocks? Our wider economy will not be best served by simply preserving the status quo in order to protect a few individual interests.

Most of the licence holders in Filey are in later life and some are moving towards a time when they might consider hanging up their nets. Their situation needs to change, and we need a new system in place sooner rather than later. It is right that the Government continue to take proactive measures to tackle overfishing. Fishermen recognise that, which is why many favour a system involving days at sea, as mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish). There would be no discards and everyone would know what has been caught and where, which could open up more opportunities and new competition.

I am often reminded that fishermen are custodians of the sea. We, the British people, own it, and in a few years’ time full responsibility should lie with us in Parliament. It will be our job to ensure that we create a viable future for our fishing industry for the next generation and the generations after that.

4.21 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), and I add my thanks to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) for securing this important debate. It is always a delight to take part in Parliament’s annual fisheries debate, which is even more significant in the light of the historic decision on 23 June to leave the European Union. The barometer of success for our negotiations will be tested in many ways. In rural areas such as North Cornwall, however, both farming and fishing will be held up and examined closely against the backdrop of the common agricultural and fisheries policies.

I would like the Secretary of State and Ministers to take up several policies on the behalf of my residents in North Cornwall. Earlier this year, I was fortunate enough to be able to secure a debate in the Chamber on bass fishing, after which I was announced as parliamentary sea bass champion.

Oliver Colvile: Is my hon. Friend aware that I am the champion for hedgehogs?

Scott Mann: My hon. Friend has mentioned that on more than one occasion. I am aware that he supports hedgehogs.

I came to the Chamber earlier this year to speak on behalf of recreational anglers, who fared badly in last year’s discussions with Ministers and EU officials. Disproportionate restrictions were placed on anglers and increases in commercial landings during specific months were announced. It is now time to act. I welcomed
the comments of the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) and believe that now is the time to follow the science on bass. All indications point to stocks being at a critical level. I have been on the record before to ask for hook-and-line commercial and recreational bass fisheries, and I speak again for that today.

I have received a number of letters this week from anglers, many of whom have signed the online petition, and the gist of those letters was virtually the same: “Dear Scott,”—we are obviously on first name terms—“I have grown up fishing for bass around Cornwall. I used to catch lots of school bass. Sometimes we would have competitions to see how many bass we could catch on the same worm. Over the last 10 years, I have caught fewer and fewer. I haven’t become a bad angler overnight. I am now lucky to catch at all if I go out. Please do something to protect the stocks. Best wishes, Concerned from North Cornwall.” In fact, a number of inshore fisheries and conservation authorities are putting proposals in place to remove Gill nets from estuaries, and I welcome that. I say politely but forcefully to the Minister: please release the bag limits on anglers and support the proposals for sustainable fishing in 2017.

Of course, there are many who fish commercially in and around our estuaries, and with Britain leaving the EU we have the ability to rebalance quota allocations and ensure that our under-10 metre fleet have species that they can target. We could shape a new coastal 0 to 10-mile nautical plan for this country. We also need to consider small producers’ organisations, so that they can put their case on what they are looking for and we can ensure that everyone from the hook-and-line fishermen and the under-10 metre fleet to the bigger fleets, has a fruitful future after Brexit. A new British fisheries policy could look after hook-and-line fishermen, the under-10 metre fleet and the broader commercial sector, and I welcome that.

The new changes to the fishing licence have not been touched on. A number of carp anglers have for a number of years called to have three rods on their licence, and I welcome the change that the Environment Agency has made. Changes have also been made so that children under 12 can have free licences, so that we encourage more people to become the anglers of the future. That, too, is to be welcomed.

I wish to ask the Minister about one specific environmental scheme. I have heard of cases where boats across our seas come across plastics. They remove the offending items and bring them back to the land but then find that the local authority wishes to charge them a disposal fee. That is clearly nonsense and I suggest that fishers could be encouraged after Brexit to clean the seas by receiving a payment for landfill these unwanted items, as plastics are filling our seas. I know that the Government have already made concessions on microbeads, which is to be welcomed, but does a scheme such as the one I am proposing exist already? Are there plans to implement one?

In summary, I call on the Minister to consider doing the following: redistribute the quota post-Brexit to the under-10 metre fleet; provide financial support to help people get back into the industry; remove the bag limits on anglers and introduce hook-and-line sustainable fishing methods for bass, and follow the science behind that; prioritise the under-10 metre fleet in the 0 to 12-mile zone to compensate for the removal of nets in the estuaries; support new producer organisations that represent the under-10 metre fleet, so that they have a place at the table when these discussions are happening; and introduce an environmental “fishing for plastics” scheme, which could help fishers to clean up our oceans and receive a payment for doing so. Many of our fishing communities in and around our coastline have seen a massive decline under the common fisheries policy. Now that we are back in control, we have the ability to shape our coastal communities once again.

4.27 pm

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): This has been a good and lively debate. Perhaps the one complaint is that my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) said that there were too many interventions from the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar—that is a scrupulous allegation!

First, I wish to put on the record my own pleas, just as many other Members have done. I represent a coastal community; indeed, it is one of the few constituencies—perhaps the only one—that reaches the 200-mile exclusive economic zone. Our current pleas are about tuna, dogfish and herring. We would like to have some tuna quota, as tuna are passing regularly through the Hebrides—about 200 miles west of the Hebrides, within the Hebrides to St Kilda area—as Angus Campbell of Kilda Cruises sees frequently when he goes out there. That call is backed by the Western Isles Fishermen’s Association secretary Duncan MacInnes, with that organisation of course being the biggest fishermen’s association in Scotland.

The second area where we need support and help is on dogfish. We need a bycatch allocation, because friends I went to school with have been in the unfortunate situation of having to dump perfectly good dogfish. I worked as a fisherman on two separate occasions, and on one of those, more than 20 years ago, we were specifically targeting dogfish. That was of course ended because of the unsustainability of that fishery, but again dogfish are coming back and it is a shame to catch these fish, which are later marketed as rock salmon, only to dump them over the side and not use them. Of course we also need to do something about herring, my third point, because herring are appearing on the west coast in great numbers and are being caught as bycatch, but there is no quota allocation and so again they are being dumped. I hope that the Minister was listening to those three points.

Mr Paterson: The hon. Gentleman has given three very good examples of why quotas do not work, and why we should move to a days-at-sea scheme. Does the Scottish National party support that?

Mr MacNeil: A days-at-sea scheme has its own problems. It puts pressure on fishermen. Sometimes they might get only hours at sea. There is merit in looking at a lot of changes in the fisheries policy, and I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman has his own thoughts on that. [Interruption.] He has a record of changing his mind over the period of a month—I might refer to that again as I go on in my speech.

On a happier note—

Mr Paterson rose—
Mr MacNeil: When I mention the right hon. Gentleman again, perhaps I will take his intervention then. Time is of the essence now.

Mr Paterson: The hon. Gentleman accused me of changing my mind. I have proved the point to him quite clearly. If he looks at the full length of the video, he will see that I did not change my mind. He has a second chance now: yes or no to days at sea?

Mr MacNeil: Let me look at the right hon. Gentleman’s words again. He said that “only a madman would leave the market.” Has he changed his mind on that?

Mr Paterson: Will the hon. Gentleman please quote the rest of the clip? If he had watched the Andrew Neil show he would realise that those clips were very, very carefully chosen, and were then disproved by the rest of the sentences that followed. I will give him another chance: yes or no on days at sea?

Mr MacNeil: I would rather pursue this point. What did the right hon. Gentleman mean when he said that only a madman would leave the market? Let us put that in context with what others in his camp have said. Here is Daniel Hannan:

“Absolutely nobody is talking about threatening our place in the single market.”

Nigel Farage said, “Like Norway.” What did the right hon. Gentleman mean when he said that only a madman would leave the single market?

Mr Paterson: I am delighted to carry on with this exchange. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the rest of the sentences, he will realise that I, Dan Hannan and others—

[ Interruption. ]

The video was put up by a Liberal press spokesman, who was then completely shredded and harpooned by Andrew Neil live. It was proved that those were very selective short sentences from a longer clip. The hon. Gentleman is still ducking the question on days at sea. Does he agree that having days at sea would mean that we would not have discards? That would then get around the problem of not being able to land fish, which is very grievous for his constituents, and which he mentioned in his opening comments.

Mr MacNeil: I have already said that I am happy for anything to enter into the mix of discussions and negotiations post-Brexit. The right hon. Gentleman has not answered my question, so I will leave it be. People watching can make up their own minds about what he meant when he said that only a madman would leave the market. I am quite clear what he meant.

The debate today was hosted tremendously well by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, particularly on the issues that affect me and Members from Northern Ireland, especially the lack of fishermen and the effects on fishing boats. Ultimately, of course, there is the effect on the Exchequer. If the boats are not going to sea, they are not earning money and not paying taxes, and that has a bad effect on the UK’s balance of payments, which, as we know, is not great at the best of times.

The right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell) made a thoughtful speech. He pointed out the dangers of the occupation, and thanked the RNLI in particular for the work that is done to keep people safe. I know that myself, after the loss of the Louisa in April this year. I was one of the last people to see the boat as she went down the west side of Barra at one in the morning. The following people were lost: Martin Johnston, aged 29, from Halkirk in Caithness; Chris Morrison from Harris; and the skipper, Paul Alliston. Happily there was a survivor, Lachlan Armstrong. That is the cost of fishing. The skipper of one of the boats that I worked on years ago lost his crewman and a friend of mine, Gerry Gilles, just over a year ago. That is the price of fishing.

The hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) mentioned the fisheries in King’s Lynn and the Wash. It is interesting to hear his frustration with the marine protected areas. He will know that it is not just in Norfolk and the Wash that these conservation zones are bringing frustration to fishermen. They are doing so across the country.

The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) made an excellent and very thoughtful speech about what being in and out of the EU might mean, whether fisheries would lose on the way out as they lost on the way in, and what exactly tariffs would mean for those selling into the European single market. At present that gives us an advantage in some places. However, many in the fishing community who voted for Brexit might have voted in frustration with the common fisheries policy, not to lose access to the single market.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) made the point that CFP interaction would continue. He spoke about the cod recovery plan and the pain that that involved, combined with decommissioning. He mentioned that 47% of stocks were still overfished, such are the pressures on fisheries.

The right hon. Gentleman and another Member spoke about the success of the Faroese in managing to gather 33,000 tonnes of mackerel in Scottish waters. As time goes on, we might see what successful and experienced international trade negotiators can achieve. The Faroe Islands have a population of 50,000 and, when they go toe to toe with the European Union of 500 million, we see that their more experienced trade negotiators are more wily trade negotiators, especially when they know the importance of something close to them, as fisheries are. Perhaps when the UK draws up its own international trade deals, we will be doing so with inexperienced trade negotiators. We should study the success of the Faroe Islands and watch that we do not get mugged in the course of those negotiations.
My hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) made a speech heavy on facts about what fisheries were contributing to Scotland—£500 million-worth of farmed salmon that goes out, compared with £438 million-worth of fish caught by fishing boats, showing that farmed fish has a bigger export value, which I found surprising.

The debate should be remembered for the many points that were made, the information given to the Minister, and the expectations of the Minister in time to come. I noted from the comments of the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) that de Gaulle was probably the original Brexiteer, in that he refused to allow the UK access to the European Economic Community.

I see your eyes, Madam Deputy Speaker, looking at the clock; you are hinting gently to me to get on with it. I hope the Minister will remember my three points, and the clock; you are hinting gently to me to get on with it. I hope the Minister will remember my three points, and the heartfelt plea from the west of Scotland and from Northern Ireland. For goodness’ sake, let our boats go to sea and, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, stop the overzealous activities of the border agencies that are working against the economic interests of the west coast of Scotland and Northern Ireland.

4.37 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak for the Opposition today. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) on securing this debate. Much of it has focused on the challenges and opportunities of Brexit, and we have had knowledgeable and often passionate contributions from the hon. Members for St Ives (Derek Thomas), for Twerton and Hounslow West (Nell Parish), for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner), for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford), for Waveney (Peter Aldous), for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) and for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), and the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson).

My constituency, Workington, includes a stretch of the Solway firth. There are around 75 fishing boats landing about 4,000 tonnes of fish annually. We have a fishing processing plant in Maryport which recently reopened, helped by a grant from Allerdale Council, creating 60 jobs. In 2012 a report examined the demand for and ability to supply locally caught fish and seafood to the hospitality sector. I am sure that many colleagues have visited Cumbria and will be aware of that sector’s importance to our economy. Last year, the Cumbrian Fisheries label was launched, with the idea that if fish are sold locally, the greater the profit will be for the fishermen and the processors. Bunking the scheme are several businesses in my constituency, including the Maryport Fishing Cooperative, the award-winning Pyne Fish and the Trout Hotel in Cockermouth.

This Saturday is Small Business Saturday. What better way to support the local community than to go down to the high street and purchase locally caught fresh fish? Cumbria is famous for its sausages. I see no reason why it cannot also be famous for its fish and shellfish. I can personally recommend Solway potted shrimp.

It is important that the Government make headway on the future of our trading relationships. As about 80% of the British catch is exported, primarily to the EU, Brexit negotiations need to take into account the impact that a less-than-ideal trade deal could have on the industry.

I am concerned that although DEFRA and the Marine Management Organisation have experienced severe budget cuts, their responsibilities will only increase. How will the Government ensure they are properly resourced? How many additional staff are being recruited? The looming regulatory deficit represents a big challenge. A streamlined DEFRA will have its work cut out because of the sheer amount of secondary legislation that we will need to replace European legislation.

Members on both sides of the House have talked about the shortcomings of the common fisheries policy, but we must recognise that recent reforms have had positive impacts, including improved sustainability and a stop in the decline of some stocks. What financial drivers will the Government put in place as a successor to the CFP while keeping in mind environmental protections and fishing business sustainability? How will we ensure that we have an effective maximum sustainable yield and that the other objectives of the CFP are incorporated into UK legislation? How do the Government intend to make up the shortfall in the funding for the fishing sector that is currently derived from the European maritime and fisheries fund?

We have to work to align our fisheries regulations with those of our EU neighbours to stop us from returning to a situation of competitive overfishing. Although we have the opportunity to look at quotas and access arrangements, it simply is not the case that we will get exactly what we want—as the Minister knows, we will get what we can negotiate. I am worried about the regulatory vacuum that we might have between our getting rid of the CFP and having our own regulations in place. What is DEFRA’s plan for that transitional period? The Minister has talked before about the unfairness of the current reciprocal access arrangements, under which other EU countries benefit more from access to our waters than we do from access to theirs, so what does he regard as a fair reciprocal arrangement?

We must think carefully about trying to maintain tariff-free access for fishery exports to the EU, and we must not be surprised if the EU then tries to bargain for increased access to UK waters. Norway is in the EEA and has a number of fisheries interests in the UK, particularly processing plants and aquaculture. If we leave the EEA and the customs union, what will that mean for companies exporting to the EU, which is where most of our high-value fish go? Is there not a danger that those companies will up sticks to a void left by the looming regulatory deficit represents a big challenge. A streamlined DEFRA will have its work cut out because of the sheer amount of secondary legislation that we will need to replace European legislation.

We must seek to preserve conservation measures established under EU law. The sustainability of fish stocks has to be a priority. I support the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) and the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) about sea bass. How can we have continued commercial netting of a stock that is below critical levels? The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) talked about recognise scientific advice when looking at long-term sustainable fishing. I implore the Minister to ensure that future policy does exactly that, taking advice from not only ICES but CEFAS. What key environmental protections will DEFRA ensure are upheld
in the negotiation process? The future of sustainable European fish stocks and the long-term livelihoods of thousands of people depend on that.

Finally, on Brexit, we must remember that building and maintaining good relations with colleagues is important—for the Minister and his European counterparts at the upcoming Council, but also across parties. I am willing to work constructively and closely with him to ensure we end up with the best deal possible for our fisheries so that we can secure a sustainable, long-term future for our industry.

4.43 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I begin by commending members of the all-party group on fisheries for bringing forward this annual debate on fisheries as we approach the December Council.

This will be my fourth December Council arguing over fisheries quotas. In that time, some things have changed: we have more stocks fished at MSY than previously, and the numbers are growing. Some of the challenges, particularly in the North sea, have receded, and the stocks are in a better situation. However, in other areas, some things have stayed the same. We still have challenges with bass, and stocks such as cod, haddock and whiting in the Celtic sea.

Sadly, it is also still the case that fishing remains, as many hon. Members have pointed out, one of the most dangerous occupations. This is an opportunity for me to pay tribute to all our fishermen who take risks to bring sea fish to our table. I am also sad to report that over the past year, since our previous debate, nine fishermen have lost their lives. I know that all hon. Members will wish to join me in expressing our sincere condolences to the families and friends who have suffered those tragic losses.

I want to cover as many of the important points that have been raised in today’s debate as possible. The context for this year’s debate is clearly very different from those of previous years, following our decision to leave the European Union. We are committed to acting on the decision taken by the British people, to withdrawing from the common fisheries policy and to putting in place a new fisheries regime.

As an independent coastal state outside the EU, the UK would be fully responsible, under international law, for control of the waters in our exclusive economic zone, and for the management of those resources within it, including fisheries. The Government remain committed to being a champion of sustainable fisheries and to ending discards, as set out in our manifesto. We are also committed to continued co-operation with other countries, including fisheries. The Government remain committed to being a champion of sustainable fisheries and to ending discards, as set out in our manifesto. We are also committed to continued co-operation with other countries, including fisheries.

I am pleased also that agreement has been reached to bring it under the landing obligation from next year. I want to make it absolutely clear that the total allowable catch set by the European Union for the vast majority of stocks will be increased, not decreased, from the current levels. These measures have been set on the basis of the most recent scientific advice, implemented at MSY, which is the long-term sustainable yield for the resource. Equally importantly, we are committed to reducing the minimum landing size in order to increase effective quotas, as well as ensuring that we take account of the condition of the stock at each assessment, which will mean reducing catches substantially where necessary. We have already managed to agree an increase in the landing obligation for cod, by removing automatic cuts in effort.

While the North sea cod stock is still rebuilding, we are close to fishing it sustainably, and we will be able to bring it under the landing obligation from next year. I am very pleased that agreement has been reached to bring it under the landing obligation from next year, and I look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues across the House, the devolved Administrations and the European Union to agree a deal that works for all stakeholders.
coastal states agreement on mackerel, blue whiting and
Atlanto-Scandian herring, remain of the utmost importance
to the UK fishing industry. This year’s negotiations
have already resulted in positive outcomes for the UK,
with increases in quota for mackerel, blue whiting and
Atlanto-Scandian herring, which we estimate to be
worth in excess of an extra £20 million for the UK fleet.
However, more needs to be done to secure the long-term
sustainability of those stocks.

I turn to some of the points made by hon. Members.
The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), who
opened the debate, made the point that I attended
her constituency during the referendum campaign. I
did—I shared a platform with her predecessor as we made
the case for leaving the EU. The hon. Lady mentioned
the cod wars. Overwhelmingly, the developments that
had the greatest impact on the fishing industry in Grimsby,
were the three cod wars during the late 1960s and early
1970s. After the cod wars, it became effectively a norm
of international law, through the UN convention on the
law of the sea, that countries would have an exclusive
economic zone extending to 200 nautical miles. Ironically,
we would be asking, going forward, for something that
is now a norm under international law, and which
became so after our loss of the third cod war.

The hon. Lady suggested that I made unrealistic
pledges during the referendum campaign. During that
campaign, I exercised my right to campaign as a free,
independent MP, but I fully intended that the leave
campaign would win, and I fully hoped that I would be
back in position and able to see through the changes
that I believe are necessary to deliver sustainable fisheries.
We will abide by international law in the United Kingdom,
and we will expect the European Union to respect and
abide by international law. As several hon. Members
have said, our European partners have a right to expect
us, as the UK, to behave honourably and decently
towards them as we put in place new fisheries arrangements.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson),
who has written papers about fisheries, highlighted an important area of future
management—the relative merits of a control system
based on effort and days at sea, and a quota regime. The
thrust is that there are pros and cons to each. A quota
system is generally considered to make far more sense
than a control system, but it is a requirement of UNCLOS
that we cooperate with other countries, that we have
regard to historical access rights and, crucially, that we
work together on shared stocks.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann)
mentioned bass. We hope to make progress this year.
They know that I have consistently made the case in the past
two years. The science suggested that the measures
that we took last year would get us to MSY by 2018.

Several hon. Members mentioned choke species. I am
aware that that is an issue. Indeed, the UK, as chair of the
north-west waters regional group, put it on the
agenda of the November Fisheries Council. We are
working on several possible options, including a de
minimis bycatch exemption or a group total allowable
catch for some of the small species. That is not an
insurmountable problem, but we recognise the challenge.

The hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) mentioned the importance of involving Scotland
in the negotiations. I can confirm that we are doing that. The Scottish fisheries Minister always joins me in

He asked me to consider whether we might do a pilot in
this area. We have not ruled that out, but we are not yet
in a position to make a decision to go forward with it.

The right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell)
talked about the Farn Deeps. He will be aware that we
agreed with the Commission last year to take some
steps on that nationally and to get agreement on technical
measures. We have taken steps to try to safeguard that
fishery, predominantly for the local fleet around North
Shields. He asked whether leaving the EU strengthens
our position. It probably does, in that that will make it
easier for us to put in place technical measures without
our necessarily having to get agreement at EU level. He
also mentioned infrastructure. While we are in the EU,
we still have access to the European maritime and fisheries fund, and obviously we will look at other
options in the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk
(Sir Henry Bellingham) mentioned shrimp fishing in his
constituency. He is aware that that is a matter for IFCA,
which is consulting at the moment. It is suggesting a
restriction on 14% of the special area of conservation,
which is less than 14% of the fishery.

The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw),
the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford)
and many others mentioned trade deals. It is important
to point out a misunderstanding that some hon. Members,
including the shadow Minister, have. Although Norway
and Iceland are in the European economic area, and
therefore part of the customs union for other goods, the
EEA does not cover fisheries. With fisheries, we have a
series of preferential trade agreements. It is therefore
incorrect to claim, as several hon. Members have, that
Iceland and Norway are in the customs union or the
EEA for the purposes of fisheries. That is not the case.

The right hon. Member for Exeter and my hon.
Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann)
mentioned bass. We hope to make progress this year.
They know that I have consistently made the case in the past
two years. The science suggested that the measures
that we took last year would get us to MSY by 2018.

Since then, the science has deteriorated and there has
been poor recruitment, so there are some challenging
decisions to make and we have consistently argued for
change.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland
(Mr Carmichael) mentioned the access given to the
Faroes, particularly to some of the pelagic species. He
knows that those negotiations are currently led by the
EU and that, although we often raise objections and
concerns, they can be overruled as things stand. It is one
of the reasons why the pelagic fishing fleet greatly looks
forward to the UK leaving the EU and regaining its seat
in important coastal states negotiations.

Several hon. Members mentioned choke species. I am
aware that that is an issue. Indeed, the UK, as chair of the
north-west waters regional group, put it on the
agenda of the November Fisheries Council. We are
working on several possible options, including a de
minimis bycatch exemption or a group total allowable
catch for some of the small species. That is not an
insurmountable problem, but we recognise the challenge.

The hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) mentioned the importance of involving Scotland
in the negotiations. I can confirm that we are doing that. The Scottish fisheries Minister always joins me in
the trilateral discussions with the presidency and the Commission. However, it is important that the UK Minister who is accountable to Members of Parliament from right across the UK represents the UK at those discussions.

We have heard many other points, which I am sure that hon. Members will raise with me afterwards. We will seek a balanced deal, and we have exciting times ahead as we develop our future fisheries policy.

4.58 pm

Melanie Onn: I am disappointed that the Minister has not offered a meeting to discuss the outstanding compensation claim case on behalf of the widow of Jim Greene. I hope that that was an unfortunate oversight and that, perhaps after the debate, he will offer me some of his valuable time.

It has been an excellent, generally good-natured debate, with lively and wide-ranging contributions from hon. Members of all parties. Ultimately, it has proved that the subject fully deserves a debate in the main Chamber. I recognise that contributions have come from all four nations of our great United Kingdom.

It has been right to remember those who have lost their lives. Let me mention those seamen who took on the wartime role of minesweeping, without any of the modern sonar equipment with which we are blessed, at great cost to them and their families. I was very privileged to attend a moving Armistice Day remembrance service at the royal docks this year.

The loss of seafaring skills was mentioned. The point made by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) about an academy is important. Perhaps that should be rolled out to coastal towns around the country.

Ultimately, I look forward to hearing much more from the Government about the fishing industry as we move towards negotiating our exit from the EU. I am not entirely assured, but I thank the Minister.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9 (3)).
council leaders decided to work towards a public consultation on possibly reorganising local government within Dorset, but without any preconditions.

In parallel, Christchurch and East Dorset Councils, along with the other seven councils, went out to consultation on proposals for a combined authority to take effect from 1 April 2017, which will bring together representatives from all nine Dorset councils plus the Dorset local enterprise partnership to deliver on transport infrastructure and economic regeneration. The consultation document states:

“A Dorset combined authority would demonstrate our partnership approach and be a strong basis for us to request more responsibilities and powers from the Government”.

It also reassured consultees that “combined authorities combine specific functions of two or more local authorities. The councils remain separate but they pool decision making over what services they want to combine, acting as one strong and accountable body representing and responsible for the area.”

That application was unanimously approved and is now on the Secretary of State’s desk. Contrary to some black propaganda, the proposal does not involve the creation of an elected mayor for Dorset.

It was disappointing that council leaders could not agree that key issues such as public transport, adult social care and children’s services should also be included within the remit of the combined authority, despite the obvious financial benefits. Adult social care and children’s services consume some 75% of the Dorset County Council budget. If included with similar services from the two other upper-tier authorities in the combined authority, Poole and Bournemouth, significant savings would be achievable without undermining local democratic accountability.

At the end of August this year, the nine Dorset councils launched a separate consultation on what they described as “reshaping your councils”. The consultation was meant to be presenting four options. The first was no change to existing structures, and the other three were for variations on the theme of abolishing the nine existing councils and creating in their place two unitaries. The options presented for consultation and the terms of the consultation paper were never approved by councillors in Christchurch or East Dorset. Indeed, it was only at the insistence of a minority of council leaders—including, I think, the leader of East Dorset—that a no-change option was included at all.

Last Friday, the Housing Minister visited Christchurch to discuss the issue with the leader of Christchurch Council. At the Minister’s request I was present at the meeting, which was also attended by the leader of East Dorset District Council. Despite the fact that Christchurch councillors have at no stage given approval to any suggestion that their council should be abolished, the leader of the council told my hon Friend the Minister:

“We don’t think option 1”—no change—

“is really an option”.

Although he was immediately contradicted by the leader of East Dorset District Council, the Christchurch leader went on to say that if he did not receive a mandate from his councillors for the council’s abolition, he would be ready to defy that decision when discussing with other council leaders the preferred option for Dorset. In throwing aside the caution that he had been seeking to impose on all other councillors around the issue of predetermination, he said:

“What is expected cannot be achieved with the status quo”, and he gave the Minister a paper setting out his expectation of Government that it should give “support for the principle of changing to a two unitary model in Dorset”.

He thereby showed that his mind had been made up all along against keeping Christchurch independent and that the public consultation was effectively a charade.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My hon. Friend and I take diametrically opposed views on this issue. East Dorset covers part of my constituency. Does my hon. Friend recognise that all the district councils, the county council and the two unitaries are individually going to be debating a report over the coming weeks—the last debate will, I think, be on 31 January—which will then determine the views of each of those councils? It is not as if either East Dorset or Christchurch has treated itself less well. No council has actually taken any decision, but they will be offered a recommendation to either endorse or disagree.

Mr Chope: Nothing my hon. Friend says is incorrect, but the situation is that the leaders of councils should—as the leader of East Dorset Council has said—enter into those discussions and negotiations having sought a mandate from their own councillors. That is not what is being proposed in Christchurch. For good measure, the Christchurch Council leader has also criticised the combined authority, despite being a party to submitting it to the Government. He said:

“We don’t think it would deal with the massive expectation”.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the public consultation has been so criticised as inadequate, biased and, indeed, untruthful. I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) has been taken in by this, because the consultation was designed to mislead respondents into believing that no change in structures was not an option. The consultation questionnaire gave the impression that there was no alternative to abolishing the existing structure of nine councils, and stated that if the nine councils were retained, “major savings would need to be found and it is likely that many council services could not be provided in future”.

The only argument it put forward in the consultation for retaining the nine existing councils was “familiarity”—nothing about control over one’s own destiny and all the rest of it.

No evidence is produced in support of the scaremongering in the document. Indeed, I have been informed by the councils’ chief finance officers that all “authorities within Dorset are in a solvent position and have sufficient balances to remain this way for the foreseeable future”.

Simon Hoare: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Chope: No, I will not give way again.

The consultation period was only eight weeks, during which time I attended five public meetings and had numerous meetings and discussions with constituents, voluntary organisations, councillors and former councillors, parish councillors and community groups.
Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): On a point of order. On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am slightly surprised, so I seek your guidance. I wrote to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) at the end of last week, giving the factors I just stated in my interjection, mentioning that part of my constituency lay within the boundaries of East Dorset District Council, and requesting that I be allowed to make a short speech. He refused my request but invited me to come and listen to his speech, which is why I am here today. Is it in order, therefore, notwithstanding his right to refuse my request to speak, and given that part of the area in question is in my constituency—as it is also in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson)—for him not to accept an—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I am stopping the hon. Gentleman because he is eating into the time of the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope), whose choice it is; it is his Adjournment debate. The hon. Gentleman is perfectly entitled to put in for another Adjournment debate, and then it will be up to him who is allowed to speak.

Mr Chope: I am most disappointed in my hon. Friend. I gave way to him and now he has taken up a minute or more of my precious time with a spurious point of order. This indicates his embarrassment at not being on top of the facts of this issue.

I was talking about the different organisations to which I had spoken. The Daily Echo was highly critical of the consultation, and its lead letter on 21 October was headlined “We are being manipulated”, which reflected the widespread opposition to council abolition among my constituents. The documentation and financial evaluation of options in the consultation were based on the presumption that a new town council would be created in Christchurch to replace the borough council following abolition. Even elected councillors were unaware of that.

Simon Hoare: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Chope: No, I will not.

Nor did they realise that the funding for the town council would come from an extra £150 a year extra band D council tax. My constituents would forever, therefore, be paying higher council tax than residents in Bournemouth and Poole for the same level of service, despite the contrary having been asserted in the consultation document. The creation of a new town council replicating the borough council would also undermine the avowed objective of reorganisation of reducing administrative costs, cutting out duplication and simplifying local government.

Simon Hoare: On that point, will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Chope: I will not give way. My hon. Friend has already taken up my time in raising a spurious point of order, and I will not give way to him again.

When after seven weeks of asking questions I received the admission that the financial figures were based upon the creation of a new town council, I inquired as to why Christchurch would choose to create a new town council when the consultation document at page 3 assured its readers:

“The two unitary councils would deliver the services currently provided by the six District and Borough Councils”.

No clear answer has been given to my question about what extra services beyond those already being provided in Christchurch would be funded with an extra £150 per year band D council tax. With 21,332 properties paying band D, as an average this amounts to over £3.8 million a year from Christchurch, subsidising this proposition.

The guile exhibited in the consultation is such that it is hard to regard it as merely accidental. If it had been, one would have expected an immediate admission that the prospectus was false. Page 4 of the consultation states:

“Councils would need to make sure that, within an agreed period of time, all residents of one council area pay the same—a process called council tax harmonisation.”

Page 9 explains further:

“This assumes an approach in which over a twenty year period...all the council tax rates in all areas within a new unitary council eventually become the same”.

It is now clear, however, that on the basis of the consultation, council tax rates and bills for citizens in Christchurch will always be higher than for those in Poole and Bournemouth under two of the unitary options, and would always be higher than for those in East Dorset, North Dorset—in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset—Purbeck and West Dorset under the third unitary option. Not only is this fact not disclosed in the consultation; it is actively covered up.

The only justification put forward for abolishing Christchurch and East Dorset Councils is financial. The consultation paper states that option 1 would result in East Dorset having a cumulative shortfall of £0.3 million between 2019 and 2025; and Christchurch a surplus of £0.1 million. Such figures would certainly not justify abolition. Some council leaders argue, however, that because the shortfall across Dorset as a whole would be £30 million, reorganisation is justified. Now, £30 million over six years might sound like a lot of money, but when put into the context that Dorset councils are currently spending £920 million a year—£5.52 billion over the six years—it means we are talking about just 0.5% of total turnover. When set against the costs of reorganisation, estimated at £25 million, and the assumptions behind the figures of continuing to increase local government spending by 4% per annum—I think it extraordinary, but that is the assumption—the case for abolition looks incredibly weak.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Chope: Yes, of course.

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful. My hon. Friend has mentioned Purbeck, which falls within my constituency, as does East Dorset. Does he accept two things? First, does he accept that there will be an opportunity for each and every council in Dorset to debate this and vote on it later in January? Secondly, does he accept that there is a range of views, on a spectrum perhaps from his views to those of my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare)?

Mr Chope: Exactly. I had a very civilised conversation yesterday with the deputy leader and chief executive of Purbeck Council. My hon. Friend is quite right that
there will be plenty of opportunities, but what I am keen to do in this debate is to make sure that we have a discussion on the basis of the facts. The shortcomings of the consultation so far have meant that the facts have been covered up from the people.

As with all such possible changes, the beneficiaries are keen to shout loudest. Both Bournemouth and Poole Councils have chosen over recent years to freeze their council taxes, while Christchurch and East Dorset have been more realistic in their approach. It is insulting to my constituents that Poole and Bournemouth should now expect Christchurch residents to subsidise their councils—currently in the case of Poole £196 lower than in Christchurch and £161 lower in Bournemouth.

Council taxes in Christchurch and East Dorset are very similar to the national average, which was £1,484 in 2015-16, while the average tax in East Dorset over the same period was £1,720, the second highest in England, and £1,756—the highest—in Weymouth and Portland. Although only tangential to tonight’s debate, I am not sure how many people living in the Weymouth borough realise that under the proposals in the consultation paper they would continue to have to pay at least £150 extra each year compared with other parts of rural Dorset.

There are many other elements of the proposals for change that have not yet been sufficiently revealed. The first is that no savings are assumed across adult social care, children’s services and education—the three upper-tier responsibilities that consume the most money. Nor has the motivation of those seeking a unitary solution been highlighted as wishing to squeeze out local discretionary services provided by district councils so that that income is available to supplement statutory services such as adult social care. Most crucially, the consultation document does not make it clear that option 1 is the most financially beneficial option—unless Christchurch and Weymouth and Portland pay extra for town councils for no additional service.

A document from Local Partnerships headed “Overall Summary without Town Councils” seems to have been suppressed. What it shows, however, is that over the six-year period from 2019-20, the difference between the amounts of council tax forgone in the unitary option for a medium conurbation is £8 million higher on the assumption that there is no town council than it would be with new town councils. That is the extent to which the people of Christchurch are subsidising this proposed project. The financial merit of no change is that each council continues to have the freedom to maximise its increases in council tax in line with Government rules, should it so wish. Having been so cruelly misled by the documents—and, incidentally, at roadshows and focus groups—my constituents cannot have any confidence in the objectivity of the consultation process. Any purported outcome will be invalidated by the inadequacy of the process, and the inherent prejudice and bias in it.

If Dorset councils remain keen to progress the idea of creating new unitaries in place of existing structures, they should launch a fresh consultation based on objective data and with assumptions that are transparent. The process should also enable every household to express its opinion, which happened when the Local Government Commission for England undertook a similar exercise in 1995.

About four months ago, I led an Adjournment debate on the issue of beach huts in Christchurch. As a result of that debate, councillors were lobbied very strongly by people living in the town, and the beach huts proposal was abandoned. I hope that as I have this evening drawn the attention of my constituents to the gravity of the current proposal, they will again lobby their councillors successfully to reject it.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Christopher Chope) for securing this important debate on the proposals for reorganising the governance of Dorset. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the issue. My hon. Friend’s interest in these matters is well known. I recognise his long experience of local government and his ministerial experience: back in the 1980s, he was a Minister in a Department that was a predecessor of mine.

Let me say at the outset that what Dorset councils are doing is exactly what councils should be doing. They are looking into how they can deliver better services to the towns, villages and people of Dorset, how they can provide stronger, more efficient and more effective leadership, and how they can generate significant savings to support frontline services. None of that is to say that we have concluded that any of the proposals on which the councils have consulted, and will consult further, are the right ones. What is right is that there should be consultations, discussions and analysis. The councils may then decide that it is right for them to submit a formal proposal for governance change to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for his consideration.

At this point, I should add that the nine councils have already submitted a formal proposal to create a combined authority for the area. They would like it to be established by April 2017. They think that it would serve as an effective mechanism enabling them to intensify their collaboration in the provision of economic development, regeneration and transport services throughout their areas. We are considering the proposal, and expect to respond early in the new year.

All this is taking place against a wider canvas of significant change throughout local government. At a time of fiscal constraint, and as the demand for services such as adult care increases, the best of local government is showing how it can improve the effectiveness and efficiency of services as well as driving the economic growth on which the prosperity of places depends, and that is what Dorset councils are doing. The Government strongly believe that local government should be as efficient, effective, transparent and accountable as possible. The right approach to any reform of local government is bottom-up: that is how councils figure out what is right for their areas and come up with locally driven solutions. It is the approach that underpins the provisions that the House considered some 12 months ago in what is now the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016, and it is the approach that we are following for the purposes of both devolution and governance changes.

Simon Hoare: Can my hon. Friend confirm that the responses from the council, when they discuss the consultation and indeed the recommendations, do not have to be unanimous across all nine for a submission...
to be made to his Department, and can he also confirm—that unanimity does not need to be delivered between the MPs within the county as well?

Mr Jones: Technically, my hon. Friend is right, but our Department is absolutely clear that we want any reforms to be locally driven, and once a local area has its blueprint for any reforms we will listen carefully, and the Secretary of State will decide whether the reforms are acceptable to him.

There are discussions about local government reorganisation across the sector. These include discussions about moving to more unitary structures, as in Dorset, and recently a detailed proposal has been put forward from Buckinghamshire to transform into a single unitary authority. We have also seen the recent research published by the County Councils Network looking at aspects of reorganisation. It has published two reports, which will contribute to discussions and debate about local government reorganisation. These point out financial benefits and savings that it is suggested may be possible if councils choose to unitarise. These reports suggest a saving of between £2 billion and £3 billion over five years net of transition costs, if all 27 county councils became single unitary authorities.

Dorset has told us that the options it is discussing, which include a reduction in the number of local authorities through unitarisation, could generate substantial savings of at least £108 million in the first six years. We are clear that appropriate governance reforms, which is what we want to have, must have the potential to deliver significant benefits, but reform, and in particular reform to include unitarisation, is not always going to be right for every area. It may not be right for Dorset, and it may not be right in Buckinghamshire, and it is certainly not going to be compulsory or imposed where there is no support for it.

The Government remain 100% committed to being open to innovative bottom-up proposals that will improve local services, enhance accountability and deliver financial sustainability. We welcome local government pursuing and discussing these ideas, particularly when done, as in Dorset, collaboratively and constructively.

The assurance I can give my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch is that if Dorset does come forward with proposals we will consider them very carefully and fully. We will want to see evidence that any proposal submitted offers a better local service, greater value for money and stronger leadership, as well as putting in place a more financially sustainable structure and delivering significant savings.

Mr Chope: Will the Minister emphasise the importance of trying to achieve consensus, because there has been a lot of workplace bullying in Christchurch Council and we have seen, perhaps, elements of it in the Chamber this evening? Surely it is wrong that what may be a minority should be oppressed; surely it is important that minority views can be heard?

Mr Jones: I thank my hon. Friend, and in making my comments this evening I have made it clear these proposals must be bottom-up, not top-down, and we will certainly listen to views.

In concluding, I assure my hon. Friend once again that we will look very carefully at any proposal Dorset may or may not come up with. Once we receive it, we will study it and speak to those local authorities and to colleagues, because we are absolutely sure that proposals being brought forward should be valuable, but we are also sure that we need to be certain that they are right for local people.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Friday 2 December 2016

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.

Benefit Claimants Sanctions (Required Assessment) Bill

Second Reading

9.34 am

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Before I start to explain the Bill, I want to thank the people and organisations that have been incredibly helpful and supportive: the Child Poverty Action Group; the Scottish Association for Mental Health; Gingerbread; Citizens Advice Scotland; PCS; the House of Commons Library staff, who have done a power of work on this; and all the researchers in the SNP team. I also thank my colleagues for coming out to support me today. I give a particularly big thank you to Tanya, one of the researchers. She is an absolute belter of a person, and I really appreciate everything she has done.

To understand the logic behind the Bill, we need to appreciate that people feel anxious. They are terrified of making a decision on whether to sanction based on a “balance of probabilities”—whatever that means.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate and getting a large number of people here on a Friday morning. I have had a careful look at her Bill. Is she advocating getting rid of conditions or sanctions entirely? That is the tone of her speech, which is in contrast to the detail of her Bill.

Mhairi Black: I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman my copy of the Bill, because he will see that that is not what I am trying to do. It is quite hard to pass a private Member’s Bill, so while my colleagues and I would want to get rid of the sanctions regime altogether because we disagree with it, I am trying to use this Bill to make a small, genuine change that the Government can hopefully get on board with. I am not trying to be controversial.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) in congratulating the hon. Lady on securing an admirable turnout among her colleagues. She wrote in The National on 16 July: “If we must have a sanctions regime”. To be absolutely clear, is the hon. Lady’s position that she would prefer not to have a sanctions regime at all?

Mhairi Black: I cannot emphasise enough that if I had the power I would get rid of sanctions altogether, but I am not trying to do that right now. The Bill tries to amend sanctions.

There are two major problems in the current system, the first of which are the guidelines. Under the current regime, a sanction may be imposed if a claimant has good reason. The JSA legislation was amended to provide that “good reason” was to be set out in guidance rather than in the regulations themselves. That is the problem—it is only guidance. The Government argued that not setting out particular circumstances or situations in legislation allows the decision maker “to take into account all reasons considered relevant when determining good reason.”

The decision maker’s guide on the guidelines explains: “Good reason is not defined in legislation.” It says:

“DMs should take into account all the relevant information about the claimant’s circumstances” and their reasons for actions.

“Claimants will be given the opportunity...to explain why they have not complied with requirements and it will remain the responsibility of the claimant to show good reason for any failure and to provide information and evidence as appropriate to explain why they have not complied.”

That sounds fair enough when we just read it, but how does a person provide hard, concrete evidence that their bus was 10 minutes’ late, or that their train was delayed?

Let me set out where the whole idea behind this Bill came from. I am a member of the Work and Pensions Committee. We were looking into jobcentres, and we paid a visit to South Thanet, which is what I would describe as a leafy, prosperous, happy Conservative
suburb with not many real hard issues. When we went to the jobcentre, I was desperate to pick holes in the sanctions regime—desperate to sit there and say, “It’s horrible, it doesn’t work, it’s horrendous and people endure horrible things.” I am glad to say that I could not do that. Within the jobcentre, the sanctions regime was working as best as it possibly could. There were hardly any sanctions, because time after time the staff were patient and understanding. They worked incredibly hard to make sure that nobody ended up in that position.

I appreciate the fact that this Conservative constituency, geographically, economically and socially, does not have anywhere near the same pressure and problems as many other constituencies throughout the UK, including mine. In my opinion, that jobcentre was just lucky—lucky because of the personalities and the attributes of its staff. That was why the sanctions were not as harsh as they were in constituencies such as my own.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the opportunity to introduce the Bill, but I must correct her: South Thanet is not a leafy suburb. It is one of the most deprived parts of south-east England, and the population there—

[Mhairi Black]

[Mhairi Black rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I always listen with the keenest interest to the right hon. Gentleman. From now on, however, interventions should be brief, and I think that we have now treated adequately of the matter of South Thanet.

Mhairi Black: I note the right hon. Gentleman’s point of view. I invite him to come up and see Ferguslie Park, where he will see what real deprivation looks like.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): When I was listening to the intervention of the right hon. Gentleman from Surrey Heath—that other incredibly deprived area of the south of England—I was struck by the Foreign Secretary’s difficulty with language this morning, when he was trying to say:

“O wad some Power the gie us
To see oursels as ither see us!”

Mhairi Black: In my constituency, I have had people sanctioned because they were ill, because they had children who needed to be looked after and all sorts. Each of us has heard examples of how people have been sanctioned for a shocking amount of ridiculous reasons. There are some examples of people who have been sanctioned for missing an appointment at the jobcentre because they were at a job interview. It is ludicrous.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady not only on getting the debate but on the tone of her speech. If it is true that the system works in some places, is that not a reason to retain it and ensure that it works everywhere rather than to change it?

Mhairi Black: I am not saying that the systems works perfectly everywhere. As I have said, I disagree with the system as it stands just now. However, if I am to be realistic and try to make some small changes, South Thanet is a place where sanctions are not as harsh as they are all over the rest of the UK—they are not as harsh as they are in different constituencies.

I want to go on to explain why this Bill should go through, and I have examples of jobcentres that are not doing not too badly with the current system. There is a dramatic variation throughout the UK as to how many sanctions are applied and why they are applied. The fact that sanctions are being applied inconsistently across the board is backed up by this week’s National Audit Office report, which found that some Work programme providers make more than twice as many sanction referrals as others dealing with similar groups in the same area. The NAO report concludes that “management focus and local staff discretion are likely to have had a substantial influence on sanction rates.”

When I secured this private Member’s Bill, I opened up a public consultation whereby individuals could answer a series of 10 questions, telling me their thoughts on the current regime and my proposed changes. Out of those responses, it was very clear that people felt that there was a Government-created point of view driven by much of the mainstream media that anyone claiming benefits is a scrounger and a charmer. They are made to feel as though they are lazy, work shy and someone who is leeching off the state and taxpayers’ money.

I will do something quite unorthodox here and quote from what probably constitutes a national treasure, Kevin Bridges. He rightly said that if politicians really think that people are choosing to be vilified by those with power all so that they can sit in their boxers watching “Storage Wars” on a Tuesday afternoon eating Quavers, then they are really not living in the real world. I know that anyone who is in touch with reality knows that that image could not be further from the truth. One respondent worded it better than I ever could when they said that there is a belief that claimants are scroungers and liars. They said that where there is a good Jobcentre Plus management, that attitude is less and probably also accounts for the variations in the application of sanctions.

It is worth noting and putting it on the record that I am not slagging off or criticising jobcentre staff. I am criticising the lack of direction and clarity that they have to operate under and the fact that they have to endure an ever-increasing workload with increasing responsibility without clear instructions.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend not agree that the Government are taking their eye off the ball with regard to the broad scope of this matter? We are seeing substantial numbers of staff leaving the DWP as result of the introduction of universal credit. Nights out are being held in Glasgow on a weekly basis by those leaving centres in Glasgow, which serve the whole of the United Kingdom. It is a disgrace, because we are losing the knowledge of the staff from the DWP, which has a gross impact on those dealing with sanctions.
Mhairi Black: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. We are all aware of people who have felt horrible when they were working in jobcentres—they felt under pressure in having to treat people as though they do not deserve attention. He is quite correct to say that the DWP and these jobcentres are under increasing pressure, and it is putting an unhealthy level of anxiety on to the staff, never mind the people who are claiming the benefits.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that some of the staff who are under all that pressure will now face sanctions themselves and will have to impose sanctions on their colleagues? That is nothing short of disgraceful, and will only serve to make them feel even worse about themselves and even worse about the jobs that they do.

Mhairi Black: I could not agree more.

A respondent to the public consultation stated that staff are human, and that “they can make mistakes, like or dislike clients and their individual views can affect how they deal with the individuals on their caseload. If they don’t like or trust someone, they are much more likely to sanction than if they like or have sympathy for the individual.”

Again, I must emphasise that this is not a criticism of jobcentre staff, who do a tremendous job given the system with which they have to work. It is recognition that we are all human, and that we all have our bad days and our grumpy days, but unless there are clearcut rules and regulations of conduct in place, that bad day could translate into ruining someone else’s day—and that simply cannot happen when they have someone else’s livelihood and survival in their hands. This creates a postcode lottery of sorts, and a situation whereby the way in which a person is treated is completely dependent on where their assigned jobcentre happens to be, who they get as a work coach and what mood that coach happens to be in.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for selecting this vital topic for debate. Does she agree that the National Audit Office’s report makes it clear that the rise and fall in referrals from 2010 to 2016 cannot simply be explained away by claimant behaviour? The Government would have us think that that is the case, so can she confirm that it absolutely is not?

Mhairi Black: Yes, I can, and I will touch on that later.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on the thoughtful speech she is making, albeit that I disagree with some aspects of it, which I will come to when I have a chance to speak. She said that a decision might be affected by the mood of somebody working in the jobcentre or by whether they happen to like the individual. Yet, a little earlier, when she talked about how the process works, she made the point that the decision maker is separate from the individual’s normal work coach, which avoids that personal dynamic, so what she says does not make sense.

Mhairi Black: I think the hon. Lady is confusing two separate issues. What I am saying is that, when we speak of referrals, there is a huge disparity between different jobcentres in different parts of the UK because the guidelines can be interpreted differently by different people. Therefore, instead of having these vague and unclear guidelines, which can be interpreted by different people in different ways, my Bill seeks to create a formal code of conduct, whereby it is clear who should be exempt from sanctions and for what reasons.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I very much appreciate my hon. Friend’s support for staff who work in jobcentres. Many years ago, I worked in a jobcentre, and these jobs are very challenging. It is clear that there is not sufficient guidance or an appropriate framework in place to allow people to make the system work as it should.

Mhairi Black: I completely agree.

The Bill is made up of 11 clauses, and it makes changes to the current legislation on the administration of certain social security benefits. It prevents a claimant in receipt of certain social security benefits from having their benefits reduced or restricted unless two requirements have been met.

I will focus on the first requirement. We want to introduce a formal code of conduct and a list of sorts, whereby an individual’s personal circumstances must be taken into account before any sanction can be applied. The Bill would also require that, before drawing up and reviewing a claimant commitment, which many individuals I have come across simply sign in the same fashion as most of us say we have read the 300-page terms and conditions when we buy a phone, download something or update our phone, the person has to be given advice—not guidance—on their rights and entitlements, and that advice has to be in writing.

Secondly, the Bill requires claimant commitments to include details of the person’s caring responsibilities, mental health, physical wellbeing and housing situation, before any sanction can be applied.

Mr Nuttall: I fear that the hon. Lady has just contradicted her own point. She says that the claimant will not read the claimant commitment, but she is making it a requirement that they have written guidance. What makes her think they will read the written guidance if they cannot be bothered to read the commitment?

Mhairi Black: I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I did not explain myself clearly enough. What I am saying is that formal written advice, not guidance, has to be given to people so that they can fully understand what a claimant commitment means. I have come across lots of people—not just in my own constituency office—who have signed a bit of paper that has been shoved in their face, thinking it means they will get their benefits, not guidance—on their rights and entitlements, and that advice has to be in writing.

Mr Nuttall: I fear that the hon. Lady has just contradicted her own point. She says that the claimant will not read the claimant commitment, but she is making it a requirement that they have written guidance. What makes her think they will read the written guidance if they cannot be bothered to read the commitment?

Mhairi Black: I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I did not explain myself clearly enough. What I am saying is that formal written advice, not guidance, has to be given to people so that they can fully understand what a claimant commitment means. I have come across lots of people—not just in my own constituency office—who have signed a bit of paper that has been shoved in their face, thinking it means they will get their benefits, but without fully appreciating or having been told exactly what it means. Part of the reason they are sometimes not told exactly what it means is the lack of clear and concise instructions for jobcentre staff. That is what I am trying to formalise in the Bill.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that consistent patterns show that some groups find it particularly difficult to comply with claimant forms? Single parents are particularly
badly affected, as are people with mental health problems. They have consistently been shown to be sanctioned disproportionately.

Mhairi Black: Yes, that is a point I am about to touch on.

Let me give a few examples of the kinds of responsibilities that should be taken into account. A report from Gingerbread found evidence that single parents are being inappropriately referred for a sanction in the first instance, or wrongly sanctioned, as a result of the decision-making process. Responding to the National Audit Office report on sanctions, a Gingerbread research officer said:

“Our own research has found that single parents are more likely to be unfairly referred for sanction than other JSA claimants; job centre advisers are getting it wrong far too often. We hear from single parents who are threatened with sanctions if they don’t take jobs that are unsuitable and unsustainable. We’re particularly concerned that new rules starting in April will mean even more single parents with young children are at risk.

Despite the mounting evidence that sanctions are ineffective, costly for the government and hugely damaging for those who are sanctioned, the government has done very little to fix this broken system.”

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mhairi Black: I am going to make a wee bit of progress first.

A single mother or a carer, for instance, might have an appointment, but their child or dependant might be sick, or they might be called to school to collect their child. The Bill would recognise their caring commitment to that child, and it would mean that they should not be sanctioned, the government has done very little to fix this broken system.

Mhairi Black: The hon. Lady has just made a brilliant point. We see that all these sanctions can be overturned later. That has cost the Government more money in administration, and it has caused more heartache, anxiety and pressure for individuals who have committed no crime and who should not have been sanctioned in the first place.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is also worthy of note that, in relation to the recent Concentrix scandal, 90% of the cases have been overturned in the past few months on appeal, and the money has been given back to the claimants. That just speaks to the fact that the system is in disarray, and I hope that Members on both sides of the House will listen to the point my hon. Friend is making and to the up-to-date statistics that are available, including about the 90%.

Mhairi Black: I appreciate my hon. Friend’s point; it is evident throughout different parts of the Government just now that the administration has become problematic, but today I want to focus on the fact that tens of thousands of single parents face the risk of being wrongly sanctioned by the jobcentre. Two in five sanction referrals and decisions against single parents are actually overturned, which shows just how faulty and flawed the system is. Surely we could make this small, uncontroversial change, prevent a lot of hassle to begin with and, hopefully, save some money.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Earlier in the week, I spoke in a debate on employment and support allowance and personal independence payments. More than 65% of decisions are overturned on appeal, which means that your Government’s system is broken. Over 80% of the cases affect women who are predominantly single parents. Your system—the Government’s system—is broken.

Mr Speaker: I have no system, so mine is not broken, but that of others might be or might not be.

Mhairi Black: My hon. Friend is right.

Anne McLaughlin: Will my hon. Friend join me in reminding everybody that, despite the percentage of cases that are overturned at mandatory reconsideration, the vast majority of people do not ask for a mandatory reconsideration, because nobody tells them that they can do that and they do not know how to do so? We are talking only about the percentages of people who actually ask for a reconsideration.

Mhairi Black: My hon. Friend makes a brilliant point. It is covered by the second part of the Bill, which I will touch on later.

It is clear that DWP decision makers are not making any genuine assessment but are simply rubber-stamping referrals, because the proportion of people being sanctioned for not actively seeking work has risen to 98%. No real consideration is being given to the individual’s circumstances and life.

On health, “Living at the Sharp End”, a recent Citizens Advice Scotland research report on the causes and impacts of gaps in income for Scottish citizens advice
bureau clients, found that benefit sanctions were one of the top five causes of a period of no income. One of the most striking findings from an analysis of the report’s 47 case studies is the impact that gaps in income have on the mental and physical health of clients in the sample. Of those case studies, almost a third mentioned worsening mental health issues as a result of a gap in income, and two of them explicitly mentioned suicidal thoughts.

I ask Members to think of the process that people already have to endure. As I said at the beginning, they are already terrified before they go into the jobcentre, never mind when they end up as part of the sanctions process. [Interruption.] If an individual suffers from depression, anxiety or any other mental health condition, the system as it stands completely neglects what life is like for them when they are having a bad day or are struggling. In response to a Scottish Government consultation in October 2015, the Scottish Association for Mental Health said:

“The number of sanctions applied in Scotland doubled in the last year, and individuals with mental health problems are disproportionately affected.”

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Health Committee is conducting an inquiry into suicide and the causes of suicide. Since the crash of 2008 and the increase in the number of unemployed people, we have seen a sharp rise in the number of suicides, particularly among middle-aged men, who suffer at rate of 3:1. The idea that the financial changes that this country has seen over the past seven or eight years have had no impact is, frankly, wrong. How people are treated really matters, not just for the quality of their life, but for whether they survive.

Mhairi Black: My hon. Friend makes her point succinctly.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I do not know whether my hon. Friend heard the comment that we think he heard from a Conservative Member—I have no doubt that it will be corrected if we misheard it—but I was convinced that they suggested that a major cause of stress for claimants is that, “They are terrified they might get a job.” [HON. MEMBERS: “Shameful.”] Does my hon. Friend agree that anyone with that kind of attitude is not in any position to judge those who are actively trying to find employment?

Mhairi Black: My hon. Friend is exactly right. If that comment was made, I suggest that the person who said it gets to their feet and puts it on the record. I suggest that, if someone has that point of view and thinks it is acceptable to speak in that way about our most vulnerable people when it is the Government’s job to look after them, they are not fit for government.

Mr Nuttall: The point is that the best way to help people is for them to find work. The fact of the matter is that there are more people in work in this country than ever before, so people have no reason to be terrified about going into a jobcentre. They ought to be looking forward to it, because the likelihood is that, under this Government, they will find a job.

Mhairi Black: For the purpose of Hansard, may I ask the hon. Gentleman to rise to his feet and confirm or deny whether he made that statement? His silence is a shame.

Lyn Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way; she is being very generous. I am sure that her constituents, like mine, do not want to see people who are able to work simply staying at home and taking whatever money they can, but that is not what the Bill is about. It is not about stopping sanctions for people like that; it is about doing what our constituents want and looking at the issue more humanely. They, like us, see this Government acting in a way that is bringing real stress and distress to families unnecessarily.

Mhairi Black: The hon. Lady is spot on and I am glad that she gets it.

As part of our public consultation, Sean in Glasgow confirmed the need for exceptions for those with mental ill health. He said:

“I live in Glasgow and suffer from a few mental and physical health conditions which affect my ability to work, and have affected my Jobcentre claims in the past (a couple of times, I’ve been too depressed to go to a meeting and my claims have been cancelled—my depression and isolation at those times left me sitting around, hungry and alone, with no money, and too depressed to deal with it), so I feel I’m qualified to talk about this topic and, indeed, recently contacted the Minister for Mental Health to discuss possible ways in which we can ameliorate the mental health burden on the NHS and increase levels of care for sufferers at the same time.”

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Last week I tabled a written question asking the DWP for an estimate of the number of people in Scotland subject to a benefit sanction who have had to use food banks. The answer I received was:

“The Department does not hold this information.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government cannot possibly continue to deny the link between sanctions and food bank usage if they are not collecting that vital information?

Mhairi Black: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. As I have said multiple times in this Chamber and outside it, one of the things that saddens and depresses me most about the society we live in just now is the fact that use of the phrase “food banks” has become normal. Although we should support our food banks, they are now considered to be a legitimate add-on to the state and people are told that they should just go to them.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for making that important point. Tomorrow I will support Tesco in a neighbourhood food collection. It is fantastic that Tesco is doing that, but is it not shocking that in today’s society we are having a public collection of food for people?

Mhairi Black: The idea that individuals and citizens in our society are reliant solely on the charity of others to eat and to feed their children shows that we are sliding backwards down a hill to Victorian times.

Dr Whitford: We also have to acknowledge the increase in malnutrition in this country, particularly micronutrition, which means a lack of vitamins and minerals. People who are living precariously with low-paid jobs tend to have poor nourishment, and if they are reliant
on food banks they have no access to fresh food, given that the vast majority of them do not provide it. We are, therefore, laying down problems for the future.

**Mhairi Black:** What Sean in Glasgow got across was that one of the main reasons behind the anxiety that prevents people from having nutritious food and from feeling confident enough to get out of their bed if they are depressed and to get a healthy diet comes down to the pressure that the system as it stands puts on mental health.

**Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP) rose—**

**Mhairi Black:** I am going to make a wee bit of progress.

When someone suffers from mental health issues, there is no escape. It does not matter what is happening around them—it is in their head. No matter who they speak to or where they are, they are looking at life through a prism of utter fear and intimidation that exists only in their head. It takes over their entire life and their entire perspective on everything. It affects all the decisions that they make.

I ask Members to imagine feeling like that and then being told that, because their bus was late, they will not have any income to buy food or deodorant, to put money in the electricity meter or to feed their kids for a week. That is the reality of what many people are experiencing.

**Angela Crawley:** May I add to that the fact that women are, unfortunately, unable to access sanitary provision? As a result, they are reliant on the “big society”, as Government Members refer to it. Food banks provide tampons and sanitary products to women who cannot afford to buy those simple products because the Government’s sanctions regime penalises them.

**Mhairi Black:** My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. The fact is that we have people who are in desperate need not just of food, but of everyday products.

**Victoria Atkins:** The hon. Lady gives the impression—inadvertently, I am sure, because I know that she would not wish to mislead the House—that people who are sanctioned receive no money. She gives the impression that there is no pot of money in the benefit service from which people can claim in the event that they are sanctioned, but claimants who are sanctioned can apply for hardship payments equivalent to 60% of their normal benefit payment; JSA claimants who are seriously ill or pregnant can receive 80%, if they qualify for hardship payments; and all ESA claimants who meet the criteria for hardship can receive payments. Does she agree?

**Mhairi Black:** No, I do not agree. At no point did I say that people in that position do not have access to any funds; what I said is that many people are left with absolutely nothing because they do not know about the fund, and they do not know that they can claim from it. Apart from anything else, they do not know how to. Someone who is depressed and anxious, and who is all over the place worrying about where their children’s next meal is going to come from, does not have time to think and worry about how to go down the paper trail to get a mandatory reconsideration.

**Dr Eilidh Whiteford:** My hon. Friend has taken us to a point in the debate where we have to talk about the disproportionality of sanctions. Criminals who are fined by a court for crimes that they have committed lose less money than people who have been 10 minutes late for an appointment or gone to another interview.

**Mhairi Black:** My hon. Friend is right.

**Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP):** Perhaps I can correct the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins). On sanctions, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities said:

“Opportunities to apply for hardship payments exist, but few people appear to have been informed thereof; the payments are also modest, discretionary, subject to strict access rules and of a temporary nature.”

I think that that clarifies the point.

**Mhairi Black:** My hon. Friend is right, because numerous studies over numerous years have shown us the reality that the system serves only to create and exacerbate mental health problems. Is it really surprising that being unable to afford food and skipping meals have implications for individuals’ health? When umpteen reports tell us that something is wrong, and when the UN tells us that something is wrong, surely it is not controversial to make a small change such as the one I am suggesting.

**Callum McCaig:** I think the most powerful part of my hon. Friend’s speech is what she is saying about the impact on people’s mental health. We can look at the pounds and pence that the Government are saving through their measures, but they are storing up an immense problem. Who pays for that? It is the taxpayer. If we cannot appeal to Government Members’ humanity, at least we can appeal to their love of money.

**Mhairi Black:** My hon. Friend has put it succinctly, and I would probably agree. Part of the reasoning behind the Bill is to try to make the system not just a bit more humane, but a wee bit more economical—a bit more value for money.

**George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP):** Is my hon. Friend aware that the NAO report sets out the clear calculation that when the hardship payments and the cost of running the sanction system are added in, the Government are not actually saving any money?

**Mhairi Black:** That point speaks for itself. This is not a political argument; it is factual. The system is costing money; it is not giving us good value for money. It is causing a lot of distress and hardship for many people.

**Dr Philippa Whitford:** Over the last seven or eight years, pressures on the mental health services in this country have increased. It may not simply be that the sanctions regime is not saving money; the regime is likely to be costing money, because it is driving more people to require support.
Mhairi Black: I think everyone on the SNP Benches agrees with that.

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady is making a powerful point about mental health and the need to have a better system of sanctioning those who, for whatever reason, fall foul of the rules. However, in Scotland recently mental health spending has been falling as a proportion of overall health spending, and child and adolescent mental health spending is significantly lower in Scotland than it is in England. Will she join me in challenging the Scottish Government to increase mental health spending, particularly on child and adolescent mental health services?

Mhairi Black: I understand the political point that the right hon. Gentleman is trying to make, but I do not want to drag us into a political debate in which we argue about Scottish budgets and so on. I remind him that Members cannot keep putting pressure on the Scottish Government and asking them to fill every single hole that this Tory Government creates, while cutting our money. As I say, I am not interested in going down the path of that argument. I am trying to be constructive and ensure that the Government can get on board with what I am suggesting.

Housing is a major issue when it comes to people being sanctioned. Research by Citizens Advice Scotland found that when people cannot pay for essentials such as food, electricity and gas, they are likely to accumulate arrears and fall into debt. The accumulation of rent and council tax arrears puts people at risk of eviction. For people who are in social rented housing, as 29% of Citizens Advice clients are, that places a burden on the local authority and the Courts and Tribunals Service, as well as adding to the hardship and vulnerability experienced by those individuals and their families.

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady is making a powerful point about mental health, which is, of course, incredibly important. Does she accept that housing benefit is not a burden on local government.

Mhairi Black: I appreciate the point that the hon. Lady makes, but with the greatest respect, she misses the point. When people are under extreme stress, they accumulate debt. That is how, as the study says, they end up in arrears, which puts pressure on councils, local authorities and the individuals themselves.

In a report published in December 2015, Crisis found that homeless service users are disproportionately affected by sanctions. In the past year, 39% of the survey sample had been sanctioned, and three quarters of the survey respondents who had been sanctioned said that it had had a negative impact on—their health. Overall, 21% of sanctioned respondents said that they had become homeless as a result of the sanction. The simple fact is that, no matter how we look at it or how we arrive at this point, no Government should make their citizens homeless. It does not matter whether that is happening to 21% of people affected, or whether the figure is higher or lower. One person made homeless is too many. This Bill is an attempt to prevent that situation from ever arising.

Dr Whitford: Is it not the case that aspects of support normally provided by central Government end up being a burden on local government? We do not allow families to live in doorways in cardboard boxes, so they will end up in temporary accommodation, which is funded by local government.

Mhairi Black: My hon. Friend has just echoed the arguments that have been made on that point.

I want to move on to the second main part of my Bill. It deals with hardship payments—my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) spoke about them earlier—which I view as the second-biggest problem in the system. Currently, when a sanction has been imposed, a person may be able to get a reduced-rate hardship payment, but such payments are not awarded automatically—a person will need to apply for them. Again, we must remember that we are talking about human beings who are often very vulnerable. Whether because of their mental health, their physical health, their financial situation or their caring responsibilities, they are up to their eyeballs in stress already, and when they hear the dreaded word “sanctions”, the situation becomes 10 times worse.

The system is not designed to guarantee that everyone will be listened to. Some people might be lucky enough to be listened to. The system might be fine, as I said at the beginning, in jobcentres that are managing to make this skeleton of a system kind of work, but there is no guarantee that it will be the same for everybody. When an individual hears that they are being referred for—that dreaded word—a sanction, their world often falls apart and they are thrown into utter chaos.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): As the hon. Lady may be aware, the

NAO has said that

“the Department has limited evidence on how people respond to the possibility of receiving a sanction, or how large this deterrent effect is”,

and that the use of sanctions is

“linked as much to management priorities and local staff discretion as it is to claimants’ behaviour.”

Does she agree that we are moving into a postcode sanctions lottery regime?

Mhairi Black: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. That is precisely why I am trying to bring in something to formalise what should already be in place to ensure a bit of consistency between different jobcentres and constituencies in the UK.

To expect someone who is up to their eyeballs and whose life is in chaos because they have heard the word “sanction” to know the system inside out, to know what they are entitled to and to know when and how to apply for it is simply unrealistic. It is not the reality of what genuinely happens. Some might accuse the Government of deliberately creating the system in that way to create a disincentive for people to challenge and claim what they are entitled to receive, as we know that the amount of unclaimed benefits to which people are entitled vastly outweighs the some 0.8% of benefits that are fraudulently claimed. However, I will let people make up their own minds.

We are realistic, and we know that the UK Government will impose sanctions. The Bill would therefore include in the code of conduct an assessment for hardship payments, so that anyone subject to a sanction would
I give credit to the film, “I, Daniel Blake”. I went to see it again earlier this week, and it was even more hard-hitting the second time. I genuinely urge everyone in this room to go and see that film, because sanctions hit real people. They are not statistics. They are human beings who are struggling and suffering due to the actions of the state.

Mr Nuttall: It’s fiction.

Mhairi Black: The public are watching, and we owe a debt to Ken Loach for focusing our minds on the human costs. His film tells the story of a 59-year-old joiner from Newcastle, Daniel Blake, who suffers a heart attack at work.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I was glad to join my hon. Friend at the cinema. I heard the sedentary intervention by the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall), who has now left the Chamber. Well, the film might be a drama, but it is certainly not fiction. It depicts the day-to-day reality that so many people are experiencing. We have heard dozens of examples of exactly those kinds of cases in our constituency surgeries, and it does a disservice to the people depicted in the film and, indeed, to its director to talk it down in that way.

Mhairi Black: The hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall), who has just left the Chamber, said that the film is fiction, which is exactly the kind of attitude that genuinely disappoints me in this House. The minute that people hear something they do not like, they leave and say, “Rubbish.”

Victoria Atkins: Stick to the facts.

Mhairi Black: I can hear the hon. Lady heckling me. Well, I will show her that the facts are that sanctions are hurting people and leaving them with no food in their cupboards and no money in their electricity meters. Sanctions are leaving people with nothing. To sit there and simply say, “Stick to the facts” just shows how ignorant and out of touch from reality she is.

Victoria Atkins rose—

Mhairi Black: I will not take an intervention from the individual because we have all heard enough from her. I suggest that she listen to what the reality is for so many people.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) is right that sticking to the facts is important. My city of Dundee was dubbed sanctions city 2014, and I am frankly ashamed that it still has that title today. Let there be no doubt that we also have the busiest food bank in Scotland. For anyone here who thinks that is a work of fiction or that these are not the facts, I make it clear that the sanctions city of Dundee also has the highest use of food banks in Scotland.

Mhairi Black: Like my hon. Friend’s city, my constituency had one of the highest sanctions rates in 2014-15. I have seen that first hand not only because I live there but through this job. I have seen what sanctions do to
people. I have seen the spiral that it puts people’s lives into—the downward spin that they cannot stop, because it just gets worse and worse.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Just to give some facts, my constituent Bryan suffers from severe disability as a result of childhood polio. His personal independence payment was withdrawn because he failed to attend an appointment as a result of an undelivered letter. Bryan phoned the office to say what had happened to the letter, but, despite that, his PIP has been withdrawn and as a result, he has lost his disability living allowance. He is no longer in receipt of any disability benefit. He lost his entitlement to disability tax credits, and he has lost his Motability car. His appeal, which I am supporting, will not be heard until next year. Are those not the facts and the reality of the situation?

Mhairi Black: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for her intervention, because we all have constituents who have suffered under the system as it stands. We can see at first hand just how cruel and heartless the system can be to people who are left behind.

Hannah Bardell: Does my hon. Friend agree that, time and again, we hear stories such as that told by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry)? This Chamber is becoming the appeals chamber for the DWP. That is not what we are here to do. We are not here to address the mistakes of this Government. We are here to make good legislation and to stand up for people in our society. The Government should listen to my hon. Friend and accept her Bill.

Mhairi Black: I thank my hon. Friend very much. To go back to my point, “I, Daniel Blake” shows the kind of situation raised by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry). Daniel Blake is forced to move on to jobseeker’s allowance because the DWP says that he is fit for work, and he is left in limbo, while he waits on a mysterious decision maker to decide whether he is actually fit for work, despite the doctor having already made it clear that he is not. Blake is then told by his DWP work coach that he is not making enough effort to get a job, and he is subsequently referred for a sanction.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): A constituent of mine missed an appointment because his baby daughter was rushed into hospital as an emergency, and he was therefore sanctioned. He came to my office when looking for the nearest food bank. As a nation, should we not be absolutely ashamed that this sort of thing is happening, and should not the Government hold their head in shame?

Mhairi Black: I entirely and completely agree. That is the perfect example of someone who, under the Bill, would be exempt from a sanction because of their caring responsibilities. Those in charge would see that someone whose child is ill or has an emergency of course needs, as a parent, to be with them.

Angela Crawley: May I add another example? A constituent of mine with three young children approached me to tell me about her issue with Concentrix in November last year, when she was sanctioned for six weeks over Christmas. Her children went without at Christmas as a result of this Government’s policy, only to discover that that was later overturned. This is a Government who allow families to go without for six weeks over Christmas.

Mhairi Black: In many ways, the fact that the Bill has come before the House so near to Christmas may actually be a good thing. A number of people I have met or who have stopped me in the street in Paisley or Johnstone have told me, “I don’t know what to do over Christmas. I don’t know where to get food. I don’t know if I can afford to get the kids any presents and be able to survive and have lighting in the House.” That is not the kind of society that I want to live in. It is not the kind of society that any Government should be proud of. The Government would be daft—it would hurt them in the polls at the next election—not to see the damage they are doing to society. Surely, when the Government hear stories like those we are telling today, they should think, “We need to change something here.” I have tried to make the Bill as palatable as possible to enable the Government to adhere to it.

Victoria Atkins: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mhairi Black: No. I am going to make a wee bit of progress.

There is a cracking and very powerful bit in the film. As I was saying, Daniel Blake has to go around giving out his CV and all that to prove that he is trying to find work to get any money at all. At one point, a guy phones him up and says, “Listen, I want to offer you a job.” Blake says, “I can’t come into work,” and he asks, “Why not?” Blake replies, “Because my doctor says I’m not fit.” He says—

Victoria Atkins: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mhairi Black: Hold on, and listen.

He says, “You’re a scrounger. You’re just lazy. You’re going around applying for jobs, but then you tell us that you’re not fit. You’re just wasting everyone’s time.” We can see the logic behind the fact that there are those in the general public who think—they are led to believe this by the rhetoric of this Government and the mainstream media—that people on benefits are scroungers and that they are lazy. It is the perfect example in the film of when we see that this guy is struggling and is hurting”—

Victoria Atkins: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mhairi Black: No. Please listen to the point.

This guy is in a really difficult position: he is caught in a vicious cycle in a system that continually allows him to fall between the cracks, which is all to the detriment of him, his life, his mental health—and, to be honest, his physical health—and his financial situation. The worst thing about the film is that at the end of it I know, especially because of my job, that it is true. I know that people are really experiencing exactly what is shown in that film.

Victoria Atkins rose—
Mhairi Black: The hon. Lady said she wanted facts, so if she does not want fiction, here are some individual examples.

In response to the survey, Connie Dobson said:

“Nearly all people I have supported, had no idea they were about to be sanctioned until the meagre payment they so desperately anticipate, which barely covers their living/caring costs, as it is, isn’t available at the bank on the date it was due. Some don’t receive letters at all re their sanction, and those who do, receive them after the payment was expected, leaving them in undue hardship, without any means to buy food and other essentials”, such as nappies and sanitary ware, and they “are unable to top up their...gas/electricity”

to keep themselves warm.

Another respondent said:

“In my experience of being on JSA a few years ago one of the problems was that it was very difficult to contact my (or any) adviser by phone. The advice given was that if you failed to turn up to sign on (or meet any other of the claimant commitments) without good reason you could face a sanction. It also said that you should contact your adviser ASAP to let them know that you would be late/missing an appointment etc. The problem was they almost never answered the phone! They should not be allowed to sanction someone if it is impossible for them to contact the Jobcentre and give an explanation! One of the biggest problems with the sanction regime is that they do not take in to consideration peoples personal circumstances.”

A female respondent, who is only 23, from sanctions city—Dundee—highlights the real cost of the regime on our constituents:

“I wholeheartedly agree with all of the above! I am a 23 year old female student in Dundee and the majority of my life was ruined by these sanctions. I found myself in a position with very little support and due to benefit sanctions along with very little advice, information and resources was left unable to feed, clothe and look after myself. These sanctions also affect any housing benefit which low income families depend on which resulted in me being homeless with my small son, twice. I am now in a much better position no thanks to any help from the government, in employment, have my own flat and am studying with hopes to pursue a career that helps people facing such hardships as it’s clear that something is seriously wrong.”

Such comments are made not just by individuals but by organisations such as those that I thanked at the beginning. Those organisations exist purely because they want to help people. Because they deal with these things day in, day out, they are the real experts.

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady is making a very powerful case, and the individual cases she is bringing to mind are deeply affecting. Does she have a sense of how many people currently sanctioned would not be sanctioned if her Bill were made law?

Mhairi Black: I do not have the exact figures, but from the experience of my constituency office, most of the sanctions cases I have dealt with that have been overturned would have been prevented altogether had the provisions been in place.

Lyn Brown: I promise that this will be my last intervention, but I could not resist intervening. One thing that really struck me in the National Audit Office report is where it says:

“The Department has not used its own data to evaluate the impact of sanctions in the UK.”

How would the hon. Lady have such information when the Government do not even bother to keep it? I am sure that she agrees with me that the Government’s lack of intellectual interest in the effects of the regime is absolutely outrageous.

Mhairi Black: I sincerely thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. The problem is an overarching one, not just for this issue, but for all the different aspects of Government, in that their records are very poor. In the Work and Pensions Committee we have seen the complete lack of data collated by the Government.

As I was saying, the organisations that do this work day in, day out and deal with these people every day know what is happening. In fact, in many ways they know better than we sometimes do, because we are always stuck in this place and they are on the front line, dealing with individuals and listening to cases.

The Scottish Association for Mental Health has said:

“SAMH calls for all MPs to support this Bill. People with mental health problems are among the most vulnerable of benefit recipients, have been disproportionately targeted to be sanctioned and are among the least likely to understand or be able to comply with the conditions attached to their benefit. Sanctioning this group of people serves no purpose other than to make their illness worse and their personal circumstances even harder to cope with—making employment a less, not more, likely outcome. Ensuring that a pre-sanctions assessment of benefits claimants’ circumstances is carried out should lead to a reduction in the numbers of people inappropriately sanctioned; as well as not pushing vulnerable people into financial hardship and making them more unwell, the reduction in cancelled or appealed sanctions should also benefit the public purse through reduced administration costs. SAMH notes the NAO’s report on sanctions...and calls on the UK Government to rethink this punitive approach.”

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I very much thank my hon. Friend for the case she is making, particularly on mental health. I have a clinically depressed constituent who was given an indefinite ESA sanction for failing to attend a work-focused appointment. His sanction persisted for six months because he was just too sick to do anything about it. Does she agree that her Bill would go some way to addressing the issue of people not being able to comply and not being able to do anything about it?

Mhairi Black: My hon. Friend gives a perfect example of the individuals we are talking about for whom the Bill is logical and sensible.

Citizens Advice Scotland has said:

“Our evidence shows that too often the current system of benefit sanctions is leaving many of our clients facing destitution and crisis. While Citizens Advice Scotland does not in principle object to the use of sanctions in appropriate cases as a last resort, we strongly believe that no one should ever be left without any income at all.”

People should be able to meet essential living costs, and at the very least be able to heat their homes and eat. Under the current sanctions regime, too little account is taken of an individual’s circumstances before they are referred for a sanction. The Bill proposes that a person’s mental and physical health, caring responsibilities and housing situation are taken into account ahead of the imposition of sanctions. It would also improve access to the hardship payments for some of the most vulnerable by ensuring that they receive written advice about the possibility of claiming hardship payments before a sanction
is imposed, and by introducing a duty on the Secretary of State to ensure that any person subject to a sanction is assessed for their eligibility for hardship payments.

**Mr Nuttall:** Before the hon. Lady concludes her remarks, will she outline for the House the approximate cost of the Bill? The explanatory notes clearly state that it will need a money resolution, so it would be useful for us to have some idea of how much it will cost.

**Mhairi Black:** I have the costs somewhere. In fact, if the hon. Gentleman looks in the explanatory notes, he will see them there.

I have explained how the Bill could have an impact on thousands of our constituents and am honoured to have the chance to do so. What is ridiculous about this whole thing is that I got the chance through a lottery, and that a lottery is helping to decide whether or not hon. Members have the chance to help. That is one thing for which I would criticise the House. Through sheer pot luck and because I happened to put my name beside the right number, I have the chance to make a genuine, logical, sensible, small and constructive change to the system.

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Surely one of the most compelling arguments for supporting the Bill is that there is ample evidence that it will work. We know from many pilot projects across the country that that is the case. In central Edinburgh, a pilot project required Department for Work and Pensions staff to work with NHS staff on target claimants with drug and alcohol dependency. They were able to reduce the number of sanctions applied to zero. If that can happen in a pilot project, it should happen all over the country. As a matter of public policy, we should treat our citizens the same; we should not depend on the country. As a matter of public policy, we should treat our citizens the same; we should not depend on the chance to protect it formally and give it statutory power and cover. The Bill would also ensure consistency across the board. In reality, the protections in the Bill go beyond the vague protections within guidance by specifically protecting vulnerable groups and putting responsibility on the Government to assess a person’s individual circumstance.

The Government say that they have already taken measures to protect claimants from sanctions when they announced their intention to undertake a trial involving warning claimants of the intention to impose a sanction on them—a yellow card system whereby people are given a period of 14 days to provide evidence of a good reason. In a written answer on 18 November, the Minister stated: “The Jobseeker’s Allowance Sanctions Early Warning Trial in Scotland ran until September 2016 and involved approximately 6,500 claimants. Data was collected throughout the trial period to assess the extent to which the warning trial affected sanction decisions. Qualitative interviews are currently being undertaken with a sample of these claimants to gain an understanding of how the new process affected claimant behaviour. The trial has now finished and a full evaluation is being undertaken.”

If the Government are prepared to make small changes, then surely for the reasons I have outlined for the last wee while, it is perfectly reasonable to ask them to support the Bill, or at least to give some kind of concession or introduce a similar proposal of their own. Fundamentally, the Bill has two points: first, to assess the individual’s personal circumstances before any sanction is applied; and, secondly, when a sanction is applied, to assess them automatically for a hardship payment. They are very small asks. As I have said, I have tried to be as constructive as possible to introduce a measure that the Government can get on board with, and to put aside party political differences and the different routes that we believe politics should go down.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): My hon. Friend has given a tour de force this morning. Is it the case that support for the Bill also comes from the trade union representing staff employed by the Department for Work and Pensions—the Public and Commercial Services Union—which wants consistency across the board?

**Mhairi Black:** When I was first putting out the feelers to find out what people thought should be in the Bill, I went to numerous jobcentres. All the jobcentre staff I came across said that the Bill would be brilliant for them. They said it would be great because it would give clarity on what they can do. If they had a list or a code
of conduct, they could say, “Right. You’ve got a child who is sick. It is clear that this does not apply”, and it would not be left to their personal judgment.

The Bill is logical and small. It protects not only our citizens and the most vulnerable people in our society, but the staff, who are under tremendous pressure in a system that is constantly changing at a rapid pace. I have genuinely tried to make the Bill one that we can pass together. I have tried to build a bridge over which all political parties can cross. I ask the Minister and all hon. Members who have sat in the Chamber today—I imagine the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) will not be joining me—to support the Bill as much as they possibly can.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns), I remind the House that there will be an urgent question at 11 o’clock, so I ask whoever is on their feet not to be too shocked when we go into it.

10.48 pm

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): I join my Conservative colleagues in congratulating the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) on securing this private Member’s Bill.

There is surely a consensus on both sides of the House that unemployment is a tragedy when it befalls anyone. There can be few things in life worse than wanting to work and failing to find it. However, I begin by bringing a group of people into the debate who were mentioned only once by Opposition Members in all the interventions in the hon. Lady’s speech: the taxpayer, which was referred to by the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig). Every benefit that is paid to a benefit claimant is paid out of the receipts that the Government take in tax. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South referred at one point to something that would cost the Government. The Government do not have any money; the Government have only taxpayers’ money.

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman not recall the National Audit Office report that showed that this sanctions regime does not actually save any money? His point is without merit.

Conor Burns: The hon. Gentleman is approaching this from exactly the wrong angle. The point is that the Government have an obligation to ensure that every person who is in receipt of a benefit is entitled to it. That is part of the social contract that underpins our society. It was at the very core of the Beveridge report, whereby people paid in in times of good, in times of work, and drew down in times of sickness, unemployment and retirement—drew down in terms of need.

If the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that we should carry on in certain circumstances, where people have been demonstrated not to be legitimately in need of benefits, that is an abuse of the taxpayer. Many of those taxpayers are on very modest incomes indeed and work extremely hard to contribute to our society.

Callum McCaig: The hon. Gentleman entirely misses the point of this Bill. He listened to me enough to get part of the picture, but he has missed the point I was making entirely. When we sanction people, there is a cost to that. There is the immediate cost and the immediate saving to the taxpayer, which seems to be all Government Members care about, but the long-term costs—in health to the individual and society—are immeasurable. Let us think about that, let us not forget it and let us spend now to save in the long term.

Conor Burns: I understood the hon. Gentleman’s point absolutely; I referred to him because he was the only Member on the Opposition Benches who mentioned the word “taxpayer” at all. I was making a more fundamental point that we need to approach these debates from the perspective that the Government have an obligation to ensure that those who receive benefits are entitled legitimately to receive them.

Mhairi Black: The point the hon. Gentleman is making is that we need to have sanctions in place because people have to be claiming benefits legitimately—fine. We disagree on that, but that is not what this Bill is about. What it is about is preventing people from being sanctioned wrongly; it is about making sure that nobody is left destitute. It is not about sanctions overall; it is about one small change to prevent hardship.

Conor Burns: I hear the hon. Lady and I take her point absolutely, but I am afraid she did rather give the game away early in her speech when she said that in her view we should not have a sanctions regime at all—[Interruption.] That is the perspective from which I will give way to my hon. Friend for Bury North (Mr Nuttall).

Mr Nuttall: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend for giving way. It has been suggested a couple of times this morning—and we need to put an end to it—that the NAO report states that the system costs money. Page 43 of the report, in figure 23, clearly states:

“The total costs and benefits to government of sanctions are unknown”.

The NAO does not come to a conclusion; it leaves the matter open. It is not saying that there is a cost. Does he agree that one cannot put a cost on how many millions and billions of pounds are saved by ensuring that everyone complies with the rules?

Conor Burns: I entirely agree. I do not think we can put a cost on the opportunity for work. Of course, it is this Government—through the policies of those on these Benches, both in coalition and now in majority Government—who have ensured the economic conditions that have led to our having more people in work than ever before in history.

Several hon. Members rose—

Conor Burns: I will make a little progress, if I may, and then I will give way to the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens).

We should also understand that this system of sanctions is not new; it has operated and existed for decades. It underlies a fundamental principle of ensuring that those
who are being supported are not abusing the support that is being offered. There is a very real risk that the practical effect of the hon. Lady’s Bill, however well intentioned it is, would be to render the system of sanctions impotent, preventing it from encouraging claimants to meet their commitments.

It is important that we understand the historical context and practical purpose of sanctions. Conditionality has been a long-standing feature of welfare benefit entitlements in the UK, since the formation of the welfare state itself. The Beveridge report spoke of the citizen having a “profound reciprocal obligation” to co-operate fully in the restoration of his earning power. Maintenance would be provided by society but “only to the extent to which its members are willing to accept their corresponding social obligations”.

Access to full unemployment benefits has always been conditional on the recipient being involuntarily unemployed, being available for work and doing as much as can reasonably be expected to find such employment.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman has been talking about the “taxpayer” and about how benefits are not a right. Does he know that 3,665 employees in the Department for Work and Pensions are chasing benefit fraud estimated at £1.2 billion, but that only 320 employees are based in the High Net Worth Unit of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs chasing tax avoidance estimated at £70 billion? Should we not be going after the tax avoiders far more than we should the most vulnerable in our society?

Conor Burns: My hon. Friend and neighbour is absolutely correct. It is the reciprocal arrangement between the benefit claimant and the taxpayer, who is supporting that person in distress, that underpins the social contract that is at the core of our society.

The scope of behavioural forms of conditionality and the severity of the sanctions applied for failure to comply with the required conduct—attending appointments with the unemployment advisers and so on—have increased substantially since the 1980s. A series of social security reviews conducted by Conservative Governments between 1979 and 1997 led to the introduction of a stricter benefit regime from the late 1980s and culminated in the introduction of jobseeker’s allowance in 1996, which intensified the monitoring of unemployed claimants’ job-seeking behaviour.

It was the last Labour Government who adopted a “work first” and “work for all” approach, embracing JSAs monitoring of claimants’ job search activities, backed up by benefit sanctions in cases of non-compliance.

The coalition Government further intensified benefit conditionality. The roll-out of universal credit has further extended the scope of the conditionality regime. Individual claimant commitments increase jobseeking expectations for most claimants. In addition, claimants of universal credit who are in work but on low income are also subject to conditionality for the first time. The current sanctions reflect the conditionality—indeed, the purpose of the sanctions system. The practical effect of the hon. Lady’s Bill, however well intentioned, would be to render the system of conditionality impotent, preventing it from encouraging jobseekers to meet their commitments.

Michael Tomlinson: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for giving way. He mentions the Beveridge report. I am reminded by my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) that it is from 1942, but in fact the sanctions regime goes back to 1911 and the setting up of the first unemployment benefits regime.

Conor Burns: First, I say to the hon. Gentleman that I did not say that benefits are not a right; benefits are a right, and a right that I fully respect and uphold. Secondly, on the point that we have heard many times—we had Opposition day debates on it when I was a bag carrier in the Treasury—as he knows, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, when he was Financial Secretary to the Treasury, reconfigured HMRC by focusing on more regional offices, so that we can have greater impact in the collection powers of HMRC and the focus it has on ensuring that the tax collected is the tax owed.

Conor Burns: As was acknowledged in earlier interventions, there are procedures for emergency payments, so the idea that the hon. Gentleman is perpetrating—that somehow it is these cruel, callous Tories—

Proceedings interrupted (Standing Order No. 11(4)).
11 am

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the aid reviews published by her Department yesterday.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (James Wharton): The House will be aware that the Government published yesterday, “Raising the standard: The Multilateral Development Review 2016” and, “Rising to the challenge of ending poverty: The Bilateral Development Review 2016”. These reviews set out how the UK will address the global poverty: The Bilateral Development Review 2016” and, “Rising to the challenge of ending poverty: The Bilateral Development Review 2016”. These reviews set out how the UK will address the global response to problems that threaten us here at home, such as the migration crisis, cross-border conflict, climate change and disease pandemics.

In the reviews, the International Development Secretary makes it clear that Britain’s aid contribution is an investment in our future security and national interest. As the reviews describe, the UK will champion an open, modern and innovative approach to development that will effectively tackle the global challenges of the 21st century while delivering the best results for the world’s poorest. This is clearly in our national interest.

The reviews are an extensive and detailed look at the UK bilateral and multilateral development systems. They confirm the geographic regions of focus for the UK, which multilateral organisations the Department for International Development will work with and the tools that will be used to maximise our impact as we tackle poverty across the globe. They also highlight best practice in the global development system, as well as examples of poor performance that will face urgent questions.

The Government are clear that the global approach to development needs to adapt and reform to keep pace with our rapidly changing world. As a world leader, the UK will be at the forefront of these efforts, promoting pioneering investment in the most challenging and fragile countries, making greater use of cutting-edge technology, and sharing skills from the best of British institutions, from the NHS to our great universities. Improving the effectiveness and impact of our aid is vital to delivering the best results in fighting poverty across the globe. They also highlight best practice in the global development system, as well as examples of poor performance that will face urgent action.

The reviews raise many important issues—the work that the Government are doing to bear down on multilateral institutions to ensure they spend our aid well; the work in fragile and conflict-affected countries; our support for the global fund for HIV AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria; the emphasis on disability; and the work on women and girls—but there remain many unanswered questions. First, no data or spending plans are attached to the reviews, so will the Minister explain whether any DFID bilateral programmes will close or be drawn down over the next few years of the spending review? Will he publish data and put them in the House of Commons Library? Secondly, EU agencies, such as the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations—ECHO—and the European Development Fund, are rated among the highest-performing international agencies. Will we continue funding them, regardless of the Brexit process?

Thirdly, we see in the reviews a shift to spending aid not through DFID but through institutions such as the Commonwealth Development Corporation and a new fund called the prosperity fund, which has been given £1.3 billion of aid money that is being spent in China, Malaysia, Mexico, India and other higher-income countries, not the poorest in the world. Will the Minister explain why that is happening? Are we keeping the poverty focus? Is it even legal and in line with international development legislation? In the last few days, Lord Bates, in answer to a written question, claimed that aid was being given to China to “maximise UK-China trade”. Where are sustainability and climate change in the economic development plan?

It is good to see the commitments to humanitarian aid, but, finally and on a separate issue, will the Minister reconsider the issue of humanitarian airdrops in Aleppo?

James Wharton: I am conscious of the time limit and the fact that hon. Members will want to avail themselves of the opportunity to ask questions, so I shall be brief.

I welcome what was, begrudgingly and hidden beneath the veneer of criticism in the hon. Gentleman’s comments, an acceptance that in this area there is much cross-party support that cuts across the political divide sometimes separating us in this place. We are all determined to see the maximum value delivered for the taxpayer, in our national interest and that of those helped by our international aid spend. Will bilateral aid programmes close? Well, some will, I am sure, but that will be done on an ongoing basis. All programmes are always kept under review. New programmes come into existence and some programmes, when they do not deliver to the expected standard, are of course closed down, so I could not stand here and promise that no bilateral programmes will close in the years ahead. That said, there remain clear commitments to the 0.7% spend, to having a separate Department and to doing aid in the right way to deliver real change and improvement in people’s lives—as has been encapsulated in comments by the Secretary of State and in some of the findings in the reviews.

The hon. Gentleman asked about EU agencies and whether Brexit might divert funding from them. I do not want to pre-empt the process of Brexit, but I would target. As the Minister said, these issues enjoy cross-party support, they are a moral duty and are firmly in Britain’s national interest.
I have had the great pleasure to work with her in DFID and we have seen some evidence this year—because it is on outcomes that we are focused. We want to make sure that we protect the greatest value for money, help the people who need it, and drive development in the most effective way. He also talked about climate change. International climate finance is a large part of what DFID does, and we have seen significant improvements in that area. We have seen in the last year that the reviews took account of the new events this year—in this changing world of politics—and many of them are making a real difference to people's lives.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Department for finally releasing the multilateral and bilateral aid reviews. The House, the NGO community and civil society have had to wait a long time to finally see them. Why did it take so long? The reviews show that DFID is working in challenging environments and delivering aid transparently—no wastages, no reason for alarm—so why has the Secretary of State continued to show little support for DFID? I hope she will now show it some support. In 2011, the development reviews included specific country-by-country data, including indicative spending levels per country. Why do the current reviews not include these important data?

James Wharton: The shadow Secretary of State asks why it has taken so long to publish the reviews. We live, of course, in a new global environment. We have seen many events this year—in this changing world of politics—including the vote to leave the EU, and the Secretary of State rightly wanted to ensure that the reviews, when they were published, fully took account of the new opportunities presented to us, including the chance to be truly global in our outlook and to deliver a global Britain, and of the contribution that DFID can make to that. It was absolutely right, therefore, that we took our time to ensure that the reviews took account of the changing environment and global circumstances.

I take exception, however, to the shadow Secretary of State's characterisation of the Secretary of State as in any way needing to show more support for the Department. I have had the great pleasure to work with her in DFID since the summer, and I have seen somebody who is driving real reform and change and taking with her a Department that is buying into a vision and a strategy that will deliver more and better for some of the world's poorest people.

I am absolutely committed to the great work that my Department does, and I have absolutely no doubt that the Secretary of State is, too. I have equally no doubt that she is the right person to drive an agenda that will push forward a Department and an area of work of which this country should be proud to partake, taking us into a new world and a new space to deliver more aid and deliver better for the people who need it—the poorest people who will receive support from the work that we do. I am proud to be in my Department; I am proud of the Ministers in my team—and that includes the Secretary of State, who is doing an excellent job.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on tabling this urgent question. My Kettering constituents appreciate that the United Kingdom is among the most generous nations in the world when it comes to international aid. I think, however, that they would also ask the Minister to attach more conditions to the aid that we give. For example, a large number of countries have a large number of their nationals in prison in this country and they refuse to take them back to put them in prison in their own country. There are also countries to which we give aid in which persecution of Christians is rife and the Governments of those countries seem to do very little about it. Top of the list on both categories would be Pakistan. Will the Minister respond to that?
poverty are not in the national interest, what is? What are the other national interests beyond building a more peaceful, secure and stable world?

**James Wharton:** There was broad range of questions there—I could spend far longer than the time I have available to answer them. It is commendable that the Secretary of State, this Department, and this Government, in this place and British taxpayers are driving performance agreements for multilateral organisations which will improve the work they do and the efficiency with which they use the funding. That will allow them to help more people over the longer term and in a more sustainable way. I think that is exactly the right approach. We should put the requirements of efficiency and transparency on organisations that receive funding from the UK taxpayer. It is commendable that that is the direction in which we have been moving.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the sustainable development goals and whether meeting them is in the national interest. I believe that they are absolutely in the national and, indeed, global interest. We all want to see serious progress made towards addressing some of the global challenges that will affect not just us but generations to come right across the world. DFID is making a significant contribution, of which I am proud.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I congratulate the Government on their ongoing commitment to aid and to ensuring that taxpayers’ money invested in aid is well spent. Does this review not provide another example of how the UK is leading the world—not only in the amount we spend on aid, but in ensuring that it is well spent through transparency and accountability?

**James Wharton:** It is absolutely the case that the reviews provide a great example of the UK in its global leadership role, setting the pace not only on how development aid should be done, but on how to ensure transparency, accountability and value for money, so that every pound and every penny we spend makes the maximum possible impact. That is a moral imperative, because if we do not succeed in those respects, the people who could be helped will have to go without that support. I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She is absolutely right, and it is the direction towards which we intend to continue to push.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The aid review showed that EU institutions were some of the best-performing global agencies. Will the Minister join me in praising them?

**James Wharton:** We work with a wide range of global agencies, many of which deliver effective programmes that make a real difference to people’s lives. As I said in my earlier comments, where we can efficiently do so, we will always look to work with multilateral organisations that can deliver change—whatever the political origin of those organisations might be.

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): Will my hon. Friend reassure my hard-working constituents whose taxes, of course, provide the money that enables international aid to be provided that there will be a laser-like focus on ensuring value for money? Does he agree that, in the long term, the best way to help the poorest countries in the world is for them to develop their economy, so that there is more trade and less aid?

**James Wharton:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The Department remains entirely focused on driving value for money. These reviews underline that commitment, and my hon. Friend is, of course, right that we want to help nations and people lift themselves out of poverty by supporting the structures of their society and the pillars of their economy by ensuring that they can trade and generate income, so that they become less dependent on international aid. Indeed, the prosperity fund is a very good example of this Government’s commitment to that course.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Will the Minister tell us how moving to payment by results for global agencies can help them plan for long-term development budgets with any certainty or confidence at all?

**James Wharton:** If we have a payment-by-results system, in some appropriate circumstances, the certainty that those organisations will get will come from the performance that they can deliver, because they will be sure that the donors can continue to have confidence in them and the work that they do. It is absolutely right to deliver value for the taxpayer, not just because it is good and right for the taxpayer in this country, but because for every pound we derive value from we can help some of the poorest people in the world.

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): For young women around the world, inequality often starts with the inhumanity of a lack of sanitation, making additional privacy more difficult. Will my hon. Friend welcome the words of the chief executive of WaterAid, a charity that is doing fantastic work around the world, in welcoming DFID’s decision this morning?

**James Wharton:** I will indeed. A range of widely respected organisations have made clear their support for what is contained in these reports and the approach that the Secretary of State and DFID are following. The support coming from a range of organisations, including non-governmental organisations, and from individuals across the political divide is significant and important. I think that makes a statement in and of itself about the work we are undertaking.

**Julie Cooper** (Burnley) (Lab): The aid review rightly says that more aid should be directed to conflict-affected areas. With that in mind, will the Government consider humanitarian air drops to Aleppo—a measure that would have cross-party support?

**James Wharton:** I believe this issue has been extensively covered in the House recently. There are practical limitations on what can be done because of the circumstances in Aleppo and the very tragic events unfolding there even as we speak. The Government continue to be committed to supporting in every way that they should and can those people who are affected by the terrible events that are happening. At this time, however, I am not sure that the hon. Lady’s suggestion is practicable or deliverable.
Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I stand here as an advocate and supporter of this Government’s policy of spending 0.7% of our national income on international aid, and I am proud that it was under a Conservative-led Government during the last Parliament that the former Member for Witney, David Cameron, drove this policy through. Will the Minister confirm that this is still the policy that the Government will pursue? However, my constituents also want to see value for taxpayers’ money, so will he confirm that that is at the forefront of his mind as well?

James Wharton: I am happy to confirm that on both fronts. I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to our former Prime Minister, David Cameron, who was a leader—not just in this country, but globally—on this agenda. He made commitments during his time in office that will ensure that this country is at the forefront of the debate and the forefront of delivery in the international development space. My hon. Friend’s constituents can rest assured that we are doing good things and ensuring value for money as we do so.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Where is the voice of civil society—particularly the voice of civil society in developing countries—in these reviews? Does the Minister recognise that well-supported and active civil societies are crucial in building peaceful and stable democracies that can allow economies to grow and poverty to be overcome?

James Wharton: That is a very important point. Civil society can be vital to holding those in power to account and ensuring that democratic systems function properly. It is an area of work in which DFID is very much engaged, and I have seen some of those projects myself when I have travelled in Africa and in other countries for which I have responsibility. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: civil society is a key driver for development and stability, and we will continue to invest in it.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the publication of the two reviews. Reading the “Multilateral Development Review”, I was interested to note how working with UNICEF on bulk orders of medicines via the Gavi programme had not only saved, potentially, the lives of 4 million to 5 million children, but saved £900 million that could be used for other purposes. Does the Minister agree that when, for the price of a cup of coffee, we can vaccinate a child against the five most deadly diseases, which might otherwise very well kill them, the money is not only necessary but well spent?

James Wharton: Absolutely. It is one of the great tragedies that so much preventable disease none the less causes such suffering and loss of life across the world, but we are in a position to make a difference to that. Indeed, we are one of the leading nations in the fight. I have already spoken about our work with Gavi and about its opinion of the reviews. My hon. and learned Friend highlights one of the moral imperatives that underpin the commitment that we have made to continue to be proactive and, indeed, world-leading in this regard.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that when, for the price of a cup of coffee, we can vaccinate a child against the five most deadly diseases, which might otherwise very well kill them, the money is not only necessary but well spent?

James Wharton: Absolutely. It is one of the great tragedies that so much preventable disease none the less causes such suffering and loss of life across the world, but we are in a position to make a difference to that. Indeed, we are one of the leading nations in the fight. I have already spoken about our work with Gavi and about its opinion of the reviews. My hon. and learned Friend highlights one of the moral imperatives that underpin the commitment that we have made to continue to be proactive and, indeed, world-leading in this regard.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Can the Minister confirm that he is talking to the Department for Exiting the European Union about continued finance for projects through the European development fund, even in the event of Brexit?

James Wharton: I am happy to confirm that all Departments are talking to each other and working seamlessly to deliver policy and the UK national interest. That includes, of course, the new Department for Exiting the European Union.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Less money, less aid and less influence is the reality of Brexit internationally. Given the projected reductions...
in growth as a result of Brexit, does the Minister not recognise that it will have a profound impact on the UK Government’s ability to meet their 0.7% commitment?

James Wharton: I think that Brexit presents the United Kingdom with an almost unique opportunity to be a world leader, to look outwards rather than inwards, to re-establish some of its historic ties, friendships and relationships, and to drive forward its agenda and values throughout the globe. The Department has a contribution to make to that, and the Government are getting on with the work. I welcome it, but, more importantly, the British people voted for it.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The Minister has referred to Brexit a number of times, but he said at the beginning that the reviews had fully taken account of what I think he called a change of circumstance, so he is surely able to clarify the position of finance for projects through the European development fund. Will he do that?

James Wharton: The question has come up many times, and I have responded to it as clearly as I can. The Government will always seek to deliver the best possible value for money for the British taxpayer and secure the outputs that we want to secure. If European Union institutions were able to deliver programmes through which we could work, we would not rule out working with them in the future—nor should we—but they would be assessed along with all the others. I do not think that I could be any clearer or more straightforward in my answer to that question. The review does not ascribe too much significance to the issue, because the truth is that we will always work with the most efficient partners to deliver the best results.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The biggest threat to global development is surely climate change. What steps is the Department taking, and what discussions is it having with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about the adoption of a co-ordinated approach to that global threat?

James Wharton: DFID works closely with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and that includes work relating to climate change. We have many world-leading projects, such as Energy Africa, which delivers renewable energy to countless thousands of homes to help people in a number of countries on the African continent. DFID is a significant contributor to the Government’s commitments on our green agenda, and we will continue to contribute through, for example, international climate finance, in which the Department plays a leading role. We are committed to that agenda, and we will continue to drive it in a development context.

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): What assistance will DFID give multilateral and bilateral organisations to support data collection and aggregation, and, particularly on age and gender grounds, to monitor impact and effectiveness?

James Wharton: The hon. Gentleman has asked an important question. If we are to understand how best to target the resources that we deploy, we need to have the data that underpin those decisions. If we are to identify the challenges that will arise in some of the poorest parts of the world before they are necessarily apparent and before it is too late to respond, we need those data and an understanding of how to analyse them. DFID is a significant investor in that context, and we will continue to be so, because we recognise the difference that our investment makes not only to the people who benefit from the results that it helps to drive and the decisions that it helps to make, but to the value for money that is secured by what we do.
Benefit Claimants Sanctions (Required Assessment) Bill

Proceedings resumed.

11.27 am

Conor Burns: May I say that I can think of no one I am happier to be interrupted by than my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for International Development, on one of his rare visits to the United Kingdom?

Before the interruption, we were hearing from the Opposition a perception that the Government were not listening. Let me point out that, in 2013, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions commissioned Matthew Oakley “to undertake an independent review of the operation of the provisions relating to the imposition of benefit sanctions that are imposed as a result of, or have been validated by, the Jobseekers (Back to Work Schemes) Act 2013.”

The review considered benefit sanctions for claimants of jobseeker’s allowance who were sanctioned after being referred to a mandatory back-to-work scheme in the year to 26 March 2014. It considered the process of benefit sanctions, and the understanding of sanctions by claimants. In 2014 the Oakley review was completed, and the Secretary of State received a report. The review team rigorously examined the DWP’s sanctions processes and communications, and Matthew Oakley “commended the Department and officials for the manner in which they have approached and supported my review.”

He also stated that sanctions were “a key element of the mutual obligation that underpins...the effectiveness and fairness of the social security system.”

The review concluded that the current system largely functioned well, but conceded that in an operation of this scale there were almost inevitably areas for improvement. It made 17 recommendations with three key themes: communications, jobcentre/provider responsibility, and safeguards. Her Majesty’s Government accepted all 17 recommendations from the Oakley review. Significant work with internal and external stakeholders has taken place to implement the recommendations and, crucially, is continuing to ensure that the system continues to function effectively and fairly.

In March 2015 the Work and Pensions Committee published the report “Benefit sanctions policy beyond the Oakley Review”, with recommendations. In October 2015 the Secretary of State responded to the Select Committee accepting recommendations in a number of areas, including on vulnerability and giving tailored support to claimants. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), Chairman of the Committee, said “We are pleased that the Government has accepted many of the Committee’s criticisms of its approach and, more importantly, the recommendations for change.”

From October 2015 onwards, the response to the Select Committee clearly outlined the work the Department had already undertaken to review the sanctions system and changes the Government intended to make and they are continuing to work on those alongside the ongoing work of the Oakley review.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I am appalled by some of the cases I have heard mentioned in the Chamber today. Many of the cases in which I have had to intervene have been where parents have not been involved in the processes, and where perhaps younger or vulnerable people have not had support. That is where we and the processes have intervened, and it has worked for them. I have found it very difficult to hear from Opposition Members of cases where people have been in such peril, in circumstances similar to those in which I have been able to intervene and make a difference to people’s lives by working with parents, those who care for people who are vulnerable and those who are helping the claimants.

Conor Burns: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point and highlights the fact that, as Members of Parliament, we can be powerful advocates for people who sometimes slip through the cracks. She also makes—if I may say so, in a spirit of cross-party consensus—the
interesting point that compassion is not resident in only one part of this Chamber. All Members who come to this House to serve, come to do their very best for the constituents who elected them.

Kirsten Oswald: The hon. Gentleman has said that many of us have come across these experiences, and his hon. Friend the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) has said the same—we have heard examples during the debate. The system is clearly not working; it should not come down to people having to go to their MP to get the support they should rightly have.

Conor Burns: It is incumbent upon all Governments of all colours to work constantly to try to improve the systems under which we operate. The answer, however, is not to remove a sanctions regime—[Interruption.] I am sorry, but the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South set out the matter very clearly; this is a Trojan horse Bill.

Mhairi Black: If I wanted to use this Bill to get rid of sanctions, that is exactly what it would say on the cover. I have explained, and I cannot be more sincere in explaining, that this Bill is not about removing sanctions. It is a genuine attempt to bring some consistency to a system that is allowing far too many people to fall through the cracks. It is about ensuring that individuals are not left without. That is compassion.

Conor Burns: The hon. Lady was very clear in her speech to the House earlier that her view is that it would be much better to have a system with no sanctions in place. [Interruption] That is what the hon. Lady said. What I am trying to outline is the way in which the Government are working within the existing processes to improve the arrangements of the system so that we genuinely deliver benefits to those who need them, but root out those seeking to abuse the system and therefore break the social contract with the taxpayers who are working to pay those benefits.

One of the ways we have done that was when, in December 2015, we accelerated the process for considering hardship payment claims so that they are now paid within three days. The Government response to the Select Committee included the announcement that we would trial a sanctions warning system and that we would give a further opportunity for claimants to provide evidence before a sanction is applied. That would strike the right balance between enforcing conditionality and fairness. The trial started in Scotland in March 2016 and ended at the end of September. Evaluation is currently being undertaken to enable ministerial decisions on any future national roll-out.

Sanctions are not jumped to before any other considerations; they are used as a last resort. This is a sensible policy, which seeks to cut down any dependency culture, ensure that those claiming benefits—

Paula Sherriff: The hon. Gentleman is doing his best to suggest he can empathise with people, but I wonder whether he has ever experienced not knowing where his next meal is coming from or whether he can feed or clothe his children. I also wonder what effect this sanctioning regime is having on our already embattled mental health services, which are struggling to cope as it is.

Conor Burns: I have in fact been in those circumstances. I was unemployed and had to sign on after I graduated in 1994 in the worst graduate recession since the second world war. I experienced that again after I tried to get elected to this House in 2005 and had not got the money; I had to decide whether to pay the mortgage or the council tax on overdraft. So, yes I have been in those circumstances, and I have to say: do not ever sit there and suggest to people that we do not have the ability to empathise in this House of Commons simply because we sit on the Conservative Benches. That is the worst type of class war stereotypical nonsense, which frankly we should have moved way beyond in this House a long time ago.

Let us return to the point in question. The fact is that 94% of JSA claimants stick to their commitments and are not sanctioned, and even smaller is the percentage of ESA claimants—the main in-work sickness benefit—who are sanctioned, which stands at less than 1%. However, something being uncommon does not justify ignoring it, if it is a justified issue, which brings me on to my other point.

Department for Work and Pensions research shows that 70% of people receiving JSA and 60% of those receiving ESA said that the regime made them more likely to follow the rules. This is a sensible policy, which takes account of, and goes to great lengths never to disadvantage, those genuinely in need of benefits, but which seeks to cut down any dependency culture, ensure that those claiming benefits—

Mhairi Black: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene. Has he read the NAO report published this week which shows that a quarter of all people between 2010 and 2015-16 have experienced a sanction? That is the reality; that is the real fact.

Conor Burns: I am very comfortable with the figures that I have given the House, and I see the Minister nodding his affirmation that those figures are indeed correct.

Michael Tomlinson: I am happy to confirm that my hon. Friend is correct. I have the House of Commons Library briefing paper here and it confirms exactly what he has said about JSA claimants falling to around 2% in each of the first six months of 2016 and ESA claimants falling to around 1% between May 2011 and May 2016. He is absolutely right to say that Conservative Members do not lack compassion and empathy. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) was right to say that we are dealing with individual human beings, not statistics, but the statistics are nevertheless important.

Conor Burns: I thoroughly agree with my hon. Friend. I could not have put that more eloquently myself.
Sanctions regimes are not uncommon. In fact, most developed economies attach conditions to the receipt of benefits. Recent European studies in Switzerland in 2005, in the Netherlands in 2013, in Denmark in 2011 and in Germany in 2014 found that benefit cuts substantially increased employment take-up among sanctioned persons. In 2013, the Government commissioned an independent review into sanctions and implemented all its recommendations.

We should put aside the misconception sometimes portrayed by Members that sanctions are the automatic default that the system rushes towards. In fact, a claimant has to go through an incredibly long journey before they reach the point of sanction.

**Anne McLaughlin** (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Would the hon. Gentleman care to tell me how that fits in with the Government’s website.

The work coach explains the consequence of non-compliance they need to attend the jobcentre. As part of the above, responsibilities or health reasons—and the job steps offer them the best prospects of employment. The work coach notifies the claimant of any specific that are available information and decides whether the claimant will include any details they have of factors that may affect the claimant’s capacity, such as caring responsibilities, health and wellbeing issues, accommodation problems or anything else that is relevant.

In step four, the decision maker reviews the case. If required, the claimant and/or relevant third party are contacted to provide any clarification or additional information, either by telephone, email or letter. For provider referrals, including those relating to the Work programme, the decision maker tells the claimant that a doubt has arisen, gives the reasons and asks the claimant to provide the reasons for their failure and any supporting evidence.

In the fifth step, the decision maker considers all the available information and decides whether the claimant had a good reason for their failure and whether a sanction is therefore appropriate.

The sixth stage involves the details of the decision being sent to the appropriate benefits centre for processing.

In the seventh step, the claimant is issued with a notification letter to inform them of the decision. When a sanction has been applied, that notification includes details of the reason for, and the period of, the sanction, how to claim hardship and what the claimant should do if they want more information about the decision and/or wish to challenge it.

**Chris Stephens**: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the next step involves someone in that position having to phone an 0345 number, for which a mobile phone provider will charge 45p a minute? Can he explain why the Government have rejected the advice of the Social Security Advisory Committee that all phone calls to the DWP should be on 0800 numbers and therefore free?

The Minister is hearing these points dear. A more succinct way to put it might be to ask me to intervene on the Minister later, because he will be in a better position to explain the Government’s position than I, a humble Back-Bench bag carrier, am.

**Patrick Grady**: If the hon. Gentleman cannot speak for the Government, does he at least agree in principle with my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) that the phone calls should be free?

**Conor Burns**: The Minister is hearing these points being made, and he will give both hon. Members a clear answer on the Government’s policy in due course.

I shall now move on to the eighth stage of the process that needs to be gone through before a sanction is applied. If a claimant requests more information about the decision, an explanation will be given by the jobcentre or contact centre. When a claimant makes such a request, they are contacted by a decision maker and a full, detailed explanation is provided.

In the ninth stage, if the claimant disputes or challenges the decision, a decision maker will have the case, and any additional information provided by the claimant,
reviewed. If the decision is overturned, notification is issued to the claimant and arrears of benefit paid. If the decision is not overturned, the case is referred to the dispute resolution team for a full mandatory reconsideration.

In the tenth step, following a request for a mandatory reconsideration, the original decision will be looked at again, taking into account any additional information provided by the claimant. A mandatory reconsideration notice will be sent to the claimant to notify them of the outcome. The letter also includes information on how to appeal against the decision. One of the points the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South makes is that sanctions are causing people to become impoverished and that they ostensibly disregard their situation and position, yet claimants who are sanctioned can apply for hardship payments equivalent to 60% of their normal benefit payment. JSA claimants who are seriously ill or pregnant can receive 80% if they qualify for hardship payments.

Mims Davies: If I read this correctly, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South is talking about assessing and then reassessing after sanctions, to ensure that no one falls through the gaps and to formalise the process and create consistency. Does my hon. Friend agree that the biggest difficulty is in striking a balance between achieving consistency in a fair and structured system and being able to assess each claimant individually based on their needs?

Conor Burns: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Indeed, the Government are constantly listening and adapting the system to improve it. We heard a lot from Opposition Members about people on JSA being categorised as vulnerable, but, as the Secretary of State announced recently, the Government are extending the list of vulnerable groups to include those with mental health conditions and those who are homeless. This will mean that they can receive hardship payments from day one of their sanction. The Government have also accelerated the process of considering hardship payments so that they are now paid within three days.

Mhairi Black: I want to respond to the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies). As the hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns) is sincerely saying, the job of Government is to listen, and they should do so constantly. If they do listen, they will find that there is huge disparity throughout the UK. While it is fine to say in theory that the system should be consistent, the Government should listen to the facts, and the reality of the stories that we are hearing today is that that is not happening. Let us listen and introduce something that will formalise that consistency. That is all that this Bill is about.

Conor Burns: I am happy to be a useful conduit for the hon. Lady to make that point to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), but it may stretch the generosity of the Chair were I to invite my hon. Friend to reply through me to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South.

Much has been said about people who work in jobcentres, including that some of them might be callous or cold-hearted people who, on a whim or when in a bad mood, or if they got out of bed on the wrong side, would somehow deliberately impose hardship. I do not recognise that characterisation from the meetings that I have had with them in my constituency. They are often berated and vilified simply for doing their job. They are honest people.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I appreciate what the hon. Gentleman is saying about DWP staff, but I wonder whether the fact that total DWP staff numbers are down 34% since 2010 has some bearing on the issues he is raising.

Conor Burns: It might be that we have a more efficient Department or that we are focusing more resource directly at the frontline rather than in back-office administration. I note that the Minister is nodding, and he may want to say something about that in his remarks.

This is about getting people into work. Government Members and many beyond our Benches believe that with work comes dignity—individuals being able to look after themselves and their families. I return to what the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South wrote in The National, in which she said:

“If we must have benefit sanctions”.

We should have benefit sanctions, because they are there to ensure that people do not abuse the system. Those who abuse the system are in a sense committing a fraud against their fellow citizens and against hard-working taxpayers who are trying to do their best. We believe in a society in which responsibility should be taught and instilled from the first step. We believe in offering a handout or opportunity for people to do better. I am delighted that those who commit benefit fraud are in such a tiny minority. I am also delighted to be a member of a Government who have created the economic conditions for more jobs than ever before and therefore more opportunities for people.

Angela Crawley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way during his extended speech. He might as well be reading from a cookery book, because you are adding nothing new to this debate. Fifty-five per cent. of claims have to be overturned as a result of this failed system, so does the hon. Gentleman accept that what he refers to as the fractional percentage of people who commit fraud is far outweighed by the vast number of people who need support? A social security system should protect those people when they need protection most.

Conor Burns: I thank the hon. Lady for her insult at the beginning of her intervention. I note yet again, Madam Deputy Speaker, the use of the word “you” by SNP Members. You would have thought that, 18 months into this Parliament, they might have learned the basics of parliamentary procedure.

This is a Trojan horse Bill. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South betrayed her true feelings early on in her remarks when she said that there should be no sanctions for benefit fraud—[Interruption.] The hon. Lady will have the opportunity tomorrow to look at Hansard online and read her own remarks.
I will conclude here because I agree with the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) that I have been going on for quite some time. I am proud that we have a Government, a Minister and a Secretary of State who are determined to get support to those who need it most. They are determined to improve the system to eliminate fraud and get maximum benefit for the taxpayer. I am proud to serve on these Benches, where we are committed to a growing economy, work for everyone who wants it and a society that works for all.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): After the previous speech, which I will come on to, I welcome the opportunity to use a slightly different tone in this debate—certainly when it comes to the evidence. I start by offering warm congratulations to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) on bringing the Bill forward. She rightly outlined her personal views, but she put them to one side and, like so many Members, spoke about the car crashes that are happening in the sanctions system. I want to provide two examples that I received just last night and this morning—that is how frequently such things are happening. Nearly a million people were sanctioned last year. It is not an insignificant number. The two cases are exactly the same. Both people were due to go in for surgery just days before a work capability assessment and were signed off for eight weeks. When they asked whether they had to go to the assessment, they were told that they did or else they would be sanctioned. It is absolute nonsense. This sort of thing is happening now.

Debbie Abrahams: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We all need to be responsible for the language and the tone that we use. Unfortunately, we have seen some of that in today’s debate. I refer Members to the earlier National Audit Office report that was published this week. A headline in a paper suggested that the one in four claimants who had been sanctioned were somehow fraudulent. That was the disgraceful tone of the headline in a major newspaper, which distorted the evidence.

Helen Whately rose—

Debbie Abrahams: I am sorry, but I am going to carry on.

We must ensure that all of us, as leaders, use the appropriate language. I can point to speeches that have been made in the past in which that has not been the case.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South has outlined the provisions of her Bill, which requires an assessment of social security claimants’ circumstances before a sanction is applied. Measures in the Bill include a code of conduct for those responsible for imposing sanctions and the important principle of just cause, which is applied in defined circumstances. It will be applied, for example, where undertaking a job is in clear conflict with the claimant’s caring responsibility, and where there is just cause for not undertaking particular employment or job-search activity. In such cases, it is proposed that sanctions should not be applied.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the need for assessment for hardship payments after a sanction has been applied. Again, that is absolutely right. It was in fact one recommendation from the Work and Pensions Committee inquiry on this issue last year.

I have been heartened by the slightly different tone taken by the new Secretary of State, particularly in what has been said about work capability assessment and sanctions for homeless people and other vulnerable groups. I see this Bill as an important step forward, as it builds on what we have said should be happening. It would also make the process much fairer. I support this Bill in abolishing the punitive sanctions regime that the Tories and the Liberal Democrats introduced in the Welfare Reform Act 2012.

Let me provide a bit of background to what has been going on over the past four years. We have heard about the exponential rise in sanctions that have been applied to people on JSA, incapacity benefit and employment and support allowance, but we did not really touch on the new application to people on universal credit who are in work. I am referring to the taxpayers whom the hon. Member for Bournemouth West was talking about—the taxpayers who are already contributing to the Exchequer and who are, through the universal credit regulations, likely to be subjected to a sanction. That would be the case if, for example, they are not working full time, or if they have not got a permanent contract and want a few days off. They can be sanctioned and that is happening now.
I have been campaigning on this issue for more than four years. A constituent came to me after he had been sanctioned. He was in the middle of a work capability assessment when he suffered a heart attack. He was told by the nurse undertaking the assessment that he needed to go to hospital. He did that, and two weeks later he had a letter in the post saying that he had been sanctioned.

I mentioned another case to the Minister when we were in an interview recently. John Ruane from my constituency has a brain tumour, which means that he has three to four epileptic fits a week. His clinical team contacted me because he was refusing to have a life-saving operation on the grounds that he feared he would be sanctioned. He had already had his ESA stopped after a work capability assessment—that is another story, which I cannot go into today, but which certainly needs to be looked at again. He was frightened of being sanctioned. Fortunately, I have been able to intervene and his ESA has been re-established, but that fear of being sanctioned is what people are experiencing.

Yet another constituent of mine, who was a Jobcentre Plus adviser for more than 25 years, came to me four years ago, saying how troubled he was about the targets that he was being set—or aspirations as a Member said earlier—to sanction claimants. Targets were being set for sanctions even when people had done nothing wrong. He explained how the system works—that appointments would be made when people were meant to come in for a work-related interview, and the people would then not be told. That was investigated by the Department for Work and Pensions and, shamefully, it did nothing.

Michael Tomlinson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Debbie Abrahams: On that point alone.

Michael Tomlinson: The hon. Lady mentions sanctions. Does she approve of the sanctions regime overall, or would she also advocate getting rid of it in its totality?

Debbie Abrahams: I said, “On that point alone,” and the hon. Gentleman has not asked specifically about the investigation of the fraudulent activity that was going on in the DWP before I am afraid I am not going to respond to his intervention. [Interruption.] I will come on to putting our position very clearly to the Minister.

This Jobcentre Plus adviser said people were being set up to fail to get them off flow. If claimants are off flow, they are not signing in. Not only do they not count in the DWP view, but they are not drawing social security support. Wednesday’s National Audit Office report estimated that last year alone, £132 million was not paid in social security support, but a significant amount—not quite as much as that—was spent on administering the sanctions process.

What many people are surprised to hear is that sanctions apply immediately and last for a minimum of a month. They are referred to a DWP decision maker, as we have heard, to decide whether they should be upheld, but that in itself can take a month. On top of that, although housing benefit payments are not meant to be stopped, they have been, and that was confirmed during the Select Committee inquiry last year. As has also been said, the ensuing debt builds up, and Sheffield Hallam University has shown the implications for sanctions-related homelessness.

Then I started to hear about the deaths of claimants following a sanction—first Mark Wood, and then David Clapson, and there have been many more. Of the 49 claimants who died between 2012 and 2014, and whose deaths were investigated by the DWP, 10 followed a sanction. By the way, I am still waiting for the Department to get back to me on the peer review details of nine subsequent claimant deaths.

It was after David’s death, and when I had met his sister, Gill Thompson, who is absolutely devastated—I pay tribute to her for the campaign she has launched to try to raise awareness of what is happening—that I managed to persuade the Select Committee to undertake an inquiry into sanctions that would explore the impacts of the Government’s 2012 sanctions regime. We found that, between 2012 and 2014, 3.2 million sanctions were applied. At a peak, in one month in 2014, 90,000 JSA claimants were sanctioned. The sanctions for sick and disabled people increased fivefold. One in five JSA claimants were sanctioned at that time; as we have heard, that has increased to one in four. Single parents and people with mental health conditions were particularly affected. Again, the variation across the country was quite staggering.

We found that 43% of claimants who are sanctioned leave JSA—they move off flow, distorting the JSA claimant count. Over 80%—this is a really important point—of those leaving JSA after a sanction do so for reasons other than work. One would think that the Government wanted to know why they were sanctioning those people and where they were going. If they are not going into work, what exactly is happening to them? One recommendation from the all-party Select Committee inquiry was that we should follow up these cases. As the NAO has shown, that has not happened. We do not know what happens to the nearly half of the JSA claimants who leave and the 80% who do so for reasons other than going into work.

The rise in food bank usage was also linked to the increase in sanctions, and both the physical and the mental health issues of claimants were found to be exacerbated by the punitive sanctions regime. The Select Committee made more than 20 recommendations, including for the pre-sanction process that the Bill also calls for. It also said that all financial sanctions on vulnerable JSA and ESA claimants, as well as those on people who are on universal credit and in work but not full-time work, should be stopped.

Fundamentally, the Select Committee called for an independent inquiry into sanctions as a whole, and the NAO made the same recommendation in its report on Wednesday. Unfortunately, the Government did not accept the majority of the recommendations. They made some moves on hardship payments. We have heard about that already and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

Wednesday’s NAO report was the third in a month reaffirming and adding to the Select Committee inquiry’s findings. There is no evidence that sanctioning someone motivates them or modifies their behaviour in such a way that they move into work. Even the Government’s own behavioural insights team found exactly that in its review. We have discussed the fact that one in four JSA
claimants were sanctioned between 2010 and 2015, and I have mentioned the appalling headline that said that they were abusing the system. As I have said, the Jobcentre Plus whistleblower said that claimants are being set up to fail.

We also know that 42% of UC decisions about sanctions took longer than 28 days, and that £132 million was withheld last year. Last month, the University of Oxford and the London School of Economics quantified the association between the increase in sanctioning and food bank usage: for every 10 sanctions, five more adults were referred to food banks.

Kirsten Oswald: I echo the hon. Lady’s sentiments and her comments on the correlation between sanctions and food banks. Does she agree that it is a sad situation that Scotland now has not only food banks, but school uniform banks, and that that is directly linked to the inability of families, through no fault of their own, to support their children in going to school?

Debbie Abrahams: Absolutely. Last week, the food bank in my own area launched a fuel bank, because people are choosing between heating and eating. That is what is going to happen up and down the country this Christmas.

Where do we go from here? I hope that, given the evidence and the new tone being used by this Government—I was disappointed with the autumn statement, but I am an eternal optimist and hope that the Minister is listening—they will support the Bill and implement it at the earliest opportunity.

I turn to the question asked by the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) about our position. I made it very clear in my conference speech in September.

Michael Tomlinson: I wasn’t there, but the hon. Lady can invite me next time!

Debbie Abrahams: I will certainly do that. The hon. Gentleman is very welcome to cross the Floor. I said—and this was widely reported at the time—that we want to scrap the system. We must be driven by evidence, and the evidence shows that it does not work. It does not motivate people or change behaviour. All it does is have a very harmful effect on the most vulnerable in society. It also has some very difficult spin-off effects.

Michael Tomlinson rose—

Debbie Abrahams: I am coming to a conclusion. As part of my party’s sanctions review, I want to explore approaches that better reflect the change that I want to see in the culture of our social security system. I want it to be based on support and positive reinforcement, not harassment and punishment. Again, if we look at the evidence from the Netherlands, we see that such an approach is much more effective at moving people into sustainable employment.

Our social security system is, like our NHS, there for all of us in our time of need. It is based on the principles of inclusion, support and security for all, and it should assure all of us of our dignity at all times. I do not think that we can say that about the present system, and we certainly cannot say that about the sanctions system. I hope that the Government are listening, because this is so important. I implore them to implement the Bill.

12.15 pm

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) on securing the debate, on the tone that she adopted and on the powerful way in which she spoke.

In my speech, I will identify three things: the general principle that working is important—the value of work—the existing sanctions regime and the importance of limiting sanctions wherever possible. Before I do so, I would like to make a general point. I think that the hon. Lady accepted that the system worked in some places, that there are hardship payments and that there is guidance. Implicit in her speech and in the Bill was the recognition that she seeks to change the implementation of the system, not the system itself, but I am not clear that legislation is necessarily the right way to do that.

First, I want to identify the principle of work. We need to encourage, empower and inform everybody about the opportunities of work, because work has a number of benefits. It gives people self-fulfilment and financial responsibility for themselves, and it enables them to be a role model for their children. Work also helps the country as a whole. If we have high employment and high productivity, we remain competitive as a nation and we ensure that those who might suffer, physically or mentally, from being out of work can help themselves. It is our job, as a Government, to ensure that those opportunities remain available and that people have the skills and the confidence to go to work.

Secondly, I said that I would identify the sanctions regime. The idea that people should go to work—that it pays to work, that people should get off benefits to go into work and that we should encourage them to do so—is neither new nor controversial. Likewise, the benefit system and the sanctions system are not new. The sanctions system has been around for four decades, and there is some evidence that sanctioning works: 70% of claimants say that they are more likely to follow the rules if they know that they are at risk of having their benefits stopped if they do not.

According to the National Audit Office report, international evidence suggests that sanctioning increases the number of people who go from benefits into employment. We have sanctions because we have conditions, and conditions are useful. Through the conditions system, people can get the training and the skills that they need, and conditions force people to get the skills that they need. As has been said during the debate, the evidence suggests that 90% of people do not have any sanctions at all.

Chris Law: To go back to the evidence from the National Audit Office, we must be reading two different reports. I have also looked at the report, and according to the official analysis of the benefit sanction system, there is absolutely no evidence that the sanctions regime imposed by the DWP has a positive effect on job outcomes. I would just like to get that on the record, because it is in complete contradiction to what the hon. Lady has just said.
Lucy Frazer: I have read the report, and it states, as I have said, that the international evidence suggests that sanctions increase the number of people who go from benefit to unemployment. It is incredibly important that we get people into work.

Having set out the system, I would like to identify, thirdly, the things we need to ward against. We absolutely need to protect the vulnerable in our society. Those who cannot work must not be penalised, and we need to ensure that those who suffer sanctions are still able to maintain a proper standard of living.

As I said at the outset, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South rightly spoke about the importance of mental health, so the following principles are important. Sanctioning must be a last resort, and the sanctions must be monitored. It is right that there is a right of appeal, and that there is a further appeal to an independent decision maker. It is right that there is a hardship fund, and that that fund protects the most vulnerable.

Michael Tomlinson: Does my hon. and learned Friend, like me, welcome the Government’s broadening of the hardship fund to cover those points, including the homeless and those who suffer from mental ill health?

Lucy Frazer: Yes, I welcome that. I am also delighted that 90% of JSA claimants who apply to the hardship fund are successful.

Mhairi Black: I welcome the comments made by the hon. and learned Lady and by the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) on the importance of the hardship fund and the good it can do. Will she therefore support the principle of the Bill? Instead of waiting and making the individual responsible for applying to the hardship fund, the Bill would mean that the individual’s entitlement to a hardship payment is immediately assessed. Is that something she can support?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns) rightly identified that hardship payments are one of the steps set out in the process. We do not necessarily need legislation to identify the fact that people should be told that a hardship system is in place—that should happen. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South rightly identified that the practice works in some places. If it works in some places, it is not legislation that is needed. We need to ensure that good practice is happening throughout the country.

The hon. Lady also rightly spoke about the work of jobcentre staff, and the Oakley review said:

“All of the conversations that the Review team held with Jobcentre Plus staff highlighted their dedication to trying to help claimants back into work and ensuring that the social security system was administered fairly and effectively.”

That is what we need to keep doing.

The Bill rightly recognises that the position could be improved, because things can always be improved. There is a continuous assessment of what is right and what is wrong. We have had the independent Oakley review of sanctions, which recognised that work still needs to be done.
I want to comment on three points that were made by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South in her speech. First, she identified that she was concerned about the facelessness of the decision maker, but there are many systems in other areas in which the decision maker does not know the individual. Many immigration decisions are made by someone who does not know the individual. Our judicial system rests on the basis that the judge is not familiar with the individual case and assesses those cases on the evidence.

Patrick Grady rose—

Mike Weir rose—

Lucy Frazer: I will make some progress.

Secondly, the hon. Lady questioned how people can provide evidence that a bus or a train was late. I can think of a number of ways of doing so, such as taking a photograph of the dashboard or asking a member of staff to provide evidence. Thirdly, she said that staff may be affected, but I have already covered that point.

In conclusion, the hon. Lady’s Bill is important because we need to assess what works and what does not work. I welcome the call for consistency, because it is absolutely vital that we have a system that works fairly throughout the country.

Mhairi Black: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Lucy Frazer: I am about to finish.

I welcome the fact that we have had a review—the Oakley review—and the fact that the Government have taken on board some of the recommendations. We must consistently and constantly strive to ensure that work pays, that we encourage people to find work and, at the same time, we must protect the most vulnerable.

12.27 pm

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): I normally say that I am very pleased to take part in a debate, but, unfortunately, I am not very pleased to do so today because we are having to discuss a terrible subject. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) on the way she introduced this very important Bill. I cannot match her passion and, Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be glad to hear that I do not want to match her length, but I want to make a few points.

I listened very carefully to what the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) said. Nobody on the SNP Benches disputes the fact that working is important—we all want everybody who is able to work to be in work, and that should be fundamental for everybody in every political party—but when she was talking about decision makers, she mentioned that we have a judicial system in which the judge does not know anything about the case. The fundamental difference is that such a person can go to court and present their case to the judge, but that is not possible in relation to decision makers in this process.

I want to comment on some of the remarks made by the hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns). I have always found him to be a reasonable chap, but I was disappointed by what he said. He made a point—it is often made by Conservative Members—that taxpayers and benefit claimants are somehow different and neither the twain shall meet. He must realise that many benefit claimants were taxpayers and probably will be taxpayers again in the future. He quoted Beveridge, but these people have paid into the system for many years, and they often find themselves having to claim benefits because they have had an accident, they are ill or have a mental illness, or for many other reasons. It is totally wrong to look at the two as different: benefits claimants have been and will be taxpayers, and they are trying to get from the system what they are entitled to, but the hon. Gentleman does not seem to accept that.

Michael Tomlinson: I, too, heard the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns). I understood that he was making a broader point about taxpayers. Will the hon. Member for Angus (Mike Weir) answer this question, please: what is his view on the principle of sanctions? Should there be sanctions at all, yes or no?

Mike Weir: We are not discussing the principle of sanctions today. We are discussing a Bill that sensibly seeks to mitigate the current system. Whether there should be sanctions at all is another debate for another day, but it is not what we are debating today. Many Government Members have spoken about mitigations in the system. It is true that people can get hardship payments, but it can take many weeks. Not only that, but the hardship payments are a percentage of what people would get from benefits. Despite what many people seem to think, benefits are hardly over-generous in the first instance. People who get by on benefits find that they cannot get by on hardship payments.

Parts of my constituency are relatively prosperous. Many people work in the North sea oil industry, for example. In the downturn in that industry, people lost well-paid jobs. Many of them came to me absolutely flabbergasted at the amount of money they got by signing on because they had believed for so many years the rubbish pushed by some of our media that all people on benefits live the life of Riley, which is absolute nonsense.

The point has been made that there is nothing new in the sanctions system, which is correct—sanctions have been part of the system since at least 1996—but what is new is the number of sanctions and how they are imposed. The system is deeply flawed, and SNP Members have long called for a full independent review of it. Even the National Audit Office found in its recent report that a shocking 24% of jobseeker’s allowance claimants received a sanction between 2010 and 2015 and that the rate of sanctions varies dramatically. That is not right and the Government must listen to the concerns about the damage that the application of benefit sanctions has on individuals and their families.

The report also states starkly: “sanctions are not rare. A quarter of Jobseeker’s Allowance claimants receive them at some point”, which blows apart the Government’s assertion that only a small minority receive them. Worse still, there is absolutely no consistency in the figures. The report finds that some Work programme providers made more than twice as many sanctions referrals as other providers.
within the same geographical area, even though claimants are randomly allocated, so that case load characteristics are identical for each provider. That would not happen in a fair system.

There should be no more than a minor variation if the system is used uniformly. Clearly it is not, which the Bill would address by adding a clear code of conduct. The point is that, wherever someone is subject to the system up and down the United Kingdom, the same principles would be applied, and it would not be left to individual variance from place to place. The NAO believes that the DWP does not use sanctions consistently, noting that sanctions referral rates “have risen and fallen over time in ways that cannot be explained by changes in claimant compliance.”

The Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South has introduced would make a start on the process. Hon. Members accept that it does not do away with the sanctions regime. She is very intelligent and knows perfectly well that such a Bill would never get through the House in its current form. However, the Bill would go a long way to ensure that there is a coherent, unified process for all jobcentres and that advisers take a claimant’s personal circumstances into account before issuing sanctions. Advisers would be compelled to take into account whether a person is at risk of homelessness and whether they have caring responsibilities or a mental health condition that could be exacerbated if their benefits were sanctioned.

It is interesting to note that in March 2015 the Work and Pensions Committee published a report, “Benefit sanctions policy beyond the Oakley Review”, which recommended, among other things, that the Government take urgent steps to implement fully the outstanding recommendations of that report. To be scrupulously fair, the Government have taken some measures. They have trialled the yellow card system and we still wait to see what the outcome of that trial will be.

Mhairi Black: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I hope that the Minister will address that point at the end of the debate, because in a written answer to my question asking when the details of the yellow card system would be published, the answer was the end of November. We are now into December.

Mike Weir: When my hon. Friend has been here as long as I have, she will realise that a political month can go on for a very, very long time.

The point is that many of the people who are subject to sanctions are vulnerable or, frankly, leading chaotic lifestyles because of mental illness. In its comments on the Bill, SAMH, which has a scheme in my constituency, said:

“People with mental health problems are among the most vulnerable of benefit recipients, are disproportionately targeted to be sanctioned and are among the least likely to understand or be able to comply with the conditions attached to their benefit.”

SAMH also makes the point that

“Sanctioning this group...serves no purpose other than to make their illness worse and their personal circumstances even harder to cope with—making employment a less, not more, likely outcome.”

In response to a Scottish Government consultation last October, it added that

“The number of sanctions applied in Scotland doubled in the last year, and individuals with mental health problems are disproportionately affected.”

According to Mind, figures obtained by a freedom of information request in November 2015 showed that 19,259 people with mental health problems had their benefits stopped under sanction in 2014-15, compared with just 2,507 in 2011-12. That is a 668% rise in just three years, which cannot be just or right.

These people are already vulnerable. The reason that they are perhaps not fully compliant with the rules is not that they are wilful but that they are unable to do so. A sanction will make matters worse and will not make them more likely to get a job; in other words, it is a completely counterproductive process. In fact, it could be even worse than that, because these people are also the least likely to look into how they can then get a hardship payment, and that happens despite the work that we do and despite the excellent work that Angus Council’s welfare benefits team do to point people in the right direction.

There are people, particularly those with mental health problems, who simply fall through the cracks, and the danger of not having a unified system is that more and more people will fall through those cracks. Many other Members will have stories of people in similar circumstances. Crucially, however, the Government also did not accept the WPC’s recommendation that they should

“establish a broad independent review of benefit conditionality and sanctions, to investigate whether sanctions are being applied appropriately, fairly and proportionately, in accordance with the relevant Regulations and guidance”

that already exist.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not appropriate for somebody to be sanctioned in circumstances such as those of a constituent of mine, who did not turn up for a meeting because the letter about it was sent to the No. 5 in a different street to his?

Mike Weir: It is absolutely incredible that such a thing could happen, which just goes to show the difficulties in the system as it works at the moment.

Many Government Members have claimed that international evidence clearly shows that benefit regimes supported by conditionality reduce unemployment and that the regime in the UK is clear and effective in promoting positive behaviours to help claimants back into work. However, a recent study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council found that most claimants’ experience of welfare conditionality and sanctions was a wholly negative one creating widespread anxiety and feelings of disempowerment. That is hardly a shock to those of us who have had to deal with the issue when they have turned to us for help.
More telling, however, is that a Government-backed employment project run by Oxford City Council and the DWP found in June that cutting benefit entitlements makes it less likely that unemployed people will find a job. It said:

“Conventional wisdom suggests that taking money off benefit claimants (eg by sanctions or cutting benefit rates) acts as a financial incentive to get a job. Our analysis says that the opposite is in fact true”.

Peter Grant: I have to disagree with my hon. Friend’s initial comment that he would not be able to match previous speakers’ passion, because I think he is doing that very well. In my constituency, when a major employer closed down, the DWP joined a taskforce to help the redundant workers back into work. The taskforce organised a half-day recruitment fair. Claimants who should have been signing on the day of the fair were told that they would be sanctioned if they met employers to get a job on the day they were supposed to sign on. Does he agree that changing legislation to prevent such things would improve the credibility and acceptability of any remaining sanctions?

Mike Weir: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point that again illustrates the complete illogicality of the system.

Research has linked sanctioning to food insecurity, demand for food banks and destitution. According to the Trussell Trust’s figures, benefit sanctions are a major contributor to its delivering more emergency food parcels in 2016 than at any other time in its history. The NAO has also thrown into doubt the cost-effectiveness of sanctioning. If we passed the Bill, we could start to reduce the number of needless, senseless and counterproductive sanctions by introducing into the system a clear code of conduct and a fairer means by which to look at the personal conditions of the person being considered for sanctions. The Bill builds on the good practice in some jobcentres, as my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South fairly pointed out in her introduction. It would protect the most vulnerable from falling into poverty and prevent what are often already chaotic personal lives from getting even worse.

The Scottish Parliament is getting new powers to establish employment schemes to assist those at risk of becoming long-term unemployed and to support disabled people back into work, although benefit conditionality and sanctions remain a reserved matter. The Employability and Training Minister, Jamie Hepburn, has confirmed that the Work First Scotland programme, which will provide employment support for more than 3,300 disabled people from next year, will be voluntary and will not use the threat of sanctions. In a rare moment of agreement, I am pleased that the DWP has agreed that the programme can be voluntary and that no sanctions will be applied. I hope that this is a sign that the Government are now beginning to see the merit in looking at the matter afresh. From this small step, I urge the Minister to go further and to support the Bill, which would put the regime on a proper and consistent footing and in the process make a real difference to many people’s lives across the whole United Kingdom.

12.42 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) on introducing the Bill, on the enormous amount of work and research she has clearly done in preparing it and on the great sincerity with which she put her case to the House.

I am sure the hon. Lady will not be surprised to hear that I disagree with her Bill, but it is a good thing for us to talk about those in the greatest difficulty and about which parts of the welfare system do not always work. All Members, in their day-to-day work and casework, will have come across the examples we have heard today of parts of the system that do not work as intended and are not helping people as well as they should, and we all do our bit to make sure those mistakes and oversights—letters going to the wrong address, for instance—are corrected. In my experience, they are very often corrected. I am sure we have all had mistakes corrected for our constituents. The fact that there are mistakes—even though they might be awful mistakes—is not necessarily a reason to rip the system up and start again.

Chris Law: We all in the Chamber agree on the need to do our bit, but according to Trussell Trust figures more than 1 million food parcels a year—the highest number since the war—are going out across every constituency in the country. Is that not clear evidence that the system is not working. After the second world war came the post-war social contract, and this shows the worst parts of the breakdown of that consensus, which was once shared in the House.

Helen Whately: From visiting food banks in my constituency and looking into the issue, I know that there are many reasons why people are using them. I am sure we would all prefer it if people did not have to go to food banks, but there are many reasons why they do, so we should not point the finger entirely at the sanctions regime.

Chris Law: In that case, let us look at the Trussell Trust’s own statistics, showing that 44% of all food bank use is due to the two key areas of benefit delays and benefit sanctions. I believe it is our responsibility to resolve that matter. Does the hon. Lady not agree that when we are talking about nearly 50% of people using food banks because of a failure of the benefit system, it means that there is a fundamental and direct link between the two and that the Bill amounts, frankly, only to a modest gesture to help improve those circumstances?

Helen Whately: I am coming on to the steps that have already been taken.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend is generous in giving way. Does she agree that we have already seen the number of JSA sanctions halved since March last year
and that the Government are dealing with ongoing reviews? Most of the arguments advanced so far in favour of the Bill have been about issues of human judgment, which will be exactly the same with the codes of practice and just cause listed in the Bill?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point.

Mhairi Black rose—

Helen Whately: I understand that the hon. Lady wants to intervene, but will she let me make a bit of progress because I have hardly been through two sentences of what I was planning to say. I will, of course, allow her to intervene later, not least because she is so passionate about this subject.

I want to take a step back and talk about the overall system that is in place. We rightly have a safety-net benefits system so that nobody should have to live in abject poverty. This system is taxpayer funded and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns) argued earlier, we should not forget that the money that funds the system comes from people’s pockets—not just from the wealthiest, but from people who are not well off and those described as “just about managing”. We always need to ensure that the welfare system gets the balance right between supporting those who need help with their income and not taking too much money away from those who do not have a huge amount of money to spend in the first place.

Mhairi Black: The statistics show that the price of this sanctions regime as it currently stands and the subsequently overturned decisions is £50 million to the taxpayer. The Bill would change how benefit sanctions are administered. It is not about ripping the system apart, but about trying to make it more efficient precisely because we want to save taxpayers’ money as well as a lot of the hassle that some people have to go through.

Helen Whately: The hon. Lady makes the important point that we should look for value for money from Government spending. That is absolutely right, but there seems to be some kind of error that the imposition of sanctions in its own right is all about trying to reduce the amount of money spent on benefits. My understanding of the benefits system is that it is part of a larger welfare system that is attempting to help people get into work. Work is an important aspect of the system and some money is spent to achieve that. It is the whole aim of the system around jobseeker’s allowance, the Work programme and so forth.

Several hon. Members rose—

Helen Whately: Let me make a bit of progress to get on to my second page, and I shall take more interventions later.

My main point is that we should all agree that it is perfectly reasonable to expect that in return for receiving a share of somebody else’s income as a benefit payment, the recipient should, if capable, make an effort to work. None of us wants a “something for nothing” culture—that is not good for anyone—and, rightly, conditions are attached to benefits. As long as those conditions are reasonable, it is also reasonable to attach a penalty for not complying, which is what the sanctions system does. Underpinning that is the social contract, which was mentioned earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West. The simple moral case is that people who hope to benefit from a society that gives them certain rights and supports them when they are in need must also take responsibility themselves.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I am interested in the point that the hon. Lady is making about the social contract. Should not the same apply to all those women who paid into a contractual pension scheme—the WASPI women? Are they not also entitled to have that money paid back to them by the state?

Helen Whately: I think the hon. Lady is attempting to take us into a completely different debate. However—I am now looking at you, Madam Deputy Speaker—I will continue my remarks about the Bill. I think you are in agreement with me, Madam, Deputy Speaker, because you are nodding.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): For the avoidance of doubt, when we are discussing a Bill the debate must be about what is in the Bill, or what might be in the Bill, not what could be interesting but is at a tangent to the Bill. The hon. Lady is wise to stick to speaking about the Bill.

Helen Whately: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Accordingly, I shall now deal with the practical case for sanctions.

The purpose and the effect of sanctions is to encourage people to take steps to find work. According to the Department for Work and Pensions, 70% of claimants say that they are more likely to stick to the rules, and to participate in the activity that will help them to get closer to work if they know that their benefits could be withdrawn.

Anne McLaughlin: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Whately: I must make a little bit of progress. Otherwise I shall be speaking until 2.30 pm, and I know that other Members wish to speak.

Claimants in that position are more likely to turn up for appointments with their work coaches, more likely to search for jobs online, and more likely to engage in Work programme activities that will help them to make their way towards finding a job. I recently visited Faversham creek, where Work programme activities include building boats. That is a fantastic activity, and I could see—and heard stories about—the enormous difference that it can make to participants. They gain real skills and meaningful involvement, which can take them closer to the workplace. The structure of turning up and doing the work is very good for their self-esteem, and the benefits are clear.

Chris Law: I thank the hon. Lady for letting me intervene again. She has spoken about how positive work is, and how it gives us all self-esteem and great
benefit. No one disagrees with that point, which has been made many times in the House, but let us be clear about the suggestion that sanctions somehow encourage or motivate claimants. The hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) said earlier that, according to the National Audit Office, analysis showed that sanctions work internationally, and I do not dispute that. My point is that, in the United Kingdom, analysis of the benefit sanctions system suggests that there is no evidence that sanctions imposed by the Department for Work and Pensions have a positive effect on job outcomes. Does the hon. Lady accept that?

**Helen Whately:** I shall come to the point about the evidence in a moment, but before I do so I want to say something about conditionality. I know that Opposition Members think there should be no sanctions at all. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South has said that she opposes sanctions in their entirety, although I appreciate that the Bill is not intended to achieve that.

The problem is that if there are no sanctions, that brings conditionality into question. As other Members have said, conditionality has been a long-standing feature of welfare benefit entitlements since they were introduced at the beginning of the last century, and in the United Kingdom access to employment benefit specifically has always been conditional on recipients’ being involuntarily unemployed and available for work. Sanctions have been a feature of the JSA since it was introduced in 1996 and they were continued under Labour as well as the coalition Government.

Nor is the UK alone in imposing sanctions; it is the norm in most countries to have conditions placed on receiving benefits. France, for instance, imposes sanctions if a jobseeker refuses two reasonable offers of work. Germany also imposes sanctions, as do the Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark and Norway. A recent study covering international evidence from Germany showed sanctions increase the probability of leaving the welfare system for employment by over 50%. Another study in the Netherlands showed they increased the probability of going into employment by between 36% and 98%.

**Anne McLaughlin:** The hon. Lady said France imposes sanctions if somebody refuses two reasonable offers of jobs. There is a world of difference between that and imposing sanctions on somebody because they are five minutes late for an interview or for any number of other trivial reasons why people have had their money taken off them.

**Helen Whately:** I will come later on to the question about good reasons for sanctioning somebody. We do have to be careful. Examples have been given in this House, and we will have seen this in our own casework, where the reasons do not appear to be good reasons and sometimes they are indeed errors, but we should not base policy on those specific individual examples, although what we should do, as we all do, is follow up on those individual cases and make sure that where errors have been made they are addressed. That is exactly what the appeals system does.

**Angela Crawley:** I have a copy of the Bill, and the hon. Lady may wish to have one to hand. It states:

> “Before sanctions or reductions…may be imposed…an assessment of the relevant circumstances”

> or “conditions…found to be satisfied”

are required. That is what the Bill asks for. Will the hon. Lady speak to the Bill itself?

**Helen Whately:** I also have a copy of the Bill to hand and the explanatory notes, and that is indeed what I am speaking about.

I wanted to make sure, however, that I had laid the groundwork on the important role sanctions play in a fair benefits system that is supporting everyone who can work to get into work. That not only reduces the number of people relying on other people’s earnings for income, and not only helps give businesses and public services a much needed supply of workers, but it is generally a good thing for the individuals involved, because we know that work is generally good for us.

A recent paper by the Royal College of Psychiatrists called “Work and mental health” observed that although work can be a stressor for some people in some circumstances, a comprehensive review of the research shows that work is beneficial to health and wellbeing. It says that when people without work are re-employed they have an improvement in health and wellbeing, while further unemployment leads to deterioration. A lack of work is detrimental to health and wellbeing, and the health status of people of all ages who move off welfare benefits improves.

We also know children in working households have better outcomes in academic attainment, training and future employment. Work provides a route out of poverty for families and improves children’s wellbeing and life chances as fewer will grow up in workless households. One of the great successes since 2010 has been the fall in the number of children living in workless households, so there are fewer children living in a household where there is often no routine, no rhythm of work, and no role model showing work is something we can, and should, do.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South mentioned her visit to a jobcentre in South Thanet as part of her work as a member of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions. I have also visited jobcentres in Maidstone and Sittingbourne that serve my constituents and have observed the hard work the staff do to help the people who come to them to get into work. I have been very impressed by my conversations with the work coaches and the active and sincere interest they take in helping their clients get into work—and their celebrations when people succeed, particularly those facing a real challenge to get into work.

**Mhairi Black:** I appreciate what the hon. Lady is saying, and ask her to join me in trying to get that same experience in those jobcentres to become the norm throughout the UK? This Bill seeks to spread that consistency and good quality of staff throughout the UK.

**Helen Whately:** I agree with the hon. Lady that it would be good to have a consistently high standard of support in jobcentres across the country. I do not agree, however, that a Bill is the right way to achieve that. There are other ways of achieving improvement across all the sectors of our public services. I have done an enormous amount of healthcare work, as she might
know, and I do not believe that legislating from the top is necessarily the right way to reduce variation and bring everyone up to the level of the best. There are many ways of doing that that do not involve legislation.

Peter Dowd: I want to ask a specific question about the Bill. Clause 1 states:

“Before sanctions or reductions (“sanctions”) may be imposed on a person in receipt of social security benefits which will have the effect of reducing or restricting those benefits—

(a) an assessment of the relevant circumstances of the person must be carried out, and

(b) conditions in this Act found to be satisfied.”

What is the problem with that principle?

Helen Whately: I am going to deal with that point later in my remarks. As I was saying a moment ago to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South, legislation is not always the right way to achieve improvement. Personally, I believe that, where possible, it is better to give those who work in the public sector greater autonomy to do a really good job. That gives people an enormous amount of motivation, because they usually go into those jobs because they want to make a difference.

Kevin Foster: Does my hon. Friend agree that the example cited by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South is bringing legislation when going through some processes. MPs also play an important role. I am currently supporting two constituents in their appeals. One was sanctioned after missing an appointment because they could not read their appointment card and another was sanctioned on the grounds that they did not use the right website to look for a job. We know that there are times when the system does not work as it should and we can support constituents who are going through the appeal process.

Anne McLaughlin: I thank the hon. Lady for taking another intervention from me. Does she agree that the vast majority of people will not go to their MP to ask for support? We see a tiny percentage of the people who, like in her example, could not read their appointment cards—there is any of a number of reasons. The others are not getting the support that they need. It is good that the hon. Lady supports those who do come to her, but she is not seeing the majority.

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the value of the relationship that the individual has with their work coach, who can support them when going through some processes. I completely agree with my hon. Friend. He mentioned the jobcentre in South Thanet that was doing really well shows that this is not an issue that requires legislation? This is about ensuring that there is consistent management throughout the system, which does not require a new Bill.

Helen Whately: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. He mentioned the jobcentre in South Thanet, and I want to correct the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South that was not far from there, and I know that South Thanet has enormous challenges as a result of deprivation. It is not only the most challenged area of Kent but the 35th most deprived area in England and Wales. There are lovely parts of South Thanet, but it is not normal to describe it as leafy and affluent, as she appeared to do.

I have seen how the very good jobcentres around my constituency provide personalised, tailored support. For example, they might help an individual to find the right childcare to enable them to get into work. They might also help people living in rural areas to overcome transport challenges. That personalised service is possible in the current system because of the level of autonomy and responsibility given to work coaches, and I would be wary of any legislation that might reduce their ability to tailor their support to individuals.

I have already acknowledged that the system is not perfect. No one would suggest that a system providing support to thousands of people could be perfect. One strength of the system is that it has been designed specifically to keep decision making local and to take account of an individual’s circumstances. It offers flexibility, and where there is flexibility there will be some variation. There is work to be done to ensure that the variations are not too great and to bring all jobcentres up to the level of the best, but that is not a reason to legislate nationally. As we know, when mistakes are made, there is a right of appeal.

Mims Davies: I support my hon. Friend’s point. Investigations by my team sometimes lead to grave concerns. Caseworkers around the House are constantly doing work on the inconsistencies in the system and the opportunities to improve it. In a long process, the failure to provide information and the necessary documentation and attend assessments is often part of the issue. Where they exist, local relationships are important when trying to unpick why people have got into such situations.

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the value of the relationship that the individual has with their work coach, who can support them when they could not read their appointment card and another was sanctioned on the grounds that they did not use the right website to look for a job. We know that there are times when the system does not work as it should and we can support constituents who are going through the appeal process.

Anne McLaughlin: I thank the hon. Lady. Does she agree that the majority of people will not go to their MP to ask for support? We see a tiny percentage of the people who, like in her example, could not read their appointment cards—there is any of a number of reasons. The others are not getting the support that they need. It is good that the hon. Lady supports those who do come to her, but she is not seeing the majority.

Helen Whately: It is impossible to know how many people do not go to their MP, but I make my best efforts to be as accessible as possible to my constituents so that people know that they can come to me for help. What I find when following up on individual cases with the DWP, whether relating to sanctions or other problems with the benefit system, is that it is extraordinarily responsive and willing to review cases and reverse decisions that turn out to be flawed. I am reasonably confident that the DWP steps up and corrects mistakes when they are made.

Hannah Bardell: I cannot help but notice a deep irony in the hon. Lady’s comments. She cites examples of where the system has failed and of when her constituents have not been served well, and my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South is bringing forward a Bill that will help all our constituents and help the system to be fairer. How can she not see that irony and not support the Bill?

Helen Whately: I wonder whether the hon. Lady has been listening to what I have been saying. I think I have recognised that the system has problems. Mistakes will be made in any system of such a scale, but that does not mean that the answer is to impose some more top-down legislation. It is better to try to improve how the system...
works and to support jobcentres that might not be doing so well to come up to the level of those that are doing best.

Kevin Foster rose—

Mhairi Black rose—

Helen Whately: I will happily give way to my hon. Friend.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend is being generous with her time to both Government and Opposition Members. The key point is that the NAO report will be considered by the Public Accounts Committee, which will then produce recommendations. We keep returning to the fact that what is in the Bill would still be subject to discretion. We are talking about management issues and ensuring consistency and they do not require a new law.

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will now happily take a short intervention from the hon. Lady.

Mhairi Black: I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Lady for allowing me to intervene. First, I am more than happy for this Bill to be looked at and to have different inputs, so the Government should support it in principle and we can then thrash out in Committee the technicalities of how it can be implemented. Secondly, if the Government are genuinely interested in listening, it might be an idea for the hon. Lady to speak to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. I have been trying for weeks to get a meeting with him to discuss the Bill, but I am yet to have even a reply.

Helen Whately: My experience is that the Government are genuinely listening and, as we have heard in many examples today, have repeatedly responded to recommendations about improving the system. There is a continual process of listening and improving. But, no, I do not agree with the principle of the Bill, which is to legislate to address what are essentially problems with the management and implementation of the current system.

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I commend her for thanking the staff in my own constituency of Louth and Horncastle. Clause 1 (1)(a) says that “an assessment of the relevant circumstances of the person must be carried out”. Does that not happen already?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend is right that those circumstances are considered already, so much of what is in the Bill duplicates what is already done, and is included in extensive guidance to work coaches.

Peter Dowd: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Whately: I wish to move on now to speak about mental health.

Peter Dowd: Just briefly, please.

Helen Whately: I will give way briefly.

Peter Dowd: The hon. Lady says that legislation should not be introduced when it is not necessary, but the Government are poking their noses in all sorts of places where they should not be, so why not here? She does not like legislation, but what about a code of conduct setting out the procedures, tests and standards to be followed and applied in carrying out assessments? What is wrong with a code of conduct laid down via regulation?

Helen Whately: As I literally just mentioned, there are already extensive guidelines, so why add to them with another code of conduct? It is simply duplication.

I wish to move on to mental health. I am chair of the all-party group for mental health, and I recognise that there have been particular problems with sanctions being imposed on people with poor mental health. We know that people with mental health problems have been disproportionately affected by sanctions, partly because of the complex and fluctuating nature of those conditions, and that sanctions have caused them a great deal of stress and anxiety.

Mind, the mental health charity, has made the point about the great number of people with mental health conditions who have been receiving sanctions. In its evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee in 2014, it talked about the problems with the way that people with mental health problems were being supported in the benefits system, and those problems persist. We know that an individual’s mental health problems are not always well understood by the people in the jobcentres, and that some of the activities required of them as conditions for receiving benefits can be inappropriate and are sometimes thought to move them further away from work. That can be the case despite the fact that people with mental health conditions frequently very badly want to work.

Efforts are already being made to support people with mental health problems into work. Work coaches already receive guidance specifically on how they can best support people with mental health conditions. For instance, the definition of people regarded as “at risk” now includes those with mental health conditions, so hardship payments can be expedited. In recognising the challenge for people with mental health problems getting into work, the Government have recently published a Green Paper, “Improving Lives”, which is a joint effort between the Department of Health and the Department for Work and Pensions. I very much welcome it, as it recognises that there is a large employment gap between those in good health and those with long-term illnesses—physical and mental—and it sets out a series of proposals to try to improve that situation. One proposal seeks to improve the support for people with mental health conditions, including developing the employment offer alongside talking therapies, enhanced training for work coaches to support people with mental health conditions, more disability employment advisers, and personal support packages offering better tailored employment support for people with health conditions. That set of proposals must be a reminder to everyone here how committed the Government are to helping people with health conditions
into work, particularly those with mental health conditions. The Government are doing an enormous amount to help people in these situations. The Green Paper is very much part of a common theme of the Government listening, responding to the situation and trying to make the system better.

On the other actions the Government are taking, we have heard that they accepted the recommendations of the Oakley review. The Work and Pensions Committee, in its recent follow-up review, said:

“We welcome DWP’s acceptance of the Oakley Review’s findings, and the steps that it has taken towards implementation of the Review’s recommendations.”

The Government have accepted many of the recommendations in the Select Committee’s follow-up report, including trialling the yellow card system, so claimants will have 14 days’ warning before they are sanctioned, and we will soon hear how that has gone. The Government have been issuing comprehensive guidance to staff to improve awareness of how JSA conditions can be varied to take account of the claimant’s physical or mental health condition and caring responsibilities. The Government have also provided for claimants to agree with their work coach any restrictions in their pattern of availability and/or in the type and hours of work they are capable of doing, as long as the restrictions are reasonable in light of their condition. Therefore, all JSA claimants should have conditionality requirements that are tailored to their specific circumstances. As more people move on to universal credit, more will benefit from its even more tailored approach.

To conclude, given all that is being done to improve the system we have—a system that is rightly designed with a level of flexibility to allow for improvement—the Bill is unnecessary and unhelpful. It is unnecessary because it seeks to legislate for things the Government are already doing. For instance, there is guidance that requires an assessment to be carried out of whether hardship payments are appropriate. There is also a whole set of guidance about things that would count as good reasons for a claimant not to attend an appointment or make their Work programme commitments. Those good reasons include things such as homelessness, travel time, domestic violence, bullying, harassment, mental health conditions and learning difficulties.

I could go on, but, as has been said, that list is not intended to be exhaustive, and it gives scope for judgment on the part of the decision maker. Critically, the system we have is intended to support and enable work coaches to give flexible support to the individuals they are helping into work. It is intended to give some autonomy and responsibility to jobcentres in supporting people into work.

What we should not try to do where a system does not work perfectly is always to centralise and always to legislate. It is better to persist with an approach that is about improving the way the service works on the ground. My experience of work coaches is that they are thoughtful and doing their absolute best for the individuals they are trying to help into work, and I absolutely support them. What they have told me they need more than anything is time to spend with the individuals they are supporting. What they do not need is more complexity, more legislation and more rules that might get them into legal knots. Let us give them the support and the time to do the best possible job by the individuals they are helping into work.

1.18 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Today started so well. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) took us on an incredible journey through the sanctions system, explaining why we need the Bill to pass, and many of my colleagues and many Labour Members made really powerful interventions—but then things just started to go wrong. I am standing here feeling like I am banging my head on a brick wall. I feel powerless. As an MP, I feel that I can do nothing to get the message through and to make people understand. If I feel powerless, depressed and, to be honest, close to tears at times, how on earth must somebody who actually has no power and who is at the mercy of this Government when they are using the benefits system be feeling? I do not even want to make this speech, but I will anyway.

As MPs, we often have to manage the expectations of our constituents. I would say that I am pretty good at fighting for them, sometimes tooth and nail—as no doubt are many others who have talked about supporting people in difficult situations—but we have to let them know that we do not have a magic wand. If I did have a magic wand and could make it do something today, I would get rid of the pernicious sanctions in the benefit system, because they are cruel and unnecessary.

I always say that the Conservative party knows the cost of everything and the value of absolutely nothing, but the sanctions do not even tick the Conservative box of being cost-effective. The irony is that, despite all their clamouring to repose themselves as the party of working people—that is even more laughable—the Tories are simply showing their true colours by allowing the system to persist.

My hon. Friend’s Bill is based, quite rightly, on the premise that having a decent job is in an individual’s interest, as we have heard from the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately). I agree with that, and the vast majority of people will try their level best to get one where one is available. The Government, with their usual deeply cynical view of humankind, have developed this policy based not on their view of the value of work, but entirely on their disdain for those who happen to be without it.

Michael Tomlinson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne McLaughlin: Not yet. I am going to talk about my mother, who is slightly more important to me than the hon. Gentleman. My mother regularly told me—I was a not-too-confident child—that I was as good as anyone else. She said that I was no worse and, being Scottish, no better, but as good. Let me tell those on the Government Benches today—not all of them need to hear this, but most of them do—that the same goes for us all. My constituents, whether they are in work or not, and whatever their reason for being out of work—illness, lack of jobs or a lack of self-confidence—are every bit as good as every one of them. Government Members are not better than my constituents. They
Michael Tomlinson: Truly, I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. She and I have had many discussions and exchanges about this subject, the first almost exactly a year ago. She speaks with great passion, but Government Members have no less compassion than Opposition Members. She has mentioned her constituents, but all our constituencies have examples such as those that she has cited. She spoke a few moments ago about the principle of sanctions. Will she be crystal clear: would she get rid of the sanctions system altogether?

Anne McLaughlin: That is not what we are talking about, but as a special treat for the hon. Gentleman, I will come on to that and be very clear about what I think about the sanctions regime.

Chris Stephens: I remind everyone in the Chamber that the Public and Commercial Services Union, which represents DWP staff, supports the Bill, because too often its “members in DWP are forced to implement the policy against what they know is in the best interests of claimants.”

Anne McLaughlin: That is absolutely right and I completely agree. I am glad that my hon. Friend has brought that up again.

The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) has said that Government Members have as much compassion as Opposition Members. I suppose that depends on his definition of compassion. Was the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) compassionate when he said that people were terrified of getting a job? In other words, he was saying that they are lazy and work shy. Then, when we attacked him for saying that, he sniggered.

Mr Nuttall rose—

Anne McLaughlin: Let me think: do I want to give way to somebody who speaks about my constituents in that way? No, I do not. My constituents who are out of work are every bit as deserving of a decent life as any Government Member. If they agree with that, they need to ask themselves how valued and respected would they feel if someone stood over them, pointing the finger, tutting away, treating them like naughty schoolchildren and taking away their entire income by way of punishment for minor misdemeanours. Except they cannot imagine that, because most of them—I take the point made by the hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns) about being unemployed—have been nowhere near that kind of life. Well, lucky them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Anne McLaughlin: Who wants to come in?

Hannah Bardell: I thank my hon. Friend for deeming me worthy to be given way to. On contrasting lifestyles, does she share my disappointment and alarm about the fact that we can have legislation that targets some of the poorest people in society, but we cannot find the legislative means to tackle people such as Philip Green who have stolen workers’ pensions but who are happy to keep their own yachts and who are taking away from people at the bottom of our society?

Anne McLaughlin: Absolutely. Without wanting to put words in my hon. Friend’s mouth, I wonder whether she is suggesting that there is a bit of political ideology behind all this.

The Bill does the best that we can do, working within the system. The Government cannot really argue with what is proposed, because they claim that they do it anyway. They claim that they already take people’s circumstances into account. If that is the case, they should just agree to the Bill. The hon. Member for Bournemouth West said that he would not support the Bill because my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South had said that she was opposed to sanctions, full stop. I want to know how supporting the Bill is going to end the sanctions regime. It is not; it is going to make the regime a little bit more humane, but there is, sadly, nothing in the Bill that will end the sanctions regime.

Conor Burns rose—

Anne McLaughlin: I will let the hon. Gentleman come in if he will answer my question. Why is he not supporting the Bill? He said that he would not do so because the Bill will end the sanctions regime. Nothing in the Bill says that it will, so why will he not support it?

Conor Burns: There are very good reasons not to support the Bill that do not relate to the comments that the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) made about her approach to sanctions in general. Much of the Bill duplicates what already happens, and it would increase bureaucracy. I have also made the point that the Government have listened consistently, and they have improved and changed things. It might be a timely moment for the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) to fulfil her promise to answer my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) about her approach to sanctions in principle.

Anne McLaughlin: I am going to repeat what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). The staff at the DWP are supporting the Bill. They want clarity, and they think that they do not have it. They are on the frontline doing the job, so if they think that they do not have that clarity, we should listen to them.

Mhairi Black: Is my hon. Friend frustrated, as I am, about the fact that Government Members seem to be applauding themselves for being so good at listening, but they have not listened for the last three hours, while we have told them how the system is not working and why we need the Bill to formalise what should be happening?

Anne McLaughlin: Absolutely. As I said at the start, I feel as though I am banging my head off a brick wall. In fact, I think that that might be a better use of my time.
If we are already doing this, the requirement in the Bill for someone’s caring responsibilities to be taken into account when considering a sanction happens already, does it? Tell that to my constituent Claire, a single parent who was summoned to an interview with the jobcentre on a day the following week at 3 pm, the exact time that her six-year-old gets out of school. She asked whether the meeting could be changed to 3.30. No. Could it be changed to earlier in the day? No. Could it be changed to another day? No, it had to be on that day at 3 o’clock, the time that she needed to pick up her child from school. She said, “Should I leave my child there, or should I take my child out early?” She was told, “We don’t care, as long as you get here, and if you do not get here at 3 o’clock on that day, we are sanctioning you.” Were her caring responsibilities taken into account? No. I do not want to hear that that was an incorrect decision or an isolated case. I am sick of hearing that. It was not an isolated case, because we hear about this all the time. I could talk about it until midnight and I would not get through, such is the number of times I have heard about it.

Hannah Bardell: I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous in giving way. When it comes to the system not working, does she agree that we have heard about very many cases and it is quite clear that Conservative Members are not listening? A constituent of mine, who had Parkinson’s and who fell twice coming to my office, had been sanctioned—against the DWP’s own recommendations that people with degenerative diseases should be treated through a paper process and not be subjected to interviews. Twice I wrote to the DWP, but only when I brought his case to this Chamber was it properly dealt with. That is not how the system should work, and the Bill would address that.

Anne McLaughlin: Absolutely. I congratulate my hon. Friend for Paisley and Renfrewshire South on proposing this Bill, and I thank her on behalf of many of my constituents. If the Bill is successful, it will provide some protection. If not, it will at least have raised the issue again, and people out there will know that somebody in here cares about what happens to them.

I will start—I say “start,” but I have been going on for quite a while—by offering the treat that the hon. Member for Bournemouth West is looking for by arguing against the entire sanctions regime. I challenge him to respond. It is academics. I will share their findings, and let us see whether Government Members have actual evidence to the contrary—not opinions, but evidence. Thirdly, I will make the moral argument, and here Government Members can make a counter-argument because we all have a different moral compass—morality can be subjective, a matter of opinion. My opinion, for what it is worth, is that anybody who thinks it is right that we sanction the benefits of people who are already in poverty needs their compass reprogrammed pronto.

Patrick Grady: I thank my hon. Friend, who is my MP, for giving way. Is it not ironic that we interrupted today’s debate to talk about the UK’s response to global poverty and the sustainable development goals? Does she recognise, as I hope the Minister does, that the Government have a duty to meet those sustainable development goals and eradicate poverty here at home, too? In fact, as we have heard in all the testimony today, the sanctions regime makes that poverty worse.

Anne McLaughlin: I agree with everything my constituent says. On the financial argument, let us look at the hidden costs. We do not know how much those hidden costs amount to, but it does not take a genius.

Mr Nuttall: The hon. Lady has just said that we do not know the costs. Earlier in this debate, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) suggested that the explanatory notes contain figures on the cost of the Bill. I have looked again at those explanatory notes, just in case I had missed it, but it turns out that I had not missed anything. All the notes say is that, in relation to clause 9 on financial provision, “The Bill will require a money resolution to cover increased expenditure under the Bill.”

There would clearly be increased expenditure. When the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) talks about the costs, will she explain how much the increased expenditure will be?

Anne McLaughlin: If it is in order for me to say so, that is the last time I will let the hon. Gentleman intervene. When there is expenditure, it is about political choices. I choose to support people who are at their lowest, and I choose not to pay £400 million to redecorate Buckingham Palace. As he knows, I was talking about the long-term hidden costs.

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. She is contrasting supporting the most vulnerable with paying for Buckingham Palace. I speak on behalf of my constituents, and their median salary is £480 a week. I am not talking about Buckingham Palace, I am talking about being fair to people in my constituency who earn £480 a week. I am sure she agrees that that is not a great deal of money, and those people require fairness, just like the vulnerable people who Members on both sides of the House have mentioned.

Anne McLaughlin: That reminds me of a constituent who wrote to me about his benefits being sanctioned for 13 weeks and about how he is now back in work and how he hates benefits scroungers because they caused the sanctioning to happen.

Victoria Atkins: It does.

Anne McLaughlin: Will the hon. Lady let me develop my argument? That is just about turning people with very little against people with nothing. My point is that the Member for Louth and Horncastle—
Victoria Atkins: The hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle.

Anne McLaughlin: The hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle, because the most important thing in this debate is that I say “hon. Member”, is it not? She said that she is not talking about Buckingham Palace, but her Government are, and she is supporting the Government to redecorate Buckingham Palace, while saying that we cannot support people.

The other thing is that the people on £480 a week may well be unemployed at some point and may well face benefit sanctions.

Victoria Atkins: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne McLaughlin: No, I will not let the hon. Lady in again.

It does not take a genius to work out that it will cost more if we put people out on the street. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South cited the figure from Crisis, which has done some studies. It found that 21% of the people it spoke to said that they became homeless as the result of a sanction. How much is it going to cost to rehouse people and to deal with the health and mental health problems that result from their having nothing, losing their home and being on the street? All sorts of figures are being batted around, but according to a story in Scotland’s Daily Record, the National Audit Office has said that, when the figures are added up, it costs £135 million more per year to implement benefits sanctions than we save by them. I think that that proves the financial argument.

On the academic argument, I have a report on welfare conditionality from the Universities of Glasgow and York. I am happy to send it to people if they want to read it. The report shows that conditionality in the welfare system does not work, if by “working” we mean that it helps people to move into employment. It does not help people into employment. The first wave of findings found that, in all the research on the impact of the current sanctioning regime, only one individual thought that sanctioning made them more active, which is less than 2% of those interviewed. Later, I will read out what somebody said.

Patrick Grady: The hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) mentioned the need for a money resolution if this Bill is to progress further, but the Government have not tabled a money resolution for the last private Member’s Bill that was approved by the House. Even if we have a vote and the House gives this Bill a Second Reading, there is no guarantee that the Government will let it progress any further.

Anne McLaughlin: That is absolutely correct, and what does that say about the democracy of this place?

The fact is that most of the respondents in the research were already keen to find work—most people are—and even the practitioners who are imposing the sanctions regime are sceptical about its benefits. As we have already heard, DWP staff are under incredible pressure. When I spoke about the aspirations they have to reach, the hon. Member for Bournemouth West challenged me to provide the name of the whistleblower who told me all about this, and then just hope that they stay in employment. I will not do that, but I will point him to an article on a journalist’s website called “Common Space”, in which Fraser Stewart talks about how he gave up his job and became unemployed because he could not bear to keep up with the targets or aspirations that were set for him. The hon. Gentleman can have a look at that, although I am surprised he does not know about it already.

I was glad to read the research to back up what I have always known, which is that conditionality does not work. I do not think people have to be that bright to see why it does not work to have somebody standing over them telling them, “You must do it”. I wonder how many of the Conservative Members who have spoken today require a stick to be wielded over them for them to go out to find work. [ Interruption. ] They have the Whips—that is a very good point—but how many of them went out into the world of work and said, “I’m not going to bother doing this”. What makes them so special, because they will all say, “No, no, I always wanted to work”? I was always keen to work, but so are most people. Most people have aspirations.

Hannah Bardell: I promise my hon. Friend that I am intervening on her for one last time. Is she aware of this year’s “Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, support and behaviour change” project report? It states that “the impacts of benefit sanctions are universally reported by welfare service users as profoundly negative.” It also found that sanctions have pushed some people into committing survival crime. Is not the fact that people in our society are pushed into committing crimes just so that they can survive a shame and a stain on our society?

Anne McLaughlin: That is an absolute shame on our society, and it costs more money, because when people commit crimes, we have to detect them and punish criminals.

I want to talk about a friend—[ Interruption. ] Wheesht! If an hon. Member wants to intervene, they can do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I will just make it clear that the hon. Lady is quite right in saying “wheesht”. We cannot have sedentary interventions.

Anne McLaughlin: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I want to speak about a friend who has been through the system and tell Members what was done to her. She asked to change her signing on day because she could not find work and wanted to set up her own business. She was given a fantastic opportunity to present to 60 people in the industry that she wanted to go into. She could not have had a better opportunity, so she asked to change her signing on day. They said no. She said, “But I’ll lose this opportunity.” They said, “Tough.” She said, “But I have to go.” They said, “That’s fine, but we will be cutting your benefits if you do.” The Minister is looking perplexed, which is how he looked at my Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant).

Peter Grant: Honourable Friend.

Anne McLaughlin: May I just say that I think everybody is honourable in case I forget to say it again?
These are not isolated cases. My friend could not do that presentation and had to sign on because she could not afford to lose unlimited amounts of that meagre income. She had to refuse that business opportunity. The damage it did to her reputation and self-confidence was incredible. She could not say to the person inviting her to the conference, “I’m awfully sorry but I have to go and sign on that day,” because she was positioning herself as a serious business person. She lied, but did so unconvincingly and was offered no more opportunities. The impact on her self-confidence and ability to apply for further jobs or develop her business was dramatic. I know that because the person I am talking about is me.

That was only three years ago. The decision did not make me any more likely to find work; it made me far less likely to find work. I felt powerless and my confidence went. I continued to apply for jobs, but how many jobs will someone be offered when the words they write make it quite clear that they are not feeling it and do not have the confidence to do the job? If I have time, I will tell a story of being unemployed that shows why conditionality does not work, and what does work.

I have no notes on the moral argument because it should go without saying. Let us take one single person—this is not about parents who are struggling to feed their kids—who is living on £73 a week. Does any hon. Member imagine that that is easy or manageable?

Victoria Atkins: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne McLaughlin: No. I want to talk about the people who need to be talked about.

It is a struggle. If that person’s washing machine breaks down, they cannot get it fixed on £73 a week. They have holes in the bottom of their shoes and it is raining non-stop—perhaps that is just a Glasgow thing—so they cannot afford to buy new shoes. They cannot afford to be part of what their friends and family are part of. The Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) said that they can apply for 60% of their benefits, which means they can get £40 a week if they know about it and if they are successful. They cannot live on £73 a week, never mind £40 a week. That is immoral. The only reason for sanctioning is to say to people, “You are too lazy and you are workshy.” It is punishment and that is all it is.

I had bad and good experiences. My good experience was that I had an adviser who had faith in me. He built my confidence. I had already been a Member of the Scottish Parliament. It was not as if I was lacking in confidence, but it goes instantly when people are treated as if they are children, or as if they are work shy and do not want to go out and earn their own living. Nobody wants not to work. There are reasons why people do not apply for work, and we need to investigate them. They might be lacking in confidence. I have met so many people who say, “Who would employ me?” So they are not applying for jobs because they think, “Who would employ me?” Nobody is helping them and people are taking their money away from them, so that they lose even more confidence. It is unacceptable and it just does not work.

I have not seen the film, “I, Daniel Blake”; I just need to go to a constituency surgery; I do not need to see the film. However, I will see it and we should all thank Ken Loach for making it—I want everyone to see it. I am not saying that members of the Conservative party do not know anything about real life—I would not say that—but for those who have not experienced anything like this situation, please go and watch it. Government Members said it was fiction but it is based on fact.

Michael Tomlinson: You have not seen it.

Anne McLaughlin: I have not seen it—I do not have to see it.

Michael Tomlinson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne McLaughlin: No, I will not, but I will respond to that point. The hon. Gentleman is saying, “She’s not seen it”—incredulously. I do not need to see it; I have lived it. I do not have to see it, but I will go and see it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South mentioned our top-notch researcher, Tanya. Tanya told me that she went to see “I, Daniel Blake”, and came away thinking, “What is the point of any of this that we’re doing?” Are Government Members proud that they have made her feel that way, that they have made her feel as if she is powerless to help anybody? She was in tears. I guess that is what the sanctions are all about. They are about grinding people down, so that they know who the bosses are, making them know exactly how powerless they are—

Michael Tomlinson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne McLaughlin: I will not give way to somebody with lots of power; I want to talk about people with no power. The reality is that the true motivation behind these sanctions is political ideology that says, “We are better than you”.

Now, if this Bill is not passed today—I am guessing that we will not get it through today—[Interruption.] There they go again, Madam Deputy Speaker, telling me that I do not have the right to speak. I am sick of hearing that in this House. It is important that what we are saying to people here is—

Victoria Atkins: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know that passions are running high in the Chamber but I do please ask the hon. Lady to reflect on what we are saying across the Chamber are saying—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. If the hon. Lady is making a point of order, she must make it to the Chair, not to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin). If she wishes to make a point of order, she has the opportunity to do so.

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful and this is the first point of order I have ever made, Madam Deputy Speaker, so forgive me if I do not know the procedure. The hon. Lady has made assertions about what has been said by Government Members, but the things she is asserting simply have not been said. The claims that we have been accussing people on benefits of being scroungers and what she has just said are simply not true.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I appreciate that it is the hon. Lady’s first point of order, but it is not properly a point of order. It is not for the Chair to decide what any
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particular Member can say, but I am quite sure that the hon. Lady for Glasgow North East will temper her speech so as to reflect what has been said, not what might be said, but the hon. Lady has the right to say whatever she likes, within reason, and she is speaking within perfect reason in this House.

Chris Stephens: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Would it be in order to remind Members of the House, including the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), that they should not shout across the Chamber at each other when an hon. Member is speaking?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Again, the hon. Gentleman has made his point. It is not a point of order as such, but I am well aware, and I have already said a few times in this debate, that we must not have sedentary interventions, that people must not shout when they are not taking part in the debate, and I will make sure that they do not do so. At the same time, this is a heated debate on an important subject and I cannot reasonably expect everyone to sit in silence—that would be uncharacteristic.

Also, I have every confidence in the hon. Lady for Glasgow North East being able to conduct this part of the debate with perfect precision and indeed rhetoric.

Anne McLaughlin: If I must, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Somebody does not have to use the words “benefits scrounger” to imply that somebody is a benefits scrounger; they just have to apply vicious sanctions to them because they were five minutes late for an appointment, or because they attended hospital with their wife when she was giving birth.

I will end by sharing the story of two of my constituents, who I met during the election campaign a year and a half ago. I bumped into them and their beautiful two-year-old daughter on the street, and they told me that the day she was born, he went with his wife as she gave birth. Does anyone here think there is anything wrong with that? Does anyone think that the right decision was to say, “Sorry, I’m going to sign on”? He forgot all about it in the euphoria—well, euphoric for him, if not for her—and was at his wife’s side as she gave birth. The following day he went in, euphoric—“I’ve had a baby”—but apologising, and they sanctioned that young couple, and that tiny little baby. Her first ever birthday gift was a six-week sanction—not a single milk token, not a single pound to support that family.

I feel that my language has been as tempered as I can get on this subject. When I hear such stories—it is not an isolated case; I have heard so many like it, as I have said before—I find it difficult to retain a calm demeanour. My priority is to support my constituents. The hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle is looking at me as if to say, “I would never have done that to them”, but she supports a regime that allows it to happen. That is the important point.

1.51 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the lively, considered and very honest speech from the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin), who shared her personal journey. The House is at its best when we share our personal experiences, as we have heard from across the House today.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) on producing the Bill; it was no easy feat. I am sure that many hours and much hard work went into it. It has given Members on both sides of the House a chance to look at the issues, to challenge their views and to question whether there is some lack of understanding. I recognise that for many this is an emotional, difficult and distressing subject. It is important, especially with the introduction of universal credit, that we continue to make sure that the benefits system is not only fair but humane.

I have sat through today’s interventions and passionate speeches, and I have sought to listen and to understand, and I now wish to bring to bear my own experiences, as an MP and a mum, and as somebody who has conducted surgeries and is doing related casework locally. When I meet constituents in peril, I speak to them about benefits assessments and mental health support. As we have heard today, it does not end just at the MP’s office. My staff and I take this support extremely seriously, as do all those who work to provide support, be they those in the local community and charities sector or those working in the local departments. I would like to put on record my huge thanks to all the staff who work in various departments and to my team and all the casework teams getting to the bottom of these matters. We will learn nothing in the House if we do not bring that to bear here.

I have spoken to my casework team this week and reflected on past meetings with constituents, and very often we are talking about constituents who have not attended assessment or interview. We have heard today the many and multifarious reasons why people have not turned up to interview or provided the necessary documentation in time.

It can be heart-breaking to hear that sanctions have been applied in some cases because people were unable to read and write and therefore be a part of the system. If people cannot understand the system and it does not work for them, it can be frightening.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I mentioned earlier that in my constituency, there is great partnership working between the DWP and what is called in Scotland “the community planning process”, through which all partners within a local authority come together. Does the hon. Lady agree that, on reflection, the DWP needs to improve that aspect of its working, not only in my constituency but across the United Kingdom? If the system is to benefit those most in need, does she agree that that needs to happen, rather than, as in my constituency, withdrawing officers from food banks?

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree about the importance of an integrated approach. Last night, I gave out an award at one of my local colleges for one of the most improved maths and English students. Some people who came to the local college were unable to engage with education, let alone a benefits system. We need to understand that people must feel able to participate in the process.

In some cases, my constituents were aware of what they needed to do, but they somehow failed to gain a sense of ownership or an understanding of the process,
It also notes that similar systems can be found throughout the developed world, and Members have mentioned many different countries today. As we have heard, and as I have been at pains to point out, 70% of claimants are more likely to follow the rules if they know that they could be sanctioned—but only if they understand the system.

A system of sanctions is a necessary and well-supported part of our benefits structure. We know that the conditions need to be checked, and that they should be used fairly. I do not think that any Member in any part of the House believes in unfairness, and it should be rooted out.

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend is making a fine and reasoned speech. Does she agree that Conservative Members acknowledge that any system run by human beings is liable to mistakes? I have experience of that myself, because in the early stages of my previous career I used to prosecute cases for the Department for Work and Pensions, and on several occasions I refused to prosecute because I considered that the Department had taken the wrong view. Does my hon. Friend, like me, find it unhelpful and, indeed, a little hurtful when Opposition Members accuse us of not being compassionate? That is not our reason for disagreeing with the Bill; we believe that the current regime should be reviewed, and the Department is doing that.

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for her considered intervention.

Today we have heard about a “postcode sanctions lottery”, about formalising and consistency, and about efforts to ensure that no one falls into the gap. The people who make the decisions will not always be in possession of the full facts, which is why we need a process to examine the sanctions system. The four principles of the Gregg review offer a useful set of tools for assessment of the strength of the policy, and were endorsed in the Oakley review. The additional pillar described in the Oakley review has also provided a clearer recourse in terms of appeal, and that must be welcomed.

We are talking—and have been all day—not about statistics, but about people, livelihoods, aspirations, children, families, homes and security, and that is absolutely right. I strongly believe that this is a listening Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) said what worried her about the Bill was the risk of duplication and pure bureaucracy in a system that would continue to be tweaked and would continue to evolve. That system will have to change to meet new challenges, and there are people in the middle of the process. I know that, in this area as in many others, the Government are listening and proceeding with reform based on constructive criticism and research, and that they are taking a pragmatic stance. I like to think that the Minister, who is a Hampshire neighbour, is always listening, although I see that he is talking to a colleague at the moment.

A new sanctions regime was introduced in 2012 with the important aim of increasing the effectiveness of categorisation. Again, this was about people, not just statistics. The categories were higher, intermediate and lower, depending on whether a transgression had been repeated and on the nature of the fault. I think that that...
was a good reform. Proportional responses mean a system where one size does not fit all, and we have an opportunity to approach people and their personal circumstances differently.

**Michael Tomlinson:** We have heard many examples of hard cases in which things have gone wrong, but the current legislation contains a safety net—a “catch system”. It used to be called good cause, and is now called good reason. The examples that have been cited—such as people who are five minutes late because they missed the bus, or because they were having a baby—are already covered by good cause, or good reason.

**Mims Davies:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. The entire legal system based on common law is about applying the law in a consistent way historically and geographically, so we must make sure that the application of sanctions is consistent.

**Kevin Foster:** I am listening with interest to my hon. Friend’s speech. Does she agree that consistency is key? The NAO talks in its report about bringing in consistency, and that is what a Public Accounts Committee inquiry will do. There will then be a report that can be taken forward.

**Mims Davies:** My hon. Friend makes an important point about consistency, which I absolutely believe the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South is looking for in this process, but we have heard about cases today, from hon. Members across this House, in which there were completely different views and completely different ways of going about things, and that reflects the way our constituents live and work. We can bring in a consistent system, but the reality is we are dealing with different people.

**Peter Grant:** We have heard many comparisons between the sanctions system and the criminal justice system. Consistency in the criminal justice system is helped by the fact that there are strict laws about admissibility of evidence and what the police can do to collect evidence and so forth. Would it not be better to have legislation that enshrines in law some of the steps that can be taken to have consistency in the sanctions system, so that some of the failures the hon. Lady has had to deal with in her constituency office are stopped before they happen and before people get hurt?

**Mims Davies:** I hear the hon. Gentleman, and I genuinely came into this debate with the view that the Bill has some real benefits. However, I believe that better and more up-to-date guidance, rather than legislation via the Department, is the right way to proceed. But I still do believe that through the Bill and this debate we can learn a lot about how sanctions can be operated humanely.

I realise that for those, few in number, who are given sanctions, that makes a big difference to their lives. Those people will be suffering huge hardship because of their sanctions and because certain criteria mean they do not receive safety-net payments. I recognise that 60% of a very small amount of money for those in a very difficult situation is an unpleasant place to be, but this does give us a layer of protection. I have great sympathy with the measures in the Bill limiting the use of higher level sanctions in certain circumstances.

There might be mental health issues, homelessness and caring responsibilities. Just yesterday, I heard from one of my caseworkers that we had managed to deal with a slightly different issue in terms of homelessness: someone was moving from north London, who was without family and who was in a difficult position because of disability. We have managed to get him on to the right level of support in the local area where his friends and family are located. That had been affecting his mental health, and we were all crying when we were speaking and listening to this constituent.

Every single time I meet my constituents, I am moved by the plight people find themselves in, and mental health issues and homelessness issues play a huge part in them. In fact, there were very few sanctions cases in our casework, but where we had intervened and got to the bottom of it we had made progress. I am very pleased the system is working in that way.

As co-chair of the all-party group on carers, I recently led a debate on carers in this House. I am a former carer, supporting my mum and dad, and we know the enormous sacrifice the 6.5 million carers undertake daily for their loved ones. Two million more people a year will come into caring responsibilities in some way or other. We need to be able to reflect that in the way we support our constituents.

There is a quiet carers army on which all of us depend, which is why I always speak to my constituents about making sure they are aware of the benefits system and are making sure they get all the support they need. The benefit sanctions system should consistently recognise that people have caring responsibilities, and if it does not we need to ensure that the Government pour support into this area, just as they are in the area of mental health. The pledge to provide an additional £1 billion for mental health provision by 2020-21 is welcome. Mental health issues reach every part of the way in which the state operates, including the sanctions regime. I have had a constituency case in which the parents of a young lad with mental health issues had a problem with sanctions. We managed to deal with it because the way through to him was via his parents. They were able to come to me and ask for help.

Every one of us in this House who is a former councillor will be aware of the link between mental health and homelessness, and of the urgent decisions that have to be made in order to get people into a place of safety urgently.

**Michael Tomlinson:** My hon. Friend has mentioned homelessness and mental health. She might have heard in a previous intervention that the Government are already moving to extend hardship payments to at-risk individuals. Does she welcome that development, given that it will help the groups she is describing in her powerful speech?

**Mims Davies:** That is absolutely the spirit in which I am approaching the Bill. I do not want to pick holes in it, because it has clearly been introduced with fortitude and passion based on casework. Bringing these matters to our attention today has given us an opportunity to have a really welcome debate and for all Members to consider how these things are working in their constituencies and bring any issues to the Minister. However, I am not sure that another layer of bureaucracy and legislation is the way to deal with these matters.
[Mims Davies]

For me, this is an instance—[Interruption.] I shall turn my phone off. I think it was a constituent calling. This is an instance that highlights the need for a greater understanding of mental health issues. We have heard about caring responsibilities. I am here today juggling family commitments. They include the need to be here as well as in my constituency, and finding a way to look after the dog. The dog is always the hard bit. No one can ever get an appointment at a time that suits, and we need to ensure that people who work with benefit claimants understand that what might seem a small challenge to us can be a very big challenge indeed to someone who is in peril.

I have great sympathy for people whose caring responsibilities, mental health issues or homelessness create a situation that attracts a sanction. It would be uncaring of us to penalise carers through the system, because this country relies heavily on them. It would be out of sync with the rest of Government policy for us not to give due consideration to people with mental health needs, and I welcome the recent announcement that homeless claimants with mental health problems will be able to access hardship payments within 14 days.

As we can see, a new policy is being trialled without the need for a Bill, and I am sure that all Members will be keen to read the outcomes of the sanctions warning system trial. I hope that the evaluations will be available for us to study soon. Giving claimants notice and an opportunity to explain the reasons behind a breach is a fair way of approaching the sanctions system. I understand that we can expect the final report around April next year, and I look forward to seeing how the trial is going and how these measures could be taken up nationally.

We must not lose sight of the overall objectives of the programmes. They are designed to ensure that people have the stability of a job and a pay packet, and that we never again see children being brought up in homes where getting a job is discouraged. We must always remember not only the claimants but those who pay in to the system. There are 800,000 fewer workless households today than there were in 2010, and unemployment in EASTLEIGH has fallen by 63% in that time. I welcome the continued support and focus that the Government are providing for our society so that people can have the security of a pay packet and so that it always pays to work.

Wherever I find injustice in the benefits and sanctions system, I vow to bring it to the attention of Ministers. I have spoken for 20 minutes on this important Bill and, on balance, the most important thing is to make things fair for those who claim and those who work. We must be sure that the Bill does not add to the bureaucracy and make things more difficult for those facing challenges to go on to better things after receiving support.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South once again, and I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

2.15 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) for bringing this important Bill to Parliament. It is detailed and compelling and it is crystal clear about the need for a code of conduct and consistency of application. Let me be clear from the outset, because I have heard this questioned too often in the Chamber today: while the SNP would like a complete review of the UK Government’s sanctions system, this small Bill is about making the system fairer with cross-party support. It seeks to build on the good practice that is already happening in some jobcentres, where advisers look at the circumstances of an individual when imposing a sanction. The Bill will ensure that that happens across the board, protecting the most vulnerable in society from being pushed into absolute poverty.

Make no mistake: the UK Government’s current benefit sanctions regime is brutally draconian and undignified. An individual can be sanctioned so heavily that they have nothing left to feed themselves or their family, in effect becoming destitute through state-sponsored starvation. At a St Andrew’s Day dinner last night, I was reminded that, less than 200 years ago, Dickens was a journalist up in the Press Gallery. He got sick and fed up of debates in here about whether or not they needed to legislate for the poor, and I am shocked today to hear that we again do not need legislation for the most vulnerable in our society. Dickens quit his job and went on to write some of the most seminal works of the terrible and draconian Victorian period. For those who have not seen Ken Loach’s “I, Daniel Blake”, it is deeply compelling and reminds me of the spirit of Dickens. While some think it to be a work of fiction, it will go on to teach future students and others who look back at history about this appalling time in this country.

Michael Tomlinson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Law: No, I will not, owing to the short amount of time left. I do apologise.

Only a couple of years ago, my constituency of Dundee was named sanctions city. Today, we might as well call it bloody marvellous sanctions city, because I have been hearing so much appeasement about sanctions and about how great they are—until someone is on the receiving end. Common outcomes include eviction threats, increased debt, anxiety and ill health, resulting in some constituents having to turn to petty theft. There is clear evidence of a link between the use of food banks and benefit sanctions, and I am saddened to say that Dundee also has Scotland’s busiest food bank. The Trussell Trust estimates that benefits issues account for 44% of all referrals—nearly half. Everyone in the House should hang their head in shame and do something about that.

We should protect the Bill and ensure that it progresses. There is a story behind every statistic. In Dundee, a woman with learning difficulties ended up with two concurrent 13-week sanctions after DWP staff declared she that she was not filling in her “work commitment booklet” properly. I recently chaired a Trussell Trust event at which I met a single mother whose benefits would be cut if she failed to send her husband’s death certificate to DWP every six weeks. Imagine the grief that that woman was feeling and how it must feel to be hounded for that kind of documentation on a regular basis.

It is no exaggeration to say that the UK Government are treating people like criminals; but if they were criminals, they would be treated more fairly. When a
court imposes a fine on an individual for a driving offence, for example, their basic rights are protected by court proceedings. There is no expectation that the fine will lead to them being unable to heat their home or feed their children. We do not hear about people committing suicide as a result of a conviction for a driving offence. There is a direct correlation between driving too fast or using a mobile phone when driving and fatal road accidents, but those who commit such offences are penalised less than someone who misses an appointment at the jobcentre because their child was ill. The sanctions system is severe and cruel and so clearly needs to change, and today’s Bill represents positive steps towards that.

As I said earlier, the National Audit Office analysis showed that there was absolutely no evidence that the sanction regime imposed by the DWP has a positive effect on job outcomes, but judging by some of the information coming out today, we are experiencing post-truth politics. It is abundantly clear from the NAO evidence that vulnerable people are more likely to be sanctioned—I am talking about homeless people, those with mental health problems and immigrants with a limited understanding of English. Those are the people who need most help to find jobs, but, rather than being helped, they receive a sanction, and their already fragile situation is further exacerbated. Let me make this crystal clear in plain simple English for those who have not yet read the Bill. First, the claimant’s circumstances have to be assessed. Secondly, a number of conditions set out in the Bill have to be met. These focus on the individual’s situation, in particular the claimant’s caring commitments, whether they are at risk of homelessness, and whether they suffer from a mental or physical health condition. Such difficulties can be intensified—and are intensified—by these cruel sanctions. What this means in practice is that an individual’s situation becomes so dire that they are unable to feed their children. We do not hear about people committing suicide as a result of a conviction for a driving offence.

The Bill will mean that a person in receipt of benefits cannot have their benefits reduced unless two requirements have been met. Let me make this crystal clear in plain simple English for those who have not yet read the Bill. First, the claimant’s circumstances have to be assessed. Secondly, a number of conditions set out in the Bill have to be met. These focus on the individual’s situation, in particular the claimant’s caring commitments, whether they are at risk of homelessness, and whether they suffer from a mental or physical health condition. Such difficulties can be intensified—and are intensified—by these cruel sanctions. What this means in practice is that an individual’s circumstances would be taken into account before—and I underline the word “before”—cutting off their financial support.

In essence, this Bill proposes minor administrative changes, which do no more than humanise a fundamentally unjust and inappropriate system, and formally establish adequate protections for the most vulnerable. Although my SNP colleagues and I would like to see an entire overhaul of the social security system, no matter what area of the country they live in.

The Bill is made up of 11 clauses, which are small administrative changes to the current legislation, and they seek to establish a long overdue code of conduct and official procedures for the current sanctions system. The aim is to end the postcode lottery of sanction regimes operated at different centres, therefore ensuring a fairer system of sanctions for everyone who uses the social security system, no matter what area of the country they live in.

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In essence, this Bill proposes minor administrative changes, which do no more than humanise a fundamentally unjust and inappropriate system, and formally establish adequate protections for the most vulnerable. Although my SNP colleagues and I would like to see an entire overhaul of the social security system, no matter what area of the country they live in.

The Bill is made up of 11 clauses, which are small administrative changes to the current legislation, and they seek to establish a long overdue code of conduct and official procedures for the current sanctions system. The aim is to end the postcode lottery of sanction regimes operated at different centres, therefore ensuring a fairer system of sanctions for everyone who uses the social security system, no matter what area of the country they live in.
Successive Governments have recognised the key role that sanctions have in the benefits system to encourage people to comply with conditions that will help them move into or closer to work. Much work has been undertaken to ensure all those claiming are clear about their responsibilities when claiming benefits and about the potential impact on their benefits if they fail without good reason to complete a requirement they have agreed to undertake.

Imposing a sanction is not done lightly. We invite those facing a sanction to explain exactly why they failed to meet the requirement, and we take all the circumstances into account to determine whether the requirement was reasonable for that individual and whether they had good reason for not meeting it. We do this in each case, and the proposals in the Bill present nothing new in that regard. Indeed, we have removed references in legislation to what constitutes good cause or good reason precisely to ensure that those making decisions can consider every aspect of an individual’s circumstances, not just those prescribed in a list. It would be a step back to return to having that in legislation.

We are confident that the training and guidance available to decision makers give them the tools to make fair and robust decisions. We have a well-established system of hardship provision for claimants—provision that can be accessed by those who are sanctioned. Where a claimant demonstrates they cannot meet their immediate and most essential needs, they can apply for a hardship payment. We tell claimants regularly about the availability of hardship payments, and we have worked hard to ensure that payments are paid within three days. Work coaches identify claimants they feel would be considered vulnerable for hardship purposes and, where a sanction is imposed, they contact them to instigate the hardship process straightaway.

Not only is our approach to sanctioning claimants considered fair, but it is a key factor in improving the employment rate and curtailing unemployment. The Department invests significant resource to help people move quickly into employment. As a result, employment, as the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South will know, is up by 2.75 million since 2010, with the number of workless households at a record low.

Evidence shows that sanctions can have a positive effect on behaviour. In “The Jobcentre Plus Offer: Final evaluation report”, published in November 2013, it was noted that 70% of JSA, and over 60% of ESA, claimants say that sanctions make it more likely they will follow the rules. The recent “Universal Credit at Work” evaluation, from December last year, found that 76% of claimants felt that the potential for universal credit to be stopped or reduced encouraged them to meet their conditions. The same report demonstrates that 72% of claimants agreed that the potential for sanctions meant they were more likely to look for, or take steps to prepare for, work.

In addition, qualitative research found that people perceived the claimant commitment as critical to the upkeep of their claim. They were generally very clear about the time they were required to spend on job-search activity and the need for them to evidence this, and about the fact not fulfilling their requirements could result in a sanction.

If I may, I will start to go through the elements of the Bill. The Bill seeks to amend sections of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 concerning the claimant commitment and sanctions, to introduce measures to check a claimant’s circumstances prior to a sanction being considered. A significant proportion of the measures proposed in the Bill are measures the Department already undertakes through guidance. For example, the Department ensures that health issues, caring responsibilities and homelessness are noted and taken into account when dealing with claimants. We ensure work-related requirements are fully explained when they are set, as well as the action the claimant should take if they fail to complete the requirement, and the potential impact on their benefit if they do not. The fact that the claimant’s circumstances and any information provided by them are considered before a sanction is imposed should also be acknowledged.

A huge amount of work has been undertaken following recommendations from the Work and Pensions Committee and, as has been referenced by a number of my hon. Friends, from Matthew Oakley’s review of benefit sanctions, to ensure that our staff, when setting requirements for benefit claimants, do so reasonably. That is especially true, of course, of claimants who are identified as having complex needs or who require additional support to enable them to access DWP benefits and to use DWP services.

In addition, we ensure that claimants are advised about their conditionality requirements and about the associated consequences if they fail to meet them. At the point of the claim, staff clearly explain to claimants what they have to do and what will happen if they fail to do it. This is followed up in writing with the claimant commitment documentation. We ensure all appointment notifications and notifications to participate in mandatory programmes also include these requirements clearly in writing.

Turning to the contents of the Bill, clause 1—

2.30 pm
The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 24 February 2017.

Business without Debate

Vehicle Noise Limits (Enforcement) Bill

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 13 January.

KeW Gardens (Leases) Bill

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 December.
Civil Service Compensation Scheme

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

2.30 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Welcome, Madam Deputy Speaker, to part 2 of the SNP Patrick Thistle supporters’ day. Part 1 was led superbly by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), who gave a tour de force.

I want to discuss the civil service compensation scheme. May I take this opportunity to refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and to my position as chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group? I also thank the House staff for their excellent briefing on the issue, which I recommend to all Members.

We are finally getting to discuss this issue in the Chamber. After at least three business questions, a point of order, early-day motion 310, which, as of yesterday, has been signed by 109 Members, including representatives from seven political parties and two independent Members, and many requests for a debate, it is a pleasure finally to represent the voice of those who contribute to our public services and who find themselves, through no fault of their own, losing out financially.

On 22 September, the Government set out their formal response to the consultation on the civil service compensation scheme, including proposals that radically reduce that compensation. The issue will affect thousands of loyal civil servants, whose jobs are now at risk as departmental budgets continue to be cut and hundreds of Government offices are earmarked for closure. Areas affected include Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which are experiencing cuts.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): There are thousands of civil servants in my constituency, 750 of whom are residents. Is the hon. Gentleman aware of suggestions that civil service managers are encouraging staff to take redundancy on current compensation terms to help with the downsizing of the civil service, or lose out under the new proposals?

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman is correct to highlight that issue, because that is exactly what is happening. It takes away from our efforts, because we are both opposed to HMRC office closures, but the Government are forcing people to go on older terms rather than the new, drastically reduced terms.

For the benefit of those watching these proceedings, let me provide some background. The civil service compensation scheme is a statutory scheme that provides compensation for loss of office for reasons including compulsory and voluntary redundancy. In July 2009, the then Labour Government set out proposals to reform the scheme in order to control costs and to address elements that may be age-discriminatory. In broad terms, the existing scheme provided severance for those under 50 and early retirement for those aged 50 to 60. The civil service unions opposed the proposed changes on the grounds that they represented a reduction in terms for most members; that they did not adequately compensate those faced with compulsory redundancy; and that they compared unfavourably with other public sector schemes.

In February 2010, the Cabinet Office announced a modified set of proposals on which it had reached agreement with five of the six civil service unions. That agreement limited the maximum payment on compulsory redundancy to three years’ pay, where that led to a payment of no more than £60,000, and to two years’ pay for high earners. Additional protection was provided for those who were closest to retirement. The civil service compensation scheme was amended accordingly. The largest trade union, the Public and Commercial Services Union, opposed the changes and applied for a judicial review. On 11 May, the High Court ruled in favour of PCS and the amendments to the scheme were quashed, with the exception of certain changes designed to address elements that were considered to be age discriminatory.

On 6 July that year, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government said that they would legislate to cap payments at 12 months for compulsory redundancy and 15 months for voluntary redundancy. They hoped to negotiate a permanent and sustainable agreement with the civil service unions, at which point the caps would be withdrawn. The trade unions objected to the proposed caps because they were less than those in other public sector schemes, where a limit of two years’ pay was normal.

The current announcement about changes to the civil service compensation scheme comes just five and a half years after the then Minister Francis Maude imposed changes to the civil service compensation scheme in December 2010, promising that those changes were fair, affordable and right for the long term. It is hard to see what has changed so radically since then to justify this fresh attack on civil servants’ terms and conditions.

The changes can be summarised as follows. There is currently one month’s salary per year of service, but after the proposed changes there will be three weeks’ salary per year of service. There is a cap of 21 months’ salary for voluntary redundancy and voluntary exit, but there would be a cap of 18 months’ salary for voluntary redundancy and 15 months’ salary for voluntary exit if the trade unions were not to accept the offer that has been put to them. There is a cap of 12 months’ salary for compulsory redundancy, but the Government propose to change that to nine months’ salary. There is employer-funded access to the early pension option when individuals reached the minimum pension age of 50, but access to that option will now start at age 55.

The Government propose to cut the cash compensation payment, which means that they will reduce the rate at which compensation accrues for each year of service from one month’s salary, as it is currently, to three weeks’ salary. That will affect those with short and medium service, cutting redundancy payments by 25%. The Government also propose reducing the cap on payments, as I have said, which will drastically reduce payments, for some by as much as 30%.

In addition to changes to compensation payments, the Government propose restricting employer-funded access to early pension. That option is currently given to staff in voluntary redundancy situations who have reached minimum retirement age, which is 50 in the classic and premium schemes and 55 in the nuvos and...
alpha schemes. Staff are offered a compensation payment based on their salary and length of service, or they are offered the option to take their pension, with the employer buying out any actuarial reduction resulting from drawing the pension early. Cabinet Office statistics show that the average value of compensation for the 50 to 54 age group will fall dramatically, by more than 50%, under the new proposals. That demonstrates the profound impact that the reform could have.

Early access to pension has been a popular alternative to the cash lump sum compensation payment for those with long service who are nearing retirement, because it provides a level of security. That is important, because it has been shown that those aged over 50 often find it harder to get a new job, and that if they do, it may be for fewer hours and/or lower pay. We are all concerned, therefore, that restricting that option will create hardship and distress. In some cases, it will result in people relying on benefit payments.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that civil servants in admin and assistance jobs—the ones who are on the front line doing the UK Government’s dirty work—are already paying a high price for Government austerity, having seen pressures rise while headcount has fallen by 37% since 2010?

Chris Stephens: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It is clear that the civil service is reducing. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, for example, is now half the size it was 10 years ago, which is important to note when it is dealing with tax avoidance and all those other issues.

Peter Dowd: In the light of what the hon. Gentleman has said, is this policy not just another kick in the teeth to loyal civil service staff? Over the past few years, they have had substantial pay restraint, huge job cuts and a tax on pensions, on top of the previous changes to the compensation scheme, which he mentioned a few moments ago.

Chris Stephens: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. He is being moderate when he says that the policy is a kick in the teeth. It certainly is, and we need to remember that these civil servants deliver precious public services every day, and they deserve to be treated better.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the recent numbers published by the Cabinet Office in answer to my written question? The numbers seem to suggest that a disproportionate number of the civil servants who have been made redundant describe themselves as persons with disabilities.

Chris Stephens: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I will address the equality impact assessment. It is worth noting that, in the Enterprise Act 2016, the Government changed the cap to £95,000 a year and, in doing so, referred to people as “public sector fat cats,” despite the evidence that civil servants with 30-odd years’ service who earn less than £27,000 a year will be caught by the cap. Low-paid civil servants are not public sector fat cats.

The combined effect of all the proposed changes will be to reduce radically compensation for loyal civil servants. With cuts to the civil service compensation scheme in 2010, the recent changes to pensions, massive staff reductions and years of pay restraint, staff are left wondering what will be next.

The Government produced an equality impact assessment only once the consultation had concluded and they had produced their final proposal. That is counter to the public sector equality duty, which states that such impact assessments should start in the early stages of a review and should form part of the active decision-making process.

Once it materialised, the equality impact assessment highlighted that there is a particular impact on older workers, who face both direct and indirect discrimination in the proposals. Raising the minimum age for the early access to pension option will have a direct and significant impact on those in the 50 to 54 age bracket. Meanwhile, lowering the caps on maximum compensation payments will indirectly affect older workers because they are much more likely to have long service.

Throughout, the Government have frustrated negotiations with trade unions and undermined the consultation process. The Government have shown little regard for the impact of the reforms, as illustrated by the fact that the equality impact assessment was provided only once the consultation had concluded, despite repeated requests from trade unions and Members of Parliament. Affected groups were therefore unable fully to understand the impact that the proposals would have on them in time to feed it in to the consultation. The data provided for consultation purposes did not cost individual proposals; instead, comparisons were made between the current civil service compensation scheme and the proposed future civil service compensation scheme, which suggests that the final package of reforms was a fait accompli.

Without information on how different proposals would affect different groups of workers, it was extremely difficult to conduct meaningful consultation. The Government have taken a similarly obstructive approach to negotiations. In June, months before the formal response to the consultation, the Government issued a letter to trade unions outlining a set of reforms and demanding that the unions sign up to them before negotiations could continue. Those outrageous preconditions made a sham out of the negotiations. With little of significance to address and an absence of any equality impact assessment or analysis of the consultation responses, and refusing to be bullied into accepting the preconditions, trade unions representing the majority of civil servants—PCS, Unite and the Prison Officers Association—were excluded from the talks.

After months of silence, on 22 September 2016, the Government issued a formal response to the consultation, which set out drastic cuts. Alongside this came the long overdue equality impact assessment. Despite over 3,000 responses to the consultation, 95% of which disagreed with the Government’s fundamental premise about the need for reform, the Government set out a package of reforms that were little changed from their original position. The little movement made since the
initial proposals has been used as leverage to blackmail trade unions into accepting detrimental changes to their members’ terms and conditions, as I outlined earlier.

The proposals will destroy civil service morale, which is already at breaking point, and as promises are broken that leaves no assurance that further attacks on terms and conditions are not soon to follow. The proposals will hinder future recruitment exercises as years of pay restraint, coupled with worse terms and conditions, make the civil service a less attractive employer.

I want to mention the process. On 20 October, I, as chair of the PCS parliamentary group, wrote to the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, but I have not had a response. I was told by him, behind the Speaker’s Chair during a Division, that he would meet me and other Members belonging to the PCS parliamentary group—there are 83 Members from both sides of the House in that group—to discuss the issue. However, in a written ministerial statement on 8 November, the Government announced that they were going ahead with the proposals, without bringing these matters to the Floor of the House. Such is the severity of the proposals that I firmly believe the Government should have made a statement in the House, so that all Members could question them on their proposals.

I pay tribute to the thousands of civil servants who will be watching this debate for all the work they do to deliver public services. I look forward to the Minister’s response, and I ask the Government to think again.

2.46 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing this debate, and I welcome the opportunity to respond to his concerns. I know that, in his role as chair of the PCS parliamentary group, he takes a close interest, as do I, in matters relating to the civil service. I, too, greatly value and appreciate the work of the civil service. Now more than ever, the work of the civil service is vital to delivering the best service to the public and to allowing us to meet the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

To provide the best service for the public, the civil service needs to be ready to meet challenges and opportunities. The Government must therefore ensure that the civil service can recruit and retain the best people, but we must also ensure that there is an efficient and cost-effective compensation scheme in place to support civil servants when exits are needed.

As the hon. Gentleman set out, important steps towards this goal were taken during the last Parliament. My noble Friend Lord Maude, in his then role as Minister for the Cabinet Office, introduced important reforms to modernise redundancy arrangements in the civil service. A revised civil service compensation scheme was launched in December 2010, when my noble Friend Lord Maude set out his hope and intention that it would be a fair settlement for the long term.

In the years since 2010, however, it has become apparent to the Government that the reforms did not fully deliver on their aims. For example, we were concerned that the 2010 compensation scheme provisions for early access to pensions were no longer appropriate. These provisions allowed staff aged as young as 50 to retire and draw all their civil service pension without any reduction for early payment. This was often very expensive for the employer, and it is increasingly out of line with the Government’s wider aim of responding to very welcome increases in longevity by encouraging longer working lives.

More widely, the Government’s view was that, even after the 2010 reforms, the civil service compensation scheme was simply too expensive, when considered against the background of the current economic situation. We of course recognise the need to provide good financial support to bridge the gap into alternative employment or retirement—we of course recognise that—but the Government also have a duty to balance that against the wider financial situation and the interests of the taxpayers who ultimately fund the scheme.

The 2010 compensation scheme terms were becoming increasingly out of line with those the Government believe should be available more broadly across the public sector. For example, we have made it clear that we do not believe it is appropriate to pay six-figure compensation payments within the public sector, and we are legislating to put a stop to that. We are also embarking on reforms to compensation schemes across the main public sector workforces, so it is right that the civil service scheme is consistent with those wider reforms. For all those reasons, it was clear that further reform of the civil service compensation scheme was needed.

Peter Dowd: With public services under absolute stress and strain—many are at breaking point—what is modern and efficient about cutting wages, numbers and training, and massive negative restructuring, in the light of the chaos in the civil service that is about to unfold with Brexit?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Gentleman should not underestimate the skills of the civil service. In fact, the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead can and will be adequately dealt with by our excellent civil service, which we value greatly.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister confirm that the six-figure cap will affect employees with long service who earn less than £27,000 a year, which is not a high salary? Are the Government considering how to address that?

Michael Ellis: It is not unreasonable for the Government to take the view that it is not appropriate to pay six-figure—£100,000—compensation payments within the public sector. We are legislating to stop that. As I have said, we must take the economic challenges and climate into consideration.

The Government launched a consultation on our proposals for changes to the civil service scheme in February and set out five principles for reform. I will not rehearse them now—they are on the public record—but it was an open consultation and we invited responses from all those who would be affected by reforms, including trade unions, employers, civil servants and other interested parties. The consultation ran for 12 weeks, but as well as that we held a series of meetings to discuss the proposed reforms with the civil service unions throughout the consultation period. Six such meetings were held during that period, attended by representatives from PCS, Prospect,
the FDA, Unite, GMB and the POA. After the consultation closed in May, we gave careful consideration to all the responses we received and to the views expressed by the unions.

After the closure of the consultation, the Government did not stop our efforts to achieve agreement on a set of reforms. We invited all unions that had responded to the consultation to a series of further meetings. In order to give the best chance of reaching agreement, the participation of unions in the further meetings was made conditional on their acceptance that a proposed basic structure would form the starting basis of a reformed negotiated set of arrangements that could lead to a final agreement.

I am pleased to say that five employee representative bodies—Prospect, the FDA, Unison, GMB and the Defence Police Federation—agreed to take part in further meetings at that time and on that basis. The Government held a total of 13 further meetings with those bodies between June and September to discuss the detail of the proposed reforms. Those highly constructive meetings played a big part in shaping our thinking and the final offer we made to unions. However, I should make it clear that we do not in any way accept that the PCS or any other union was barred from those discussions, as has been claimed. The decision not to participate was made solely by the unions concerned and not by the Government.

Following the conclusion of the discussions with the unions that chose to participate, the Government made a formal offer of revised compensation schemes. The offer reflected the constructive discussions between June and September. As such, we proposed a number of improvements on the package of reforms set out in the consultation, including taking more account of longer service, which is only right and fair; increased protection for the lower-paid, which is also appropriate; greater flexibility for those over the minimum pension age; and improvements to the terms for inefficiency compensation. The consultation and discussions therefore worked.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister refresh the House’s memory? I did not say that the trade unions were barred from those talks; I said that they had to sign up to preconditions before them. Does he agree?

Michael Ellis: The arrangements for the talks were satisfactory to eight trade union organisations; they were not satisfactory to the PCS, but that is a matter for it. However, the offer reflected the points that I have made and those improvements. Nevertheless, the offer was made on equal terms to all civil service unions—all of them—including those that had not taken part in the talks.

All unions were then also given the same amount of time to consider the Government’s offer and to ballot their members. I am pleased to say that eight unions were able to make a formal response to the Government by the requested date of 31 October and I am also pleased to say that all eight of those unions responded to say that they accepted the Government’s offer. As such, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office considered that the Government’s offer had been accepted by a sufficient number of trade union organisations to constitute an agreement.

A revised civil service compensation scheme, consistent with the terms of the Government’s offer, was therefore laid before the House on 8 November and took effect from 9 November. However, I regret to say that, unlike other unions, the PCS and the POA did not feel able to ballot their members and respond to the Government within the requested timeframe.

I understand that it can take time for unions to make such arrangements. However, the PCS gave no indication that more time would be required at the time the offer was made. Indeed, the issue was not raised at all until more than half the time intended for union consideration had elapsed, and even then a formal request for an extension to the deadline was not received by the Government until some time after that. By that point, the Government did not consider any extension to the deadline to be either practical or fair on the other unions, which had made strenuous efforts to respond in time.

Since then, I understand that the PCS has balloted its members with a recommendation to reject the Government’s proposals, and that they have done so. While the Government will of course take note of the result of that ballot, that does not change the fact that the Government’s offer of revised compensation scheme terms was accepted by the large majority of unions consulted, or that the new scheme has now taken effect.

Chris Stephens rose—

Michael Ellis: I am very conscious of the time; if I may, I will just carry on a bit more and then give way.

To summarise all that I have said so far, the Government are very clear that the reforms to the civil service compensation scheme were carried out in an open and consultative fashion. The process benefited greatly, as such processes do, from the constructive approach of the unions that chose to participate fully, and the benefits can be seen in the improved terms I have referred to, which were able to be adopted as a result. So, while it is regrettable that not every union sought to participate in a constructive manner, that is a matter for them and it will not discourage the Government from our belief that it is right to seek to reach negotiated agreements in such matters, wherever that is possible.

Chris Stephens: I thank the Minister for giving way and I will be brief. He has mentioned individual trade unions, which is fine, but I would be curious to know what percentage of civil servants those unions represent. If he could write to me on that, I would be obliged.

Michael Ellis: I am always very happy to write to the hon. Gentleman.

Turning quickly to the reforms themselves, I fully accept, as I have said, that any change of this sort can be difficult for those affected and as a result will often be unwelcome. However, I am clear that the revised terms of the 2016 civil service compensation scheme represent a good deal for civil servants. The new scheme strikes the right balance in achieving the savings that are required while reflecting the nature of the civil service workforce and the benefits of reaching a negotiated
agreement. Also, the new scheme will continue to meet its main objective, which is to provide a good level of support to help to bridge the gap into new employment or until retirement, where that is necessary, when exits are unfortunately required.

Because of all of that, the Government believe that these are sustainable reforms and therefore I will close by echoing the words of my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office in his written ministerial statement of 8 November, in which he described the reformed compensation scheme as providing “a firm foundation for the management of the Civil Service and its people for a generation”.

Question put and agreed to.

2.59 pm

House adjourned.
Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): Before we begin, I should warn Members that the case mentioned in the petition is currently before the courts. The House of Commons has agreed in its resolution on matters sub judice that cases that are active before the courts should not be referred to in debate. This is to avoid any possibility of what we say prejudicing a fair trial or impeding a successful prosecution. I therefore ask all Members to avoid any reference to that particular case.

David Mackintosh (Northampton South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 168678 relating to the status of police dogs and horses.

Sadly, it is not unusual to read reports in the press of police animals being seriously injured or killed, or having to be put down as a result of injuries sustained during their duties. Understandably, there is much concern among the public about animal welfare generally, but this issue hits at the very heart of compassion for animals and our responsibility to those we put in harm’s way for the benefit of society.

I should make it clear that this petition relates to a specific case that is currently progressing through the legal system. I shall of course follow your guidance, Mr Crausby, and make no direct reference to that case. In a broader sense, the petition asks that police animals be given enhanced legal protection and refers to legislation that was introduced in the United States. That legislation gives animals the status of police officers, but it is unlikely that that would be considered in this country, so I will concentrate on legal recognition for service animals and our responsibility to those we put in harm’s way for the benefit of society.

At present, there is no specific offence or penalty relating to causing harm or death to a police animal.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way so early in the debate. Our police animals—dogs and horses—are an integral part of the police service and contribute significantly to keeping us all safe. Does he agree that it is outrageous that if a police dog or horse is assaulted or injured, this is treated merely as criminal damage?

David Mackintosh: I am grateful for that intervention. I do believe the law should be examined and changed or a new law introduced. When looking into the issue in the run-up to this debate, I contacted or was contacted by various organisations, and their views are mixed. Organisations such as the RSPCA believe that the current legislation is adequate, but the Kennel Club feels strongly that that would be considered in this country, so I will concentrate on legal recognition for service animals injured while doing their duty to help to keep us safe.

At present, there is no specific offence or penalty relating to causing harm or death to a police animal.

David Mackintosh: I am grateful for that intervention and I agree with the hon. Lady. At present, there is no specific offence or penalty relating to causing harm to, or the death of, a police animal. Under current legislation, such offences may be prosecuted under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 or the Criminal Damage Act 1971, which I will come to.

The petition suggests the adoption of legislation along the lines of the US Federal Law Enforcement Animal Protection Act 2000, which was introduced following similar concerns that police animals did not receive adequate protection under the law and were vulnerable to physical harm as a result. Following the Act’s introduction, it is a federal offence in the United States to maliciously harm or conspire to harm a dog or horse being used for law enforcement and carries a penalty of up to 10 years’ imprisonment.

The Government point out in their response to the petition that under existing legislation and sentencing guidelines it is technically possible for someone convicted of such an offence under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to be imprisoned for up to 10 years.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Can we smash this myth that 10 years’ imprisonment is available in almost any circumstance for assaults on police dogs and horses? For the matter to come before the Crown court with its extended sentencing powers would require the damage involved to exceed £5,000. I suggest there has never been such a case and that 10 years’ imprisonment has never been available for any offender convicted of such an offence.

David Mackintosh: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I have done some research into sentencing for this sort of act, which proves and backs up what he said. Alongside the 2006 Act is another option, the Criminal Damage Act 1971, which, sadly, likens any attack on an animal to damage to a police car or riot van, and does not reflect the bravery of the animal. That is wrong.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Animals are sentient beings. They are capable of feelings, emotions and pain. The law currently regards animals as mere property that is capable of being destroyed or damaged under the 1971 Act. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this law must be changed so that animals are given the protection they deserve?

David Mackintosh: I am grateful for that intervention. I do believe the law should be examined and changed or a new law introduced. When looking into the issue in the run-up to this debate, I contacted or was contacted by various organisations, and their views are mixed. Organisations such as the RSPCA believe that the current legislation is adequate, but the Kennel Club feels strongly that such offences should be treated as assault or attempted murder. Clearly, there is a wide range of opinion.

As the petition demonstrates, there is a feeling among the wider public that police animals deserve greater legal protection than they currently enjoy, in recognition of the risks they face in the service of our society. In this respect, the law is definitely at odds with public opinion and that of the police, who care for their animals with exceptional compassion and humanity.

My concern is that although it may be technically possible to secure convictions with up to 10 years’ imprisonment, the failure to prosecute means that has no deterrent effect. There is an argument for enhanced protection for police animals, as we have heard from colleagues here today. I note that the Government’s response states that the maximum penalty for such offences is 10 years, but figures supplied by the House of Commons Library show that in 2015, the average custodial sentence for a prosecution under the Animal
Welfare Act 2006 Act was just 3.3 months and the average fine just £244. Custodial sentences applied in just 10% of convictions. What sort of message does that send about how we treat and protect animals acting to uphold the law and who work to keep us safe?

The feeling among police officers is that prosecutions are so unlikely that assaults on animals are often not recorded, so it is hard to understand the scale of the issue. A specific offence of causing malicious harm or death to a police or service animal with clear penalties outside the 2006 Act would be a more effective deterrent and would recognise the unique risks these animals face. There is a sound argument for enhancing the current protection, but without suitable changes to the procedures for seeking and securing a prosecution, this would prove ineffective. A new offence would help to empower the police to seek a prosecution and provide clarity for the Crown Prosecution Service.

Understandably, police officers have extremely close bonds with their animals. They help the police to prevent and to fight crime and to secure convictions. The animals are placed in harm’s way daily and, sadly, often suffer physical harm that sometimes results in death. We must not forget their role in protecting police officers and the public and in preventing injury and loss of life. Police officers have told me that on occasions, if it had not been for the animal and its intervention, they fear they would have been killed.

The care with which the police treat their animals and the affection they receive from the public should be echoed in the protection they receive under the law. We have a clear moral and ethical responsibility for the welfare of these animals, and I support the introduction of the sort of measures suggested in the petition. I am grateful to be able to lead this debate today.

Christina Rees: The South Wales Police Federation constables branch board chair, Steve Treharne, wrote to me recently about the safety of police officers, but he also talked about the need to give the same protections to police animals, as an extension of what he called the police family. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is time that police animals were given the same status?

David Mackintosh: The hon. Lady makes a very clear point and is backed up by a message from her constituent. It lends weight to the argument that we have heard already today: that we should be looking to introduce new protections in legislation for police animals.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I think I am in right in saying that my hon. Friend does not have the right of reply to this debate, and I would like to hear his comments on this issue. I do not know whether he consulted the British Transport police, but for a brief time I was privileged to hold a warrant as a constable with the BTP, and we regularly worked with police dogs on the London underground on drug interdiction. Drug dealers are not nice people; they are quite prepared to harm anyone and anything to get their way. Is it not time that we recognise that the animal is in effect an extension of the policeman or woman, and give them the protection that they deserve?

David Mackintosh: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I did not speak specifically to the British Transport police, but he makes a very salient point. It is very important that we recognise the vital job that these animals do. If they were not there to help us, the police officers would have a much more difficult job. It is also worth registering the fact that it takes a lot of effort, time and money to train the animals to do their specific jobs. By recognising their status in law, we would also be recognising the contribution they make and how much we as a society have invested in them in the first place, so it is a very credible point, and I am happy to move the motion.

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): Let me just say that the hon. Gentleman does have the right to reply at the end of the debate, on condition that the Minister gives him time to reply. It has been my experience sometimes that that is not the case.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): May I say how pleased I am that you are chairing this important debate, Mr Crausby? I thank the Petitions Committee for allocating time to discuss this issue in Westminster Hall, and in particular the hon. Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) for doing such a good job of setting out the principles underpinning the debate.

As we have heard, people all over the country have been struck by the story of police dog Finn and his handler, PC Dave Wardell, with the petition reaching more than 100,000 signatures in just 10 days. I will heed your advice, Mr Crausby, and not say any more about that case, but let me take this opportunity to wish Finn and PC Wardell all the best on their road to recovery.

I also thank the “Finn’s Law” campaign team, who have harnessed the sense of injustice about what happened to Finn and turned it into positive action, with a view to delivering the change that we would all like to see. I pay tribute to some of the senior officers in West Yorkshire police who have gone over and above what might have been expected to lend their support to the “Finn’s Law” campaign. If people have not already seen the video of Chief Inspector Aidy Waugh and Chief Superintendents Tim Kingsman and Mabs Hussain trying and failing to evade a police dog, all in the name of raising awareness about Finn’s law, I promise them that it is well worth a watch and even a retweet.

Spending time with West Yorkshire police in my constituency over the summer, I have met some incredibly dedicated people, yet the workload of our police forces is becoming increasingly complicated. In West Yorkshire since 2010, we have lost 1,200 police officers—a 20% reduction in the force—and increasingly officers are asked to respond to 999 calls on their own. I witnessed an incident that quickly escalated, leaving an officer surrounded following a routine attempt to stop a vehicle. With the Police Federation, I started the “Protect the Protectors” campaign and began raising police officer safety in the Chamber. One of the works of the “Finn’s Law” campaign reminded me that it is not just police officers but our hard-working police horses and dogs that are exposed to risk.

There are 1,900 police dogs in the UK: 781 specialist dogs and 1,119 general purpose dogs carrying out tasks that are often simply beyond their human counterparts.
In West Yorkshire fairly recently, two police cars were rammed by a vehicle and the driver ran off, evading arrest. Police dog Tia was able to track the offender and found his discarded hat; from that hat, a DNA sample was obtained and matched and the suspect identified. Police dog Ty tracked and located an elderly lady with dementia who had got lost in freezing weather. Officers were adamant that had Ty not located her, she would not have lasted much longer, exposed to the harsh weather conditions.

Police officers tell us that dogs are one of the most effective ways of managing some very difficult situations, with officers’ only concern being that not enough dogs are available. Police dog Buzz, a firearms support dog, recently detained a distressed male who was threatening the public with a large knife. He was able to bring the incident to a conclusion thanks to the advanced training the public with a large knife. He was able to bring the incident to a conclusion thanks to the advanced training that police dogs go through, and thankfully with no harm to himself.

Police horses are also invaluable, yet six were injured during last year’s million mask march and an irate football fan was sentenced to a year in prison in 2013 for punching West Yorkshire police horse Bud in the face before being detained by officers.

**Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con):** I praise the hon. Lady for her work on the “Protect the Protectors” campaign. She is giving very good examples. Police dogs and horses are an integral part of the policing team, and introducing exemplary punishments for those who show ill will and cause harm, damage and perhaps even death to police horses and dogs will give confidence to the police officers who are working as a team with their police dogs and horses.

**Holly Lynch:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He is absolutely right: offering that protection to dogs will lend further support to handlers and to their colleagues more widely.

I did not know until I was made aware by the “Finn’s Law” campaign that the only mechanism for charging someone who assaults or kills a police dog or horse is in section 4 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Conviction carries a maximum penalty of six months in prison. Alternatively, in the most serious cases, an offender can be charged with criminal damage. Kent Police Federation tweeted me yesterday and summed the position up perfectly. It said that

“the Finn’s law campaign isn’t about the law treating Police Dogs the same as cops, but it is about treating them better than a broken window.

I understand that a constructive meeting has already taken place between the campaign team and the Policing Minister, which is encouraging, but I think the Minister already knows my view: police officers and police animals alike deserve the full backing of the justice system, and tough sentences must play a role in deterring anyone who thinks that it is acceptable to assault either a police officer or a police animal—quite often it is both. That simply must not be tolerated.

Although I welcome the recent progress made, as with all results, police officers it has been difficult to establish the scale of the problem of assaults on police animals because of a lack of official statistics. That is partly due to the difficulties of getting an offence to court and securing a conviction, as we have heard. The evidence required to secure either an animal welfare or a criminal damage conviction has to clear such a high threshold that offences are, sadly, going unpunished. To prove criminal damage, it has to be shown that an offender inflicted “unnecessary suffering” on an animal and did so deliberately. If an offender claimed that a kick to a police dog’s head was an involuntary reaction to being scared, for example, a prosecution would be difficult to secure.

The average cost of the initial training of a police dog is about £20,000, and the lifetime cost, including vets’ bills, food and kennelling, is about £50,000. That is a significant investment on the part of a police force, but it makes that investment because police dogs are a highly trained asset and incredibly effective at what they do. However, precisely because of what they do, they are exposed to heightened and very different risks from other animals, and I agree with the “Finn’s Law” campaign that that should be reflected in the laws that protect them.

**Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con):** I salute the hon. Lady on the “Protect the Protectors” campaign. This weekend, I stood among people laying remembrance wreaths. People from all different parts of the services were paying their respects to the people who gave their lives for our country. The work that we are doing today on the safety of police officers is similarly important. I served on the Policing and Crime Bill Committee, and this matter was not raised as an opportunity to support police dogs and horses. Does the hon. Lady think that this debate is an opportunity to ask the Minister whether the protection can be extended?

**Holly Lynch:** I thank the hon. Lady very much for that intervention. She is absolutely right, and it perhaps was a missed opportunity that we did not address the matter at that opportune moment, but hopefully not too much time has been lost and we have the ability to correct that mistake today.

I asked the Police Federation whether it had cases of assaults on police animals and details of whether convictions had been secured following those assaults, and some really troubling stories were passed on to me. In February 2013, police dog Euro was repeatedly punched around the head and kicked in what his handler described as a “violent and unpredicted” attack; Euro sustained bruising and cuts to his mouth and lip. In that instance, the officer was charged and found guilty of the offence of criminal damage to police property, but only received a community order and was ordered to pay court costs. Police dog Buzz, who I mentioned earlier, was attending a large public order incident and was kicked in the head, sustaining injuries to his tongue and the inside of his mouth. On that occasion, the offender was detained and charged under the Animal Welfare Act.

Sam, a nine-year-old German Shepherd police dog, was asked to give chase to a driver who ran from a vehicle. The man climbed on top of another car and began kicking Sam’s head; when Sam managed to pull the offender from the roof of the car, the male then
began to twist the police dog’s collar, restricting his airway until he was unconscious. The dog’s handler, PC Ian Head, had to draw his baton in order to get the male to let go of Sam’s collar. Fortunately, Sam slowly began to regain consciousness, and a short time later got back to work assisting with the arrest of the offender. The offender in question was later charged with failing to provide a specimen on suspicion of drink-driving, which was the more serious of the charges against him. Part of the problem that needs to be addressed, which is often the case in prosecuting assaults on police officers as well as on animals, is that the circumstances leading to the assault take precedence, with the most serious charges being pursued at the expense of lesser charges. Too often, animal welfare charges, and even police assault charges, have been sidelined.

Those are some of the assaults that have been recorded and did go to court, but the feedback from dog handlers is that in the vast majority of cases the injuries sustained do not meet the evidence threshold required to secure a prosecution, so much of that information is then lost and not recorded. The “Finn’s Law” team spoke to 71 serving dog handlers, 75.7% of whom said that their dog had been either kicked or punched in the line of duty. Only 8% saw charges brought, with 82% of assaults on police dogs going uncharged. Some 10% of those surveyed said that they had experienced their dogs being stabbed or seriously injured.

Other countries have successfully introduced much tougher deterrents, as the hon. Member for Northampton South said. In America, specific federal laws apply to anyone who harms an animal used in law enforcement. The law states:

“Whoever willfully and maliciously harms any police animal, or attempts or conspires to do so, shall be fined under this title and imprisoned not more than 1 year. If the offense permanently disables or disfigures the animal, or causes serious bodily injury to or the death of the animal, the maximum term of imprisonment shall be 10 years.”

In this instance, “police animal” refers to “a dog or horse employed by a Federal agency... for the principal purpose of aiding in the detection of criminal activity, enforcement of laws, or apprehension of criminal offenders.”

In Canada, Quanto’s law extends similar protections to all service animals used in law enforcement, the military and for individuals with disabilities or specific medical needs. Quanto was a police dog who was fatally stabbed while helping to apprehend a fleeing suspect. The federal law in his name means that jail sentences of up to five years can now be imposed on anyone who intentionally kills a police dog or service animal.

I said that I have had some horrible examples passed to me. I want to share one of the most awful, because to me it shows the risks that both police officers and police animals face and why our justice system must offer the greatest possible protection to them both. It dates back to 1998 and was recounted to me by a Federation representative.

Police officers attended a domestic incident, where dog handler PC Churms arrived with police dog Bryn. Shouting and screaming could be heard from inside the premises, so PC Churms advised other attending officers that he would deploy with Bryn. As he approached the house, a male appeared holding a hunter’s rifle with a silencer to the head of his female partner. The officers with PC Churms backed off, and he and police dog Bryn were left with the offender in the confines of a garden. The officer attempted to negotiate a successful outcome, but as he attempted to quieten Bryn he was shot in the leg causing significant injury. As the offender lifted the gun to shoot the officer again, PC Churms released Bryn in an attempt to bring the male under control and protect himself and the female. Police dog Bryn was killed with a single fatal shot to the head. The female attempted to run off and was shot in the shoulder. The officer dragged the female back and forced the barrel of the gun into the officer’s mouth and said, “I will come back for you,” before dragging the female away. The officer dragged himself into the street and was taken into a neighbour’s house, where they barricaded themselves and the officer was tended to.

The risks faced by our front-line officers and animals alike could not be more serious. I hope that tougher sentences for those who assault police dogs will serve to keep both dogs and handlers that bit safer in the line of duty, as the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) said.

I am reassured that the Minister has met with the “Finn’s Law” campaign team. Once again, I thank the “Finn’s Law” team for the work they have done in putting this issue on the political agenda. For me, the challenge with granting police animals the same protections as police officers is that I am still of the opinion there is much more we should be doing in relation to police officer safety, so I am hoping to keep going with the broader debate about how we protect our protectors and keep front-line officers and animals safe in the line of duty. I hope that the Minister is able to reflect on the examples from other countries, as well as on some of the tales of police animal bravery that we have heard today, and think about what more can be done to offer police animals like Finn the greatest possible protection.

4.55 pm

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I would like to put on the record my thanks to the Petitions Committee for kindly allowing this debate to take place, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) for leading it and starting us off today. I also thank the “Finn’s Law” campaign team, who have helped to mobilise public opinion behind the petition, and the members of the public who have signed the petition and contacted me to offer their support.

My interest in this subject was stirred by an incident in my constituency involving police dog Finn and his handler PC Dave Wardell. I understand that this matter is now sub judice, and we are not allowed to discuss the case during the debate. That is a pity, as I am sure that if I could share the details of what happened, there would be no doubt in anyone’s mind that our police dogs and horses need far greater protection in law than they currently have.

However, I am sure everyone will be delighted to know that both police dog Finn and his handler Dave Wardell are recovering well from their injuries. Dave is here in the Public Gallery, so I thank him for joining us today. Sadly, Finn cannot be with us but I have teased
Dave that all the people who have contacted me have shown sympathy only for Finn and not for him—he is just an afterthought. On a serious note, he is a great person and a fine example of the amazing professionals that we have in Hertfordshire police.

I was privileged to take part in the police parliamentary scheme, and one of the 20 days I did with Hertfordshire police was with the police dogs team. We raced all over Hertfordshire and on that day we tackled everything from individuals who were possibly armed, to illegal immigrants inside a truck. We tackled people who were trying to evade the police and also dealt with a burglary, where they sent the same police dog in to see what was going on in the house.

These animals work constantly and consistently, on a day to day basis, week after week. They do an amazing job to keep my constituents safe, and Hertfordshire police have ensured that Hertfordshire is one of the safest places in the country to live. That is one of the key reasons why so many people relocate to my constituency of Stevenage. The thousands of new arrivals every year make it one of the strongest and most vibrant communities, providing the engine room of Hertfordshire’s economy.

That is an amazing feat considering that Stevenage was this country’s first new town and celebrated its 70th birthday last Friday.

Today we need to celebrate the role of the police dogs and horses that are constantly put into some of the most dangerous situations and are attacked on a weekly basis up and down the country. These animals are doing a vital job keeping us safe, and it is only fair that we return their commitment by providing them with the protection they need when they are hurt in the course of their duty.

I know that on an emotional level my constituents and I find it difficult that these animals are treated as property in law. If someone attacks a police dog, they can be charged only with criminal damage or possibly animal cruelty. However, treating a broken window or a broken garden gnome the same as a police dog hurt in the line of duty trying to disable an armed offender, or as a police horse attacked with broken bottles during a riot, seems heartless to me and my constituents.

Gareth Johnson: Does my hon. Friend agree that this typifies the materialistic way in which the law treats animals? We see that with dog theft and with attacks on police dogs. Does he agree that it is time we stopped treating animals like a commodity such as a laptop computer or mobile telephone?

Stephen McPartland: I agree with my hon. Friend. I understand that in 2015, France stopped treating animals as movable property and now refers to them as living beings. Perhaps that is something we can consider going forward.

I understand that there is nervousness about providing police dogs and horses with the same rights as police officers, as the petition states. We need to be talking about simply treating them better than a broken window. This is about recognising that they are not pieces of property, but highly trained and highly intelligent animals; there has got to be somewhere in between. They are also part of a much larger family of working animals that work very hard on a daily basis to keep us safe.

The military police have dog handlers, and we have fire dogs in Hertfordshire. There are customs and excise dogs, guide dogs and hearing dogs. Imagine the impact on a blind person if their guide dog was attacked and injured! Apart from the intense vulnerability they would feel during the incident, they would suffer a loss of freedom and independence as the dog recovered from its injuries, and they might well be housebound as a result.

The Government response to the petition has been underwhelming, to say the least, but I believe we can get them to change their mind. I am delighted that the Policing Minister is with us today, because I know he is a big animal lover. He is not frightened of going up against the system and doing what is right, and I am convinced that together with him, we can get on and make a change through Finn’s law. We are all looking forward to working closely with him to achieve that.

The petition response states:

“An attack on a police dog or other police support animal can be treated as causing unnecessary suffering to an animal under section 4 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006. The maximum penalty is 6 months’ imprisonment, or an unlimited fine, or both. The financial element of the penalty was raised only last year from a maximum fine of £20,000. An attack on a police animal could be considered by the court as an aggravating factor leading to a higher sentence within the available range. Under some circumstances assaults on support animals could be treated as criminal damage which would allow for penalties of up to 10 years’ imprisonment.

An additional offence dealing specifically with attacks on police animals or a move to change their legal status is unnecessary in light of the maximum penalties already in place. An additional and separate offence may not result in more prosecutions, or increased sentences.”

The problem with that response, and the reason why we find it so disappointing, is that it fails to recognise that the vast majority of offences cannot be charged as either criminal damage or under the Animal Welfare Act, simply because of the very high threshold for both offences. In practical terms, there are no charges for the majority of attacks on dogs and, as other Members have said, cases rarely get to the stage of prosecution in the courts.

According to my understanding, for someone to obtain a successful prosecution of an offender under the Animal Welfare Act, they need to show that the suffering was unnecessary and deliberate. If the offender says they were scared and only defending themselves or lost control, the Crown Prosecution Service will not pursue the case. The more likely scenario is that a charge for criminal damage will be pursued, thus treating a highly trained and intelligent animal the same in law as this table or chair.

The prosecution has to show deliberate or reckless damage that is permanent or temporary. Most attacks cannot be shown to be such, because bruises do not show on dogs. The dog’s fur would have to be shaved to see the bruise underneath, meaning that it would be impossible to prosecute offenders as only when the dog has been stabbed or hurt in a different way. Veterinary evidence would also be needed to show that that action led to that result, and there would be a time lag between the incident, seeing the vet and the veterinary report.

The sad reality is that these animals are being placed in danger every single day of every week and are attacked on a regular basis, but the offenders are not prosecuted. The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) mentioned
the survey that was generated by the “Finn’s Law” campaign. It was only up for 24 hours, so it is not scientific, but it received 71 responses from dog handlers, 75.7% of whom have experienced their dog getting kicked or punched. Of those attacks only 8% saw charges brought—so in 92% of cases the offender got away with it completely—and 10% of handlers have experienced their dogs being seriously stabbed or seriously injured.

I will read the following handlers’ stories, which the Finn’s law campaign has collated:

“One on two separate occasions my dog has been kicked at when locating suspect.

Dog got kicked by an individual at a travellers wake; dog put 18 holes in subject’s leg”—

the handler said the individual was not charged with attacking a dog, just “with affray”—

“Experienced 2 separate incidents. 1) detaining a male for dwelling burglary kicked dog in head and chest before making off over railway. 2) Punched and kicked whilst trying to detain male after a serious domestic assault. No charges brought...as not enough evidence.

During a warranted by court eviction in North London, we assisted a team of bailiffs to remove squatters. The male was hiding behind a door and when confronted by the dog he began kicking and punching him. The dog defended himself and me with a full mouth bite to the leg. Thankfully he was a hard headed, strong dog and it didn’t phase him”—

but no charges were brought due to a “lack of bruising”.

Holly Lynch: When we are thinking through the thresholds required for evidence to secure prosecutions, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the prevalence of body-worn video for police officers might be part of the package for how we secure more evidence to get convictions when the charges come to court?

Stephen McPartland: I agree with the hon. Lady, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) said, a monetary value is placed on the damage. It has to be shown to be worth £5,000, so even with a police officer’s body camera, it would have to be demonstrated that the kicking and punching caused £5,000-worth of damage for the case to be eligible to go to the Crown court to seek the maximum sentence. To me the situation seems inappropriate, and that is because the dog is treated the same as this table and these chairs. That is unfortunate.

Let me give another quick example from the survey:

“Drink driver decamped following”—

a road traffic collision.

“Dog tracked and located offender in bushes. Offender decided to kick dog numerous times and was duly bitten on the leg and pulled from bushes. Arrested and charged with drink-drive and traffic offences only.”

We are a nation of animal lovers, but our laws do not really protect all animals when they are put at risk of serious harm in the course of their duty. Our laws are also behind other countries, as the hon. Member for Halifax mentioned. The Bill that became the US Federal Law Enforcement Animal Protection Act 2000 was introduced in response to the fact that eight police dogs were killed in the States between 1998 and 1999.

Before that, as in the UK, the animals were regarded as a piece of equipment such as a computer, and offenders were prosecuted for property damage. The Act includes any animal that is employed by a federal agency.

The American law states:

“Whoever willfully and maliciously harms any police animal, or attempts or conspires to do so, shall be fined under this title and imprisoned not more than 1 year. If the offense permanently disables or disfigures the animal, or causes serious bodily injury or the death of the animal, the maximum term of imprisonment shall be 10 years...In this section, the term ‘police animal’ means a dog or horse employed by a Federal agency (whether in the executive, legislative, or judicial branch) for the principal purpose of aiding in the detection of criminal activity, enforcement of laws, or apprehension of criminal offenders.”

I am sorry that the incident that inspired the petition took place in my constituency, but I am proud to stand alongside the campaigners to support a change in the law so that these amazing animals are treated as more than a broken window when they are hurt in the course of their duty.

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): It is very warm in here, so I am happy for Members to remove their jackets if they want to. I call Sir Roger Gale.

5.6 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I apologise to you, Mr Crausby, for the fact that I did not indicate in advance that I intended to participate; I was moved by the moment.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) on introducing the debate. I want to say to my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) that I am not remotely surprised that public sympathy was overwhelmingly for Finn rather than Finn’s handler. I do not disparage in any way the work of the constabulary, but having worn that uniform myself, I can honestly say that at no time has anybody of either sex come up to me and tickled me behind the ears.

On a more serious note, I know that Finn’s handler will also have expressed his prime concern for the animal. The bond between the police dog handlers—male and female—and their animals is very special indeed, and we should not ever underestimate the service that those animals do for the general public.

I say to the Minister that if there are not 650 Members of Parliament in this place all willing to support a change to the law, then there ought to be. He and I know that every day that the House sits, police dogs go into our Chamber and sweep it—not for drugs, but for bombs. They do that advisedly because, within my living memory, one of our colleagues was blown up and killed in this House, although not in the Chamber. We owe the police a huge debt; if we owe them that debt, we owe their dogs that debt and we should look after them.

I hope and believe that when push comes to shove—and it just has—we will change the law to give precisely the same protection to police animals that we give to the constables themselves. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South, they are an extension of that constable’s right arm and an injury to the animal is an injury to the officer. It should be prosecuted and punished as such.

The one area that we have touched on only lightly is that of police horses, which should not be overlooked either. Those of us who are slightly long in the tooth,
who sadly on occasions have found ourselves embroiled in disturbances at football matches, will know only too well the value of those police horses and the officers riding them. The police horse and its rider offer a vantage point and, therefore, an ability to control simply not available to the eyes and ears on the ground, which are too low down.

We have all heard of—and in some cases, sadly, witnessed—instances of police horses being stabbed with knives, punched, kicked and treated vilely, very often by people under the influence of alcohol, but that makes it no better. That is why it is right that we place on the record our appreciation of the service of the police horses, and the men and women who ride them, as well as of our dogs and the people who handle them. I hope very much that when the Minister replies, he will say that the law will be changed as soon as possible.

5.10 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I suppose I should thank you, Mr Crausby, for your injunction at the beginning not to mention the court case that has triggered the debate. I have now lost a third of my speech because I cannot talk about what went on—but that is entirely my own fault, as I should have thought about it earlier. However, I wish PC Wardell and Finn all the very best for a speedy recovery.

I thank the 120,000 people who signed the petition that triggered the debate, the hon. Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) for an excellent introduction, and the Petitions Committee for giving us the opportunity to have this discussion. It is a really good example of the e-petitions system working to concentrate minds here in Parliament and to bring issues the attention that they merit.

I declare an interest. I am not just the shadow Policing Minister; I am an unapologetic animal lover. A membership card for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds sits alongside my party membership card in my purse. As some in the House will know, one of my best friends in the world is my beautiful but rather wilful Yorkie, Cara. She certainly does not think that I own her; in fact, it is quite the other way around. They do rather leave paw prints on our hearts.

I was very upset when I read about the horrendous attack on the police dog, Finn, that sparked the debate. Unfortunately, that attack is not an isolated incident. There is so much to read about on the internet, and the research we did to prepare ourselves for this debate was rather harrowing.

I will just talk about one incident because I am not sure whether this dog has been mentioned. In 2013, Fuzz was struck with a metal bar by a robbery suspect who was wanted for stealing a moped. Despite the attack, Fuzz kept hold of the man until he was arrested. He was then rushed for veterinary treatment on his eye for a Spenday recovery.

The “Finn’s Law” campaign has rightly said that police animals “deserve better protection than property.” I totally and utterly agree. Charging someone with criminal damage in such instances has the unsatisfactory implication that the victim is the property owner, rather than the animal itself. Finn, Fuzz and Bud, a police horse attacked by a Newcastle football hooligan, are not merely police property. They are not disposable objects as easily replaced as a broken window, but valued public servants and real victims. They are personalities—sentient, beautiful and often loved animals who, just like us, feel real pain when they are subjected to violence. The law should recognise them as such and give them the protection they deserve.

As has been mentioned, those who attack police animals can also be charged under section 4 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which makes it a criminal offence to subject an animal to unnecessary suffering. The Act is an important piece of legislation, but it was not passed with brutal attacks on animals in mind, and the maximum punishment is six months in prison or a fine of up to £20,000. That is much lower than the maximum penalty of 10 years available under the Criminal Damages Act 1971 or the American federal laws mentioned in the petition.

My own personal view is that there needs to be a review of the Animal Welfare Act, as I am not sure that that law is as robust as many of us would like. There are concerns from handlers that charges are not brought in most cases. There are no reliable national statistics about attacks on police animals, and I would like the Ministers to look into that. As we have heard, a survey by the “Finn’s Law” campaign found that 75.7% of handlers have experienced their dog being punched or kicked, but charges were brought in only 8% of those attacks.

The Government have produced an official response to the petition, arguing that “An additional offence dealing specifically with attacks on police animals or a move to change their legal status is unnecessary in light of the maximum penalties already in place. An additional and separate offence may not result in more prosecutions, or increased sentences.” I get that and I respect the Government’s position; I also recognise that it is good practice to avoid duplicating laws on the statute book. However, I would like the Minister to address some of the concerns we have raised today.

Can the Minister assure us that he will write to the Sentencing Council and express the view of this House that police animals suffer greatly from some attacks and
are valued members of our law enforcement teams? Attacks on them should not be treated the same as attacks on property and should carry an appropriately severe penalty. Although the Criminal Damages Act 1971 carries potentially severe penalties, it has the unsatisfactory implication of treating police animals as property and, as we have heard, it is not fit for purpose when dealing with crimes against our serving animals—or, indeed, animals per se. Will the Minister, who has received very warm plaudits from his hon. Friends, commit to working with his phalanx of civil servants to bring forward an alternative proposal that would not treat such attacks as we treat the kicking of a door panel on a police car?

Today we can make a difference to these loyal and brave animals. It is not too late for the Government to amend the Policing and Crime Bill in the Lords to that effect. I am sure that if the Minister did so, he would receive cross-party support, and I might even join in with some of those warm plaudits. Will he commit to reviewing how often charges are brought when police animals are punched or kicked? In order for the Government to do that, they will have to start collecting proper statistics on the number of attacks on police animals, just as we argued they need to with regard to attacks on police officers a fortnight ago. It is not beyond the Government’s ken to do so. With the IT available, it should not be a burden and would take a matter of moments.

Police animals such as Finn, Fuzz and Bud work tirelessly to help our police tackle crime. When they are attacked, they feel real pain and suffering, which in turn breaks the hearts of their handlers such as PC Dave Wardell. They deserve the full protection of the law. The Minister needs to recognise that many of those who work with police animals think the law is currently failing to offer that protection. They and I would like to know what he will do to address those serious and warranted concerns.

5.20 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) for sponsoring the debate, and I thank all Members who have contributed on an issue that is close to many of our hearts.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) said, I am a dog lover. I have two dogs, and I never thought I would see the names of Oz and Buzz in Hansard, but they will be in there now—my followers on Instagram and Twitter will know who Oz and Buzz are. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) is right that our pets are part of our family. I am a hardcore dog lover. My current dogs are both Labradors, but I have also experienced the joy of being a basset hound owner, which got a lot easier when I realised that bassets do not have owners—they have staff. Life got a lot easier after Bertie and I worked that out.

I will slightly reverse how these debates normally work. I will address some of the issues, but I will outline the journey of travel as I see it and what I think we can and should be doing, before touching on the challenge of doing that and outlining where we are. As we have a couple of hours, I will leave time for my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South to respond, should he wish.

The petition response outlines the current position. As I will outline over the next few minutes, this afternoon’s conversation has highlighted some of the challenges in how we address the situation and just how far we want to go. I have huge sympathy for those who are trying to do something, but this is not the simplest thing in the world. I will explain exactly why in a moment.

Before I come to that, I congratulate and thank the campaigners, whom I met last week to discuss some of the issues. They have been conducting the “Finn’s Law” campaign in a positive, constructive way to get to a result, and they understand the mechanisms within which we work. They also appreciate, as do a large number of people in the police force—I met the Hertfordshire police and crime commissioner this morning to discuss this issue, as Finn is a member of that force—that the available sentencing powers, if used correctly, are as severe as we see elsewhere. The powers are not as severe as we would like, but it is about how they come across, whether they are used and the context in which they are used. I will return to that point.

I express my horror and disgust at the attack on PC Wardell and police dog Finn in Stevenage in October. Without touching on the case, I will say that the photographs taken of Finn after the operation are deeply distressing. I understand the public outrage that has followed the media coverage of the attack and its aftermath. That response is entirely human and expectable. The extent of the public support not just for Finn but more widely is clear.

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. I ask the Minister not to refer to the court case, as I indicated at the beginning.

Brandon Lewis: Absolutely. I have been very careful not to do that.

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): You are getting quite close. I want to help you.

Brandon Lewis: I appreciate that. Like my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), I have received a huge amount of emails and correspondence on this issue, none of which, I am sorry to say, asked about the welfare of PC Wardell—it was all concerned about Finn, which highlights just how much the public and we care about animals. I am pleased that both are recovering well.

As I said earlier this month, when we twice debated officer safety at length, any kind of assault on a police officer, or on the animals and people who work with them, is completely unacceptable, so I am grateful for this opportunity not only to reiterate that message but to restate my personal commitment to moving forward on this issue.

The particular abilities of dogs make them a vital part of the police team, and indeed the police family. Part of the complication, as one of my hon. Friends mentioned, is that the issue is wider than police dogs. We also have police horses and fire dogs—I met Reqs from Hertfordshire, and he is a fine specimen of a Labrador—and there are other service dogs too. Anyone
who thinks it is appropriate, excusable or acceptable to mistreat, abuse or attack a guide dog or a hearing dog also needs to understand the severity of the crime they are committing. If we move forward on this issue, it is important that we encapsulate the kinds of dogs that serve our community and are extensions of the community that they serve.

Dogs provide important support in many areas of our public services. I have met Reqs, a fire and rescue dog, but there are other dogs working within our military or working to keep our borders safe. We often ask such animals to take on dangerous roles that we either would not ask humans to do or that it would simply not be practical for humans to do. These animals play a hugely important part in ensuring our safety and security.

Police dogs, for example, make a fantastic contribution in searches for suspects, vulnerable people and evidence, in specialist searches for drugs, explosives, firearms and bodies, in crime scene work and, of course, in tracking suspects. The pictures of Finn after the attack remind us of the specific dangers faced more widely by police dogs that are working in pursuit and public order situations. They and their handlers show incredible bravery and go about their work with dedication and courage to keep us safe and fight crime. They show remarkable courage and discipline.

Another police dog, PD Ghost of Merseyside police, lost his life last week while carrying out his duties. He was hit by a car in a tragic accident. The media coverage of his illustrious career—chasing and holding dangerous criminals to keep the local community safe—shows just how much we have lost with his passing. I offer my condolences to his handler, PC Dave Bartley, too.

Much of today’s debate has understandably focused on dogs, but it is important to remember that horses are also an important part of the police family. As well as making a contribution to local policing in our rural communities, police horses are often called on to perform their duties in the face of danger, including in serious public order situations. It is hugely upsetting to read stories such as those reported in the media following the million-mask march in London last year, when people looked to bring down a police horse and its rider, which is a cowardly and dangerous act. The images are still clear in my mind of a football match that I attended when I was young: police horses were brought in to clear in my mind of a football match that I attended.

I offer my condolences to his handler, PC Dave Bartley, too.

The issue is complicated, because it goes more widely than police dogs. None of us thinks of police animals as just equipment. They are an important part of the job, but they are not just equipment. That does not seem to me to convey properly the respect and gratitude that we rightly feel for those animals, for their contribution to law enforcement and public safety more widely. That is why I have written to my ministerial colleagues at the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to explore whether we can do more in law to offer appropriate protection to working animals.

I appreciate Members’ earlier calls about the Policing and Crime Bill, but I think it unlikely that we will do something in that Bill, partly because the Bill is at Report stage in the House of Lords and is likely to receive Royal Assent at the turn of the year. We need to do some work with the Sentencing Council. I will come to penalties in a moment; the point made about them was fair. There is work to do on ensuring that the penalties—which are severe and match those elsewhere in the world—that are linked to the Criminal Damage Act 1971 apply to animals in a way that is appropriate and correct in language, as well as on ensuring the ability to prosecute.

We must also consider using the law not just for police dogs and horses, but more widely for service and working dogs—that might cover guide dogs and potentially those used by the fire and rescue service and others. It is important that we do that piece of work. Other work is going on—I will come to it in a moment; it touches on some of the points the hon. Member for West Ham made about assessing—that means that we might not be able to put something in the Policing and Crime Bill, but if there is a need for legislative change, I will consider opportunities to do so in 2017.

Lyn Brown: I am grateful to the Minister for that assurance. I think he is an honourable man who will keep his word, and I accept that sometimes when we legislate in haste, we legislate badly, and it would be better to do this well. Has he thought of any forthcoming Bills from the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice or DEFRA that he might be able to tag this on to? I always think that a date is a better way to hold the Government to account. It is something tangible and concrete to hang it on.

Brandon Lewis: I thank the hon. Lady for ensuring that she does her best to hold me to account, as well as to tempt me into pre-judging what Bills might be introduced in the next Session. I hope she will understand if I resist, but I will say that if we see while working through the issue that a legislative change is required—Sentencing Council changes might not require it—I will seek to do something in 2017, which is not that far away.

We expect a huge amount from our police support animals, in terms of their training, temperament and performance in their various roles and the dangerous situations in which we ask them to perform. The scale of support for the petition shows that the public hugely
appreciate their work. It is only fair that police dogs and horses receive the best possible protection as they go about their duties.

As has been outlined in this debate by Members and in the response to the petition, significant penalties are already in place that can be issued to those who attack animals that support the police. I recognise that this e-petition debate is about more than just penalties. I hope I have covered some of that already, but I will go further. I am glad that the penalties currently available reflect the seriousness of the offence; the issue is how and where they are used to prosecute successfully. As has been said, an attack on a police dog or other police support animal can be treated as causing unnecessary suffering to an animal under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. The maximum penalty is six months’ imprisonment, an unlimited fine or both. An attack on a police animal can be considered by the court as an aggravating factor, leading to a higher sentence within the range of six months’ custody.

Under some circumstances, assaults on support animals can be treated as criminal damage. I appreciate that that use of language can seem inappropriate, but it is important to note that that charge carries a much wider sentencing range, allowing for penalties of up to 10 years’ imprisonment. I appreciate the comments that my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford made about the valuations required, but we must also bear in mind that the valuation of a police dog, with its training, would be well in excess of the figures involved. Finn’s attacker has been charged with this offence, given the seriousness of the assault.

The petition calls for protection in line with that afforded to police support animals by the US Federal Law Enforcement Animal Protection Act 2000, as the hon. Member for West Ham said. Under that legislation, causing harm to a police animal in the US carries a maximum tariff of one year in prison. Where the offence is more serious, the maximum penalty can be as high as 10 years, so the maximum penalties available there, if used, are about the same as the maximum penalties here in England and Wales. The issue is whether they are being used and presented in the right way. I agree that the framework within which the offence is held, prosecuted and used is crucial; at the moment, many people feel that it is not ideal. That is why I have outlined that I will work with colleagues from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Ministry of Justice, as well as campaigners and colleagues throughout this House, to consider how we can take the issue forward in a positive way.

Sir Roger Gale: I ask the Minister to take on board the fact that this is not really a DEFRA issue; it is a criminal justice issue. We are talking about police officers, albeit four-legged ones, who give great service, as do the dogs of the armed forces. They are not the same as assistance dogs, however highly assistance dogs are also held in esteem. It is time that the Ministry of Justice is compelled to understand that we are dealing with law enforcement personnel, and to treat them accordingly.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend highlights the complication. The Animal Welfare Act 2006 is part of DEFRA’s portfolio, but as I said, I will also be working with colleagues at the Ministry of Justice. There is a wider issue, which people have raised with me, about how we define this. Is it an issue involving police animals, police and military animals, animals in the fire service and guide dogs? That is why I say that it is not as straightforward as we might like. I want to ensure that we get it absolutely right, so that we cover the right animals in the right way and get any legislation right. As I have said, the penalties elsewhere in the world that people want to be applied are available here; it is about whether they are in the right context and framework. I am determined that we will do what we can to ensure that we get it right. I take my hon. Friend’s point absolutely on board.

That is why it is important that we ensure that the right sentences are handed down when such offences come to light. The Sentencing Council recently consulted on revised guidelines for sentencing in the magistrates courts, including for animal cruelty offences. Throughout the development of the guidelines, the council has worked closely with the RSPCA. It is now reviewing consultation responses and developing definitive new guidelines, which it intends to implement in May next year. I am writing to raise the issue of attacks on police animals to ensure that it can be considered as part of the council’s consultation review.

I want us to do everything we can to ensure that assaults on police animals are taken seriously: that they are reported, that the police respond effectively and that the right sentences are handed down to those who think they can commit such crimes. My officials have been consulting police leads in the area, who are best placed to advise on this issue, and they agree that the penalties for attacking police animals are severe enough: it is the framework and how and when prosecutions are brought that we need to consider.

I know that police leaders are committed to the ethical and effective management, training and handling of police dogs. The current national police lead for dogs, Chief Constable Wilson of Suffolk police, chairs the police dog working group. To respond to one of the specific points raised in this debate, I am pleased to be able to tell the House that, with the support of the College of Policing, the working group is currently updating practice guidance addressing the deployment, safety and welfare of police dogs to further professionalise the discipline. At the heart of the guidance is the welfare of all police dogs. The House may wish to note that both dogs and mounted policing will be brought together soon under one national police lead, Deputy Chief Constable Rod Hansen of Gloucestershire police, who currently holds the lead on mounted policing.

National statistics on the number of assaults on police animals are not collated, as was rightly said earlier, but I can inform the House that the national working group will consult police forces on the issue over the next few months to get a better idea of the extent, so that we can get the reporting correct. I am confident that police and crime commissioners will also play their part in saying quite clearly on behalf of local communities that attacks on police animals are abhorrent and unacceptable. The day after the attack, the PCC for Hertfordshire, David Lloyd, praised PC Wardell and PD Finn for their quick thinking and bravery. He subsequently issued a statement applauding the petition’s success. I met David this morning to discuss the issue; I welcome his helpful intervention
and his positive contributions, which highlight how PCCs can play a lead role in expressing the public's view on how we should see police animals.

We must strive to protect all members of the policing family: police dogs and their handlers, police horses and their riders, police officers, staff and volunteers. I know that chief constables are signing up to a pledge to support officers and staff who are victims of assault. For our part, the Government could not be clearer about the great value and respect in which we hold the police and the need to support them in their work. To enable chief officers to understand the scale of the issue, it is important that we have accurate data to capture the number of assaults, so we have sought to improve the collection of such data. As I outlined to the House in an Opposition day debate in October, we will ask all forces to include the number of assaults with injury on a police officer as part of their recorded crime data from April next year. Combined with the measures that I have announced today to address assaults on animals, that represents a significant step towards building a much better picture of assaults against the police family, so that local police leaders are in a better position to fully support their workforce of all types.

I thank again those who launched and signed the petition for the way in which they have conducted their campaign, which has allowed people throughout the country to get their voices heard. Those voices are being heard very clearly: all the Members who spoke today highlighted that. The Government and our police partners will work together to look at assaults on the police family—I use that word carefully—in the round and to send the firmest possible message that such assaults cannot, should not and must not be tolerated.

5.42 pm

David Mackintosh: I welcome all the speeches and interventions from the right hon. and hon. Members who took part in this wide-ranging debate, which has covered a number of issues.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for her input. She gave some real, specific examples, particularly of brave police dogs, reminding us that they help not only to fight crime but to protect vulnerable people and catch criminals. We also heard from her that the legal threshold is too high, so it is hard to bring about prosecutions. Given her work with the commendable “Protect the Protectors” campaign, she is well qualified to point that out.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) suggested an amendment to the Policing and Crime Bill, which the Minister dealt with in his response and which I will come back to. My hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) reminded us that the attack on police dog Finn prompted this petition and that we should wish him and his handler, PC Dave Wardell, all the best. We treat these brave dogs and horses like a broken window. We need to do much better than that. My hon. Friend referred to a survey of handlers that indicated that after 92% of incidents, no charge was brought; only 8% of incidents resulted in a charge.

The hon. Member for Halifax suggested that the use of body cameras could help to bring about better prosecutions in the future. I ask the Minister to look at that. My hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage referred to laws in other countries, and I hope the Government will seriously look at those. My hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) reminded us that as MPs we all owe a personal debt of gratitude to the police dogs that sweep the Palace of Westminster daily. He also reminded us that police horses should not be forgotten.

The shadow Policing Minister, the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), rightly thanked the 120,000 people who signed the petition and she reminded us that the attack on police dog Finn and PC Wardell was not an isolated incident. She asked the Minister to write to the Sentencing Council, to make it aware of the views of the House. I commend that suggestion; we must ensure it happens. She also pointed out that legislation does not adequately recognise the bravery of police animals.

In his response, the Policing Minister told us that he is a dog lover, which I am sure we all welcome. He also discussed the direction of travel and the challenges involved in looking at this issue. He questioned whether sentencing is being used effectively. He said that the guidelines are adequate but we are not sure whether they are being effectively implemented. I am pleased that he recognises why the term “criminal damage” is so inappropriate and why it affects so many people when it is used. I am also pleased to hear that he has written to the Ministry of Justice and to DEFRA to see what extra legislative support we can put in place to help service animals. I welcome that; I will also write to those Departments and to the Minister after the debate, and I hope we will see something about this in the Queen’s Speech next year.

The Minister also said that he had written to the Sentencing Council. The cost of training and investing in service animals amounts to more than the £5,000 threshold required by law. I hope he will ensure that that is pointed out to the Sentencing Council and to the Crown Prosecution Service.

I welcome the Minister’s comment about collecting data. If we improve data collection, we will be better able to identify the issue and have more accurate statistics. I ask that that point is passed on and filtered down to the individual dog handlers, many of whom feel that the threshold is so high that they do not report any attack because they do not feel the report will go anywhere.

I am grateful that the Government have pledged to look at the issue, which I will be following up with the Minister and other members of the Government. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who spoke in this debate and I thank you, Mr Crausby, for chairing it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered e-petition 168678 relating to the status of police dogs and horses.

5.46 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall  
Tuesday 15 November 2016

[MR DAVID NUTTALL in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

State Pension Age: Women

9.30 am

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered acceleration of the state pension age for women born in the 1950s.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall, and to appear in front of the Minister. I look forward to a positive response from him to all the remarks made today.

A woman born on 6 March 1953 retired on 6 March 2016, aged 63. A woman born a month later, on 6 April 1953, retired on 6 July, aged 63 and three months. A woman born on 6 May 1953 retired a few days ago, on 6 November, aged 63 and six months. A woman born on 6 June 1953 has to wait until 6 March 2017, when she will be aged 63 and nine months. A woman born on 6 July 1953 will not receive her pension until her 64th birthday, in July 2017. We are beginning to get the picture. For each month that passes, women’s pensionable age increases by three months. Let us just dwell on that—a three-month addition to someone’s pensionable age for each month that they were born later than their neighbour, friend or colleague.

I spoke of a woman born in March 1953, who retired this year aged 63. A woman born a year later, in March 1954, will not retire until September 2019, when she will be aged 65 and a half. She will be two and a half years older than a woman born a year earlier before she receives her state pension. A woman born six months later, in September 1954, will have to wait until she is 66, in September 2020. Over an 18-month period, women’s pensionable age will have increased by a whopping three years. As we keep saying, we are not against equalisation of the state pension age. The issue is the pace of change, as well as the lack of appropriate notice.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and on making these compelling historical points about women. For that reason, and because of the documented evidence that he has submitted here today, does he agree that there is a compelling need—and an imperative on the Government—to bring about transitional protection and transitional payments for these women?

Ian Blackford: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. She makes a telling point. The significance of having the debate today, for which I am grateful, is that next week we will have the autumn statement. That is the opportunity for the Government to respond to the injustices that women are facing and to do the right thing. We often hear about people who have been left behind. The Women Against State Pension Inequality have been left behind, and the Government must act.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. He has certainly done women a great service, because he has been working on this issue for a long time. The other dimension to the issue, which we see when we do an analysis of it, is that it affects women in different ways. There are different poverty levels involved, so things such as bus passes may not be accessible to them.

Ian Blackford: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. I will come later to the proposals that my party has made. We have been able to test the number of women who would be taken out of poverty as a consequence, and it is a very important point. We should remind ourselves what a pension is. It is deferred income. Women and men have paid national insurance in the expectation of receiving a state pension. That is the deal, plain and simple: people pay in, and they get their entitlement. They do not expect the Government, without effective notice, to change the rules. What has been done to the WASPI women has undermined fairness and equity in this country.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is certainly painting a picture. Does he agree that the impact of the changes to the state pension age cannot be seen in isolation from the impact of historical gender inequality?

Ian Blackford: Absolutely. The hon. Lady makes a valid point, because women have faced inequality in pension entitlement, whether in the state pension or occupational pension schemes. In the past, they were even denied access to occupational pension schemes, and we are still battling for equal pay for women. It is simply not right that in addition to all the injustices that women have faced, they now face the injustice of having to wait much longer than they expected for their pension.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He is making a compelling case and outlining the lottery of the current arrangements. The WASPI petition was signed by 2,249 of my constituents and I also received many letters. Does he agree that additional transitional arrangements are needed to support a group of women who in the past have often been working mothers and are now carers for elderly parents and sick husbands, and who have often had low-paid manual jobs and just have not been able to build up private pensions?

Ian Blackford: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point and demonstrates, rightly, why hon. Members across the House need to unite. This is not about one party—let me make that absolutely clear.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I will in a second. This is about all of us recognising that, as a House, we have a responsibility to do the right thing. It is about giving encouragement to the Government, just as happened last year with tax credits when we realised that we were going to be punishing hard-working families, to do the right thing.
by the women affected by this issue. That is what the Government have to listen to and respond to in the autumn statement.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con) rose—

Ian Blackford: I will take another couple of interventions and then I need to move on.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), the fact that this issue kicks in at the latter stages of a woman’s career, when her caring responsibilities can increase significantly because of elderly parents and her own health may start to deteriorate, means that the level of uncertainty and anxiety is greatly increased. Suddenly, the prepared-for pension does not materialise, and women with caring responsibilities are left in limbo.

Ian Blackford: The right hon. Lady makes a valid point, and I will come later to the notice period because that many women in particular have. She is right to raise that point. I will take one more intervention and then move on.

Ian Austin: This is a very important point. I have lost count of the number of women in Dudley who have told me that they have not had time to make plans for the new arrangements. They have had to take time off to bring up their children, or reduce their hours or retire early to care for ageing parents or grandchildren. Other women have told me that they have lost their husbands and have not just had to come to terms with the bereavement, but have been thrown into financial turmoil as a result.

There is an additional unfairness in former industrial areas such as the black country, where women typically left school at 15 or 16, started work and did hard work all their lives. That is very different from someone graduating in their early twenties and doing an office job. Women in the black country have done their bit, and that is why the Government should be coming up with proper transitional arrangements so that they can plan properly for their retirement now.

Ian Blackford: I agree with that point. Many of the 2.6 million women affected have made more than 35 years’ worth of national insurance contributions. They have paid their way. They have paid their dues. This is about us accepting our responsibility. As I mentioned, 2.6 million women are affected by the increase in pensionable age and have an entitlement to a pension that they should have had. They need to be treated fairly—no more, no less.

The Government often state that the increase in pensionable age under the Pensions Act 2011 means that no woman will have to wait more than 18 months for their pension. That is disingenuous, as it came as an addition to the changes in the Pensions Act 1995, which are still being implemented. It is a fact that women’s pensionable age is increasing by six years over a very short period. That is the issue and the reality. It is about the combined impact of the 1995 Act and the 2011 Act. The Government have a duty to be truthful about the matter.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I am conscious that many Members want to speak and I do want to take interventions, but I will press on, if I may, and take interventions later.

The issue is not only the sharp acceleration of pensionable age, but that many women were unaware of the increase in pensionable age. As the Select Committee on Work and Pensions reported in March this year, “more could...have been done” to communicate the changes, especially between 1995 and 2009. Women have been let down not only by the rapidly increasing pensionable age, but by a failure of communication. We face the rapid acceleration of pensionable age and also the nightmare scenario for many women that they were not aware that it was coming. They have had little notice and no time to prepare for an increase in pensionable age. They have not been able to adjust accordingly, and in many cases we are talking about women and families who are struggling.

The Prime Minister talks about those who have been left behind and the duty the Government have to deal with it; the WASPI women have been left behind and it is now our responsibility to deal with it. We cannot just shrug our shoulders and blame past Governments for the failure to give women notice. We have a collective responsibility to deal with this issue and we have to show leadership. We cannot take the line that the last Parliament made a decision and there is nothing we can do; that is an abrogation of responsibility by all of us.

When the Government came forward with proposed changes to working tax credits that would have damaged millions of families in the UK, after much opposition, the Government ultimately relented and removed the proposals. We need to campaign in Parliament and throughout the United Kingdom to achieve the same objective here. We are not going away. The Government have to recognise that women should not be punished in the way that they are being by this increase of three months for every month’s difference in their age.

The Government have asked what we would do. That is why, in September, we in the Scottish National party published our own report looking at various options. We suggested a return to the timeline of the 1995 Act, which would slow down the increase to a pensionable age of 65 by 18 months, and defer the increase to a pensionable age for women of 66 years into the next decade. The cost of deferring over an additional 18-month period would be £7.9 billion. The Government estimated that the acceleration of state pensionable age in the 2011 Act for both women and men saved around £30 billion from 2016-17 to 2025-26, but that is simply not the case. That was scaremongering from the Government and, not for the first time, they got their numbers wrong. Depending on the timescale for the increase to age 66, there will be additional costs in the next decade.

I am grateful that, through the Backbench Business Committee, we have secured this debate, which is supported on an all-party basis, with a number of Conservative Members supporting the motion that was originally put
forward. Of course, that happened on the back of many of us here today and in Parliament putting petitions down on behalf of the WASPI women. The WASPI women are going to be knocking on Members’ doors this week, next week and until we do the right thing.

We are often told that this is about the money. “We can’t afford it,” they say. This is not about women getting something they are not entitled to; it is about entitlement based on national insurance payments and about the Government meeting their obligations out of the national insurance fund—yes, for those who were not aware, inside Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs there is a national insurance fund. I am grateful to the Government, or more specifically the Government Actuary’s Department, for stating that there is a projected fund surplus of £26.3 billion at the end of 2016-17, rising to £30.7 billion in 2017-18. The argument that the Government cannot do this is therefore bunkum. The money is there. These women have paid into the fund and we should meet our obligations. Women have paid their dues, the fund is in surplus and the Government can make restitution.

Next week we will have the autumn statement. If the Minister chooses, he could tell the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the strength of feeling on this issue. Next week the Chancellor could, if he is minded, deliver some good news for the WASPI women. Will the Minister demand that the Chancellor uses the surplus to do so? The money is in the national insurance fund to allow the Government to take action—to right a wrong, to reflect on the injustice of a sharp increase in pensionable age, to show leadership and to recognise that Parliament collectively got it wrong with the timetabled increases. This is, after all, about fairness. Men are seeing a one-year increase in pensionable age; for women it is six years, over too short a period. The Minister can be a hero to 1950s women by addressing the injustices that many are facing.

We are often told that there was no choice in the scale of the increase or the timing, and Europe was forcing equalisation upon us. In our report, we published the scale of increases in pensionable age in each European country. There are only two countries that are seeing such a rapid increase in pensionable age: Italy and Greece. When the Prime Minister took office, the first debate she fronted was on Trident renewal. The motion did not have a price tag, but the Chair of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), informed the House that it could be as much as £205 billion. The Government effectively asked Parliament to give them a blank cheque. We can find hundreds of billions of pounds for weapons that can blow humanity to smithereens, but we cannot meet what should be a contractual obligation to 1950s-born women. Where is the fairness? Where is the humanity? Of course, the Government will be prepared to find £7 billion to renovate this place. If I had a choice, I would fund the WASPI women’s pensions first, and not spend a fortune on this place.

I know that a number of Conservative Members are here, and they are broadly supportive of the WASPI campaign. It is a pity that we do not have those who so far do not support it, but I say to the Conservatives: is there anyone on the Government Benches who is prepared to stand up and say that it is right for women’s pensionable age to increase at the rate of three months per month? How can anybody possibly think it is right that pensionable age should increase by three months per month? I would be happy to give way to anyone who wants to stand up and say that it is right, but I suspect that we will get what we always get: silence—silence and the hope that we, the Opposition, the Tories who support this and the WASPI women will go away. As I have said, we are not going away. We have given the Government an option and, unlike their Trident nuclear weapons commitment, it is costed. More importantly, not only are we not going away; the WASPI women are not going away.

The Pensions Commission that reported in 2005 suggested that at least 15 years’ notice should be given on any future increase in pensionable age. Given that, I ask the Minister: how can the Government defend the 2011 Act and some women receiving pretty negligible notice? Does the Minister think that is acceptable? There would be uproar, and no doubt legal challenges, if occupational pension schemes behaved in such a way. Can we imagine the outcry from Members of Parliament if we were told, with little notice, that our pension payments would be deferred by an additional six years?

Ian Austin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I want to make a little progress, and will take interventions later.

Just as workers pay into occupational schemes, men and women pay national insurance in return for a state pension. Why should women be treated so shoddily? It is little wonder that WASPI women are considering legal action. For too long women have suffered injustices as far as equal pay is concerned. They tend to have much poorer workplace pension protection than men and are now facing state pension inequality. Why do we not stop, take stock and put in place mitigation? Let us have equalisation, but let us do so fairly. When we consider what has been done as far as communication is concerned, it is dismal. Women should have been written to at the earliest opportunity, letting them know what was changing and allowing them to consider their options. Yet in 2011, the Government said their approach was to inform women through leaflets and publicity campaigns. That was a failure of responsibility to act and inform appropriately.

It was only in 2009 that the DWP began to take responsibility and proactively write to women to tell them about the 1995 Act. They started to tell women in 2009, but it took the DWP years to issue all the letters. Last night I was given the response to a freedom of information request on the timeline of the letters—perhaps the most damning thing about this whole debate. Women born between April 1953 and December 1953 were formally told of the increased pensionable age only in January 2012. Women born between December 1953 and April 1955 were told only in February 2012. A woman born in April 1953 under the old regime of retiring at 60 would have expected to retire in April 2013. She was given just one year of formal notice of her new retirement date of July 2016. It was 17 years after the 1995 legislation before the DWP could be bothered to formally tell the women involved—too little notice; too little, too late. We should all hang our heads in shame at the way the WASPI women have been treated. If there is
one issue that should force the Government to agree to change now, it is that new information and the timeline of notice given.

Why have we been able to find this out through a freedom of information request from the WASPI women? Why have the Government not come clean about this before? Who knew about this in Government? Did the Minister know? I have had many letters on this issue from the women affected. Rosina wrote to me:

“When the 2011 Pensions Bill was announced, it accelerated these changes, so that Women’s SPA would be 65 by November 2018 and then both Men’s & Women’s SPA would rise together to 66 by 5th April...Letters began to be sent out...but many never received them. I received my letter in early 2013, just before my 58th Birthday and just 2 years before my expected retirement age of 60. The letter advising me that I would now have to wait until I was 66 before I could draw my pension! How can I be expected to plan for a 6 year increase with just 2 years notice? How can this be acceptable? I had already made plans for my retirement. I will lose over £40,000 of pension because of this. I have paid into the system in good faith and the system has now failed me. I want the £40,000 of pension because of this. I have paid into the system in good faith and the system has now failed me. I want the...Women of the 50’ s by their gross mismanagement and...that they will now do the right thing and pay us what we are due.”

I cannot put it any better than Rosina. Will the Minister will now do the right thing and pay us what we are due.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): My hon. Friend has come forward with a shocking revelation today, thanks to the WASPI women who made the FOI request. Nearly half a million women had only a year’s notice to change their retirement plans. I do not think that is acceptable, particularly given everything we have heard about why women are more likely to be dependent on a state pension and likely to be in poverty in old age. Does he agree that it puts an absolute moral imperative on the Government to take responsibility for their failure to let women know before a year in advance that they were going to lose out in such a way?

Ian Blackford: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. I know that the Minister is a decent and honourable man. I hope he listens to the evidence and will go back to his colleagues in Government and recognise that the surplus we talked about is there in the national insurance fund. He would make us all happy, but more importantly he would make the WASPI women happy, if the Government showed they were prepared to act.

Peter Aldous: The issue of notice is raised a great deal, and it has been said that notice was given in magazines and the like. Given the high-profile television campaign at the moment for workplace pensions, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the issue should have been on television 15 or 20 years ago?

Ian Blackford: Absolutely. There has been a gross failure of communication at all levels. Many of us have access to the occupational pension schemes. We are members of the House of Commons scheme. We get an annual statement of our pension entitlement. That is what the DWP should have been providing, rather than waiting 17 years before communicating with the women involved.

I am conscious of time and I want to begin to wrap up. Much of what I have been talking about was picked up by the Select Committee report in March this year. It said:

“Well into this decade far too many affected women were unaware of the equalisation of state pension age at 65 legislated for in 1995.”

The National Centre for Social Research stated:

“In 2008, fewer than half...of the women who, at that point, would not be eligible for their state pension until they were 65 were aware of the...change.”

That statement referred to research carried out in 2011. Given that we knew there was a lack of appreciation of the 1995 changes, why pour oil on troubled waters by accelerating the timescales in 2011? That was simply vindictive and cruel. Today, let us correct that. Let us show compassion and deliver fairness to the WASPI women.

I have been dealing with this issue on a UK-wide basis, but I want to briefly touch on Scotland. To put this into context, there are 243,900 WASPI women in Scotland. I would dearly love for us to have responsibility for pensions in Scotland, but we do not. The commitment the SNP has given in supporting the slowdown of the increase in pensionable age is one we would legislate for if we had the powers, but we do not. The powers that Scotland has over social security are limited to 15% of such spending in Scotland. We have limited powers. Section 28 of the Scotland Act 2016 grants exceptions to reserved areas where we can top up payments, but this does not include pensions assistance or payments by reasons of age.

I mention that because the Secretary of State, responding to a question I asked about WASPI mitigation last month, said that the SNP “now control a Government who have the power to do something about this and put their money where their mouth is.”—[Official Report, 17 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 590.]

The Secretary of State created the impression that we hold powers in areas where we do not. I sought to be charitable to him in a point of order I raised later that day; rather incredibly, I received a letter from the Secretary of State on the 19th arguing that his statement was correct. Let me be clear: it was not. I then raised a further point of order on the 19th, when the Speaker suggested I apply for a face-to-face debate. I am grateful the Minister is here, but it is unfortunate that the Secretary of State is not. He should be dragged to this House and forced to accept that he cannot blame the Scottish Government when they do not have competency for the failures of this Government, and it must stop.

This is an important matter. We cannot have the UK Government suggesting that the Scottish Government have powers that they do not have. I wish we did have powers over pensions. If we had those powers, we would do the right thing by the WASPI women. Until such time as we have such powers we will push the Government to accept their obligations. This Tory Government have ducked their responsibility to the WASPI women for too long. It is time to face up to reality. Pensions are not a privilege; they are a contract, and the UK Government have broken that contract with the WASPI women.

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): I am looking to start the contributions from Front Benchers at 10.30 am, so based on the number of speakers I have been notified of, that will mean about five minutes maximum per speaker. I call Tom Elliott.
10 am

**Tom Elliott** (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I congratulate and thank the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for securing the debate, which is very timely. The most recent changes to the women’s state pension age will have a direct impact on around half a million women across the United Kingdom. The hon. Gentleman outlined the historical issues extremely well.

It is estimated that in Northern Ireland around 80,000 women will be affected. A number of weeks ago I, like other Members, presented a petition to the House containing the signatures of hundreds of residents of my constituency who are concerned about the unfair changes to the women’s state pension age. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to Wilma Grey, who lives in my constituency and is the co-ordinator of Women Against State Pension Inequality in Northern Ireland. She tirelessly campaigns on a voluntary basis to raise awareness of this issue.

Nobody would disagree that rationalisation of pensions is necessary, but it must be sustainable and ready for an ageing population who are living longer. If pensions are not properly funded and addressed, they have the potential to be a millstone around the neck of future Governments. We accept that, but few things are so clearly deserved in life as the state pension. I reiterate the promise that if someone works hard their whole working life, the state will take care of them in their old age. That ideal has underpinned our society for more than 70 years, but the promise is precisely why I am deeply worried about the manner in which the Government have decided to equalise pension ages.

This is the key issue: women who were born in the 1950s were made a promise and the promise is now being broken. Worse still, the changes are being made with little to no notice. These women, who have rightfully been considering and planning for retirement, now face uncertainty that threatens what should be the most relaxed period of their lives. Today’s national insurance contributions pay for today’s pensions, and many of these women believed that when they started paying contributions pay for today’s pensions, and many of these women believed that when they started paying national insurance contributions—some of them at the age of 16—they were entering into an agreement with the Government to retire at 60.

Raising the retirement age may be a necessary evil. With life expectancy climbing, it is unavoidable that we must work longer and retire later. However, the problem is that although that principle may be sound, the reality is somewhat different. When Her Majesty’s Government introduced the Pensions Act 1995, women were supposedly given 15 years to prepare, as the women’s pension age would not begin to equalise with men’s until 2010. However, no one who was aged 44 or over would have been affected at the time. It is therefore understandable that any discussion of pension changes was viewed as irrelevant.

The Government at the time should have made a concerted effort to publicise the changes widely and to spell out the implications for the women affected, but that was glaringly absent. To compound that, the Pensions Act 2011 increased the overall state pension age to 66 by 2020, accelerating the rate of increase for women. Because they had not been notified previously, it was only at that point that many women learned of the changes to the state pension age, with some women reaching state pension age at 66 when they had anticipated drawing their pension at 60.

It is therefore no surprise that the women affected by the changes are frustrated by the implications for their post-retirement planning, both financial and otherwise, and by the fact that the Government have substantially moved the goalposts without effective communication. That unfairness must be addressed and the Government must now consider the introduction of appropriate transitional payments.

10.4 am

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for securing the debate.

I find myself speaking on the Women Against State Pension Inequality women for, I think, the fourth time. Frustratingly, despite three previous debates and the launch of a UK-wide petition, which attracted 2,534 signatures in my constituency and would have attracted more had there been more time; despite legal action from the WASPI women being seriously on the table due to what has been, in effect, the mis-selling of pensions are not a benefit? The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) described them as a promise. They are not a promise; they are a transitional payment. Everyone is feeling the frustration.

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): The situation is worse than the hon. Lady described. Five and a half years ago I stood in this Chamber with my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves)—our then Front-Bench spokesperson—and challenged the Government on this issue. We did that again the year after and again the year after that. The hon. Lady described recent action, but the situation is even worse: we have been telling the Government that this is wrong since 2011.

**Patricia Gibson**: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, and I go back to my original point: after all this time, all this activity, all the warnings, and all the stories of hardship, we are still no further forward. When will this Government wake up to the fact that pensions are not a benefit? The hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott) described them as a promise. They are not a promise; they are a social contract, which has been cruelly and thoughtlessly broken. It is time for the Government to step up and take responsibility for the way in which this matter has been mishandled over a number of years, and stop dragging this misery out for the women caught up in this injustice.

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Patricia Gibson**: I will not—I am very conscious that other people want to speak, so I apologise to the hon. Lady.
Around 2.6 million women have been affected by these changes, and in Scotland, the number of women affected is 243,900. On behalf of the Scottish National party, Landman Economics analysed the costs and distributional impacts of potential changes to pension arrangements for women born in the 1950s who are losing out, in the context of the surplus in the national insurance fund, which is projected to stand at around £30 billion at the end of 2017-18 according to the Government’s own figures. With that surplus now forecast to be larger than it was before, the £7.9 billion that it will cost to give those women relief and a delay in the rise of their pension age is very much affordable.

The Landman report costed a return to the Pensions Act 1995 by immediately restoring the timetable in that Act, raising the pension age for women from 63 in March 2016 to 65 by April 2020, with no further increase to 66 until the mid-2020s. That is the second most expensive option, costing about £7.9 billion over five years. That cost is not trivial, but as we have heard today, it is not prohibitively expensive either in the context of other Government spending plans. It has the merit of completely eliminating the problem of an accelerated increase in pension ages for women born in the 1950s by returning to a timetable set out two decades ago, giving women much more time—necessary time—to adapt to the changes. It would then be possible to increase women’s pension age to 66 at some later point in the 2020s. That measure has the benefit of being progressive and reducing relative and absolute pensioner poverty.

The UK Government’s position, even after all the mistakes in the process have been laid bare for all to see, has been characterised by intransigence and wilful stubbornness. It is time to do what is right, fair and just. It is time for the Government to stop telling us that they have no choice. It is time to make the right choices, and it is time for justice for the WASPI women.

10.9 am

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My thanks go to the hon. Members who secured this important debate. I want to contribute on behalf of the women in my constituency who find themselves affected by the change to the state pension age. They are angry about the pace at which the change has been accelerated, angry about the way it was done and how it was not communicated properly—many learnt about it from the media, not a Government body—and angry that the Government have not acted to help them.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government are being cloth-eared, that they should listen to the cries of anger across the UK and that these women need to be heard?

Jessica Morden: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) said, clearly the Government have failed to listen over successive years when the issue has been raised. As other hon. Members have mentioned, there has been debate after debate, and question after question.

The women affected in my constituency are not just angry but anxious and worried, because they face real financial insecurity. I will focus on that. Some 3,100 women are affected in Newport East, and 135,000 are affected in Wales. Many have been hit particularly hard, with significant changes to their state pension age and, as was mentioned earlier, a lack of appropriate notification.

Last week, a new constituent—I very much welcome new constituents—contacted me. Her story illustrates the financial insecurity facing many people. She had to sell her long-term family home in Bristol and move away from her children, parents and friends in order to make ends meet and to tide her over until she is 66. This is a woman who, as a single parent, received no support when her children were small. She worked all her life and then discovered, far too late in the day, that she will have to survive for longer. She is recovering from breast cancer but does not feel able to work at the moment, and she is trying to navigate the disability benefits system. This is a woman who explained to me how she would ring the DWP every single year when she was working to check that she had paid enough contributions to get her full pension at 60. In her words:

“This is not the retirement I planned at all—I live in a constant state of worry due to the cancer and financial pressures. The goal posts have been moved twice”.

She said that this is surely discrimination against women at its worst.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important point. Is she as surprised as I am that there are no Government Back Benchers here? Could that be because there are no WASPI women in their constituencies?

Jessica Morden: The constituent I speak of, in fact, from a constituency where she was represented by—

Mrs Hodgson: Or not?

Jessica Morden: Or maybe not in that case, but I will leave that there.

Another constituent explained to me the impact of her pension date being deferred for the second time with little time to make compensatory arrangements. She has worked for 45 years and paid her way, and the changes to the pension age, which mean that she is not in receipt of her state pension at 60, will deny her more than £38,000. She, too, has cancer and is considering whether she has to give up work.

Alison McGovern: My hon. Friend was also in the debate with me and our hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) back in 2011, so we are veterans of this campaign. Does she think that the Government should look at the net cost of any transitional arrangements? As she points out, many women who are missing out on their pension are now relying on disability benefits because of the incidence of ill health among the women affected.

Jessica Morden: My hon. Friend makes a crucial point. The change to the state pension age is affecting people who are ill and on disability benefits, and the Government should look into that.
My constituent who has cancer and is considering giving up work tells me that instead of seeing retirement as a positive development, she is dreading the financial insecurity after having worked for 45 years. These women had a picture of what their retirement might look like and it has been cruelly taken away. They did not expect the Government to change the rules. It would be good to know whether the Minister gets just how tough it is for many trying to find work at this stage, especially those who are ill or who have a disability. What will Ministers do for that group of women?

Women who have contacted me from Newport East add their voices to the calls for more reasonable transitional arrangements that are particularly mindful of those who are ill, who depend more on the state pension in retirement and who have limits on their ability to work. We need the Government to move on this issue and ease the impact of the changes on those most affected. The Government have an opportunity in the autumn statement. There are a number of options on the table and they are all ways in which the Government could act. We need them to take responsibility for what has happened to these women.

10.15 am

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) not just on securing the debate, but on bringing forward the report and putting on the table some real facts and figures that the Government cannot deny.

I often tell constituents that I speak from a different world from the Government, and today the Government’s attitude to the WASPI women has proven that to be the case. I come from a world where women worked, often intermittently because of family commitments that involved childcare and family caring. Those women suffered lower pay and a lack of pension contributions, often due to part-time work. However, they always had the comfort of their contract with the Government that they would receive their pension at the age of 60. That contract was broken by the Pensions Act 1995, and the women were not notified. Yet the previous Minister continued to tell us that women were generally aware of what was happening with pension changes. They may have been generally aware, but they did not know that it was happening to them in their personal circumstances. That has been proven by the lack of notification and the fact that the information that did come from DWP was often conflicting.

In the Government’s world, these women were deemed suitable for a rapid increase in pension age. Into the bargain, it was deemed necessary for them to pay more national insurance contributions than they were originally contracted to. Since then, as the proverbial has started to hit the fan, we have all become aware of the bigger picture and the implications for the women. In the past year, the Government’s Budget contained inheritance tax cuts of £2.6 billion, capital gains tax cuts of £2.9 billion, corporation tax giveaways of £8.5 billion, higher rate tax relief of £3 billion, and individual savings account and savings relief of £2.5 billion. That is nearly £20 billion of tax giveaways for the people who live in the Government’s world, but not for the people who live in our world. At the same time, the Government brought in the right-to-buy discount on social housing, which will cost something like £12 billion.

This is an alien world to the one that me and my constituents inhabit, and yet the previous Minister hid behind the stock answer that the alternative transition will cost too much money, and asked where that money will come from and what cuts we, in opposition, would make. As we have heard, our preferred option would cost £8 billion and there is no need to make cuts. I have outlined simple tweaks that could be made to the Budget. There is £30 billion of surplus in the national insurance contributions fund, so the money is clearly there, and there is an autumn statement coming up in which the Government could do something.

The name “national insurance fund” is a misnomer, given the way things are happening. This generation of women has lived through the endowment mis-selling scandal and the payment protection insurance mis-selling scandal, but to have to live through the state mis-selling pensions is something else. It is no wonder these women are going to court. This is not about where to make cuts; it is about making the correct moral decision.

Last week I went to the funeral of a former councillor colleague, Jim Buchanan. He was a great campaigner for social justice and could not believe this position, which affected his wife—and, by default, the two of them as a couple—and many others. Jim actually joked that he would need to work longer to keep bringing extra money into the household. Instead, sadly, he died at 63, leaving behind a widow who is still affected by the pension increases. There are many such cases across the country.

I say to the Minister that there are now Tory Back Benchers involved, and there is cross-party support for the campaign. Do the right thing and act. The forthcoming autumn statement is a golden opportunity to do something for these fantastic WASPI women, and the local Ayrshire WASPI campaigners in my constituency, deserve.

10.19 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for securing it and for giving us all a chance to speak. It was a pleasure to join him and others in going to the Backbench Business Committee—this debate is the result of a combined request from many of us here in the Chamber. It is good to see a goodly number of Opposition Members, although there are perhaps not so many Government Members.

I welcome this debate, which was secured with a great work ethic. If people do not work, they do not eat. If people pay their dues, they reap what they sow. That is the premise on which an entire generation was raised, but I have been told that the dues have been uplifted and that, for some, the harvest is not due for another three and a half years, so they have to keep slogging on.

That might seem okay. What is three and a half years in the grand scheme of things? It is not that long. I want the House to consider a lady who left school at 14, as was then permissible, to work in a local sewing factory. She worked there for the next 35 years, until the factory was closed and relocated abroad. With no education and no skills, she took on a job cleaning the floors of schools and buildings, which she has done on her hands.
and knees for the past 11 years. For that lady to wait another three and a half years is not a small thing—it is more years of an aching back, fingers that remain bent and knees that are worn away.

Liz McInnes: I have a constituent who describes herself as “June ’54 and furious.” One source of her fury, apart from having to wait for her pension, is that she is having to wait for her entitlement to winter fuel allowance and a bus pass. We need to remember that it is not just about pensions; it is about things that will help these women in their declining years as their health declines. Small things are adding to my constituent’s fury.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is very clear. Many of my constituents are equally furious. They might not have been born in June ’54, but they are equally furious. The lady she mentions and the lady I spoke about, who worked for 35 years in a sewing factory and 11 years in a school, are representative of ladies across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the Northern Ireland pensioners’ parliament, which has done tremendous work? One person in my constituency, Mr Nixon Armstrong, has been a great ambassador in getting rights for these women.

Jim Shannon: All Members from Northern Ireland have had a chance to meet the pensioners’ parliament, which has lobbied us on this issue. We are here today to speak on their behalf.

We all know the background to this debate. The Government changed the timetable because of the increase in life expectancy, but as we have illustrated, the numbers do not equal the human cost or the health implications. Even for women who have a job in an office and are expected to continue working for another six years, the repetitive strain of typing, and so on, has not been taken into consideration and has been ignored.

Women born in the 1950s are justified in their argument that they have been hit particularly hard by the significant changes to their state pension age, which was imposed without appropriate notification. They have not been looking to the future and thinking, “I’ll take a high-tech job at night-time and do a course to get a qualification. I can’t do this hard-labour job for the next 30 years.” The fact is that these women have been subject to the whim of Government, with no notice for them to change their future potential.

I understand how the world works. If the Government continue to borrow, the debt continues to rise. We all know the story. Changes must be made, but how we make those changes is a problem. I fully support the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign in calling for a fair transitional state pension arrangement that translates into a bridging pension between the age of 60 and the increased state pension age.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that most people accept that there has to be some change because of the increase in life expectancy? The problem is the utter confusion, the lack of clarity and the complete absence of proper, coherent information. Does he agree that one small thing the Government could do today is to be completely upfront, honest and transparent and say exactly where we are? My constituents and his constituents are in the dark on this issue.

Jim Shannon: Some 4.5 million people in Great Britain will have their SPA increased by less than a year, and 500,000 born between October 1953 and 5 April 1955 will have their SPA increased by more than a year. In Northern Ireland, 76,000 people face a further one-and-a-half-year wait on top of previous rises, which is simply not acceptable. Something must be done to bridge the gap, especially for those who physically cannot keep working. Is there an argument for opening the door to the personal independence payment just a little further to enable these women to have an income without working? That is unlikely, as the Government have made it clear that they are determined, by hook or by crook, to lessen the number of claimants, despite what people’s doctors say—that is a debate for another day.

Jobseeker’s allowance is restricted, and the employment and support allowance criteria ask, for example, whether a person can lift a cardboard box or move a £1 coin. If only that was all it took for a woman to work again, but it takes more than that. I am sorry to say that the Government have not understood the real issue.

We do not have a benefits system that allows us to bridge the gap, so who will help these women? They do not seek to have something for which they have not worked. They are not asking for a handout, like so many people do: they are asking for a return on their hard work over 45 years or more. Why have we let these people down? What will be done today to help those whose hard work means their bodies can no longer continue at this pace?

Individual cases do not necessarily make good law, but I have not recounted an individual case. There are many such women in my constituency and across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is time that the Government acknowledged the effect that the acceleration has had and is having. They should seek to do the right thing for this generation, who have worked hard in all areas to build this country and who deserve the same respect and attention that they have given to this country all their lives.

10.25 am

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I am grateful for the chance to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) on his excellent, terrifically detailed speech. I will not go into great detail, but I wish to make three points. When I first got involved in politics, which was not long ago, I was shocked when an old hand said to me, “Politics isn’t fair.” I hope that we can all prove him wrong. This debate is about fairness for women who have had their pensions taken away. They are struggling at the moment, and they need the Government to be fair.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): It is kind of the hon. Gentleman to allow me to intervene. Not long ago, on 13 July, the new Prime Minister stood on the steps of No. 10 and talked about all parts of the nation, including Northern Ireland, and about bringing the United Kingdom
together. She said that her Government would be not for the privileged few but for the many. We need to hear from the new Minister—I welcome him to his place—the new Prime Minister and the new Government that thousands of women have suffered an injustice. I am one of those women born in the 1950s who is affected; I am one of the furious ones. This is an opportunity for the Prime Minister to meet her words with action. Does the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) agree?

Danny Kinahan: I certainly agree. That goes to the heart of what I was saying about the world needing to be made fair for these women.

Do the Government have the will to deal with this matter? As my hon. Friend the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott) did, I congratulate Wilma Grey on all her work. What came home when we petitioned Stormont and others is that there is still a mass of women who do not know that this is happening—or they vaguely know. Do the Government have a complete database in Northern Ireland? If 76,000 women are affected, how many of them actually know? Are we working on a database? Will that database be used to ensure that everyone knows? We can then concentrate on whom we can help. If we cannot help everybody, can we look for those who really need help, such as those with ill husbands or ill children to look after, those who cannot get a job and those who live out in the sticks? So many different areas have been addressed today. I would rather see the Minister helping everyone, but if not, let us look at the details and make sure that we know who needs help so that we can get involved.

I have spent my life trying to get people in Northern Ireland working together. Will the Minister work with the four separate campaigns so that we get much better detail on this issue and a result that is fair to everyone?

10.29 am

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. This is the fifth or sixth time that we have had this debate, and every single time the Government’s response and stance has been littered with absolute hypocrisy. This Government lecture the Opposition about how they are the Government of responsibility, the ones making the difficult choices and the ones who can be trusted, yet they do not even allow people the chance to be responsible for their own pensions. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) made clear in his speech, women were not given the slightest notice. Some of the women with the steepest hike were given a year’s notice. How does that encourage responsibility?

If anything, the Government have shown how irresponsible they are in working out solutions to problems in society. We have said for years now that people have to make 30 or 35 years’ worth of national insurance contributions to get their pensions. The generation of women that we are discussing have been paying in for 45 or 46 years now, yet they are being told, “Sorry, you still can’t get your pension.” We say that we care more about our pensioners than anybody else, and we pride ourselves on how we look after them, yet as has already been stated, the only other European country that has hiked the pension age at such an incredible pace is Greece, which a few weeks ago tear-gassed pensioners for protesting against austerity. Is that really where we want to put ourselves in terms of how we deal with constituents?

The thing that blows my mind is that if a private company were acting in this way, it would be taken to court. By the sound of things, if the Government do not act soon, they might be taken to court as well. We cannot blame individuals for being pushed to it; the Government are leaving them with no option. This is the last chance for the Government to do something right.

In every debate on this subject, we have called for transitional arrangements, and the Government’s response has always been, “What transitional arrangements are you asking for?” The Scottish National party has gone away and paid our own money to commission a report. I have printed it out, and I am happy to give it to the Minister at the end of this debate in case he does not have a copy.

Our report—I must give credit to Howard Reed of Landman Economics, which did a power of work for it—found independently that the figure of £30 billion being thrown about by the Government was nonsense. Implementing some form of transitional arrangement would cost £8 billion spread across five years. Bearing in mind that we are spending money on nuclear weapons, airstrikes in Syria and renovations to this building, I think it is about time that we got our priorities straight in terms of who needs what most. Even if we were to forget or not bother criticising the poor choices made by this Government, by the end of this year, the national insurance fund will sit at a surplus of £26.3 billion, which is expected to rise to £30.7 billion. The idea that we cannot afford it is nothing other than a bare-faced lie from the Government.

I must say, not just for the Government’s benefit but for that of any women from Women Against State Pension Inequality who might be watching, that we know that our report is not completely perfect and involves an element of compromise. We recognise that this Parliament has only a couple of months left to make an effective change to get something for these women. Therefore, we suggest delaying things for the next Parliament, so the report affects every single woman affected by the changes, although in different ways. We have been reasonable and tried to be genuinely conscientious in coming up with something that the Government can support.

I am at my wits’ end to know what we need to do for this Government to act. We have proved that women in every constituency and from all backgrounds are affected, brought hundreds of petitions before Parliament with thousands upon thousands of signatures, had umpteen debates and gone away and done the Government’s homework for them, and yet we are still told that the Government will not act. What more do we need to give them in order for them to give us something?

I thought that the Government were just arrogant, but now I see that they are both arrogant and incompetent. They do not know what they have been told, the only other European country that has hiked the pension age at such an incredible pace is
given to the devolved Administrations to deal with things. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber said, the Scottish Government do not have the power to top up pensions. Even if we did, I would ask why the Government should effectively ask the Scottish Government to tax Scottish people twice so that they can receive a pension they have been paying into all their lives. However, we do not have those powers. We have argued that we would quite like them; if the Minister is prepared to move on that, we are more than happy to listen.

Most of all, the Government have managed to allow a genuine problem that transcends party political leanings and affects every constituency to become a party political issue in their own minds. The Government are so adamant that they cannot give the Opposition an inch that they are prepared to put this on the backs of women who have suffered their whole lives from inequality and unjust policies. That is completely unforgivable. If this Government are so arrogant and obsessed with not giving the Opposition an inch, they should come up with their own plans to sort the issue. We have jumped through every hoop that the Government have put before us since I first raised the issue during this parliamentary term.

Surely by now the Government recognise that this issue is not going away. It is a reasonable ask, and it is double. The Government are out of excuses, and hell mend you if you do not do anything to fix it.

10.36 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) on securing this debate on an important issue. I am sure that ‘50s-born women up and down the country will be listening eagerly to hear whether the Minister is prepared to do anything more to alleviate their plight. I also pay tribute to the many MPs across the House campaigning on the issue, particularly the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women, which is chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley).

I was never in any doubt when I took on my role as shadow Pensions Minister that this issue would be one of the biggest and most contentious, and I have been proven right. I have already had contact with groups from across the country, all campaigning on the same message: the previous Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition Government’s rapid changes to the state pension age are simply unfair.

Most of the women recognise, as others have said, that the state pension age must be increased in recognition of a workforce that is living longer and to address the gap in the retirement age between men and women. However, what cannot be accepted is the unfair and unjust approach that the previous Government took and that the current Government are not prepared to change. The policy has had failures from the start. There has been a severe lack of communication from the Government on the changes, leaving 2.6 million women in doubt about their circumstances and providing only uncertainty to potentially vulnerable people up and down the country.

The Minister has heard many Members outline the case on behalf of ‘50s-born women. The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber made a comprehensive speech that left us in no doubt about how unfair it all is and how the Government could change things. Although I do not recognise some of his financial numbers, we agree that some changes could certainly be funded if the Government had the will.

There is some Conservative support for the WASPI women. The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who has now left, spoke about the lottery faced by ‘50s-born women when it comes to retirement age. That is hardly fair. My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) spoke about the different levels of poverty created by the Government’s policy, and another Conservative, the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), spoke about people in the latter stage of their careers who find themselves with caring responsibilities and little income to support them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) spoke of bereaved women left with no support. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) described herself as a veteran of the campaign and reminded us that we have been having this debate and talking to the Government about the issue for more than five years, yet they do nothing. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) spoke of angry women, but also of anxious women, one of whom has had to sell her home and move away in order to make ends meet. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke of the hardship of a woman in her sixties forced on to her hands and knees to scrub floors to make ends meet. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) spoke of the half a million women given too few years to prepare for retirement, many of whom probably have some of the lowest incomes in the country.

I know of another example: a 61-year-old woman having to live with a friend, who receives just £8 a week from a private pension and is worried how she will afford basics such as dental treatment. She is like so many others: not fit for work, but not sick enough for employment and support allowance. She walks to the jobcentre every day, even in the snow, with her walking stick. She was let down by the last Parliament, and now this Government are letting her down.

I believe the Minister to be a caring and compassionate man who is looking for answers to a problem that is not of his making but is tricky for the Government. Indeed, the absence of Conservative Members in the Chamber illustrates how tricky this issue is for the Tory Government. Sadly, some very specific ideas put forward by the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), have been rejected by the Government. That has probably been driven by the Treasury’s not being prepared to invest in a better quality of life for the women most affected.

That is very disappointing, but there is still time: the Minister has an ideal opportunity to do something positive. He can go to the Treasury before the autumn statement and fight for the resources that are needed,
and he can then have clauses added to the Pension Schemes Bill that is currently in the other place, to allow the necessary changes. Then again, he may feel constrained by the threat of legal action from WASPI, which has raised more than £100,000 to challenge the Government’s failures in the courts. Perhaps he can confirm whether he feels that his hands are tied.

Contrary to what the Prime Minister claimed, the Opposition have tried to help her out of this hole and laid out plenty of options for the Government. Labour set out six transitional options and we are still waiting for the Government to properly address them and their potential. We proposed delaying the state pension age increase until 2020; capping the maximum state pension age increase from the Pensions Act 2011 at 12 months; keeping the qualifying age for pension credit on the previous timetable; allowing those affected to take a reduced state pension at an earlier age during the transition; and he can then have clauses added to the Pension Schemes Bill that is currently in the other place, to allow the necessary changes. Then again, he may feel constrained by the threat of legal action from WASPI, which has raised more than £100,000 to challenge the Government’s failures in the courts. Perhaps he can confirm whether he feels that his hands are tied.

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I ask him gently to allow a couple of minutes at the end, so that Mr Blackford can sum up and wind up the debate.

10.44 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. It is also pleasing to see so many Members present, which shows the importance of the issue. The Westminster Hall debates that I address usually have a much smaller audience. It is also fair to say that Members from all political parties have been present at different times in the debate.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): The Minister studied jurisprudence at university and had a career in the retail industry, so he will recognise the concept of good faith. Does he accept that the women concerned in this matter entered into a contract with the state about their pensions in good faith and that the Government’s actions amount to bad faith? If so, what is he going to do about it?

Richard Harrington: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which I will attempt to answer in a moment, after I have thanked the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for opening the debate and hon. Members from both sides who contributed.

I must say that this is the first time that my rather limited attempts at jurisprudence between 1976 and 1979 have been mentioned in the House. At least they will now be recounted in Hansard rather more than they are by my tutors of the time. The serious point that the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) makes is that hon. Members feel that the Government have broken some form of contract, presumably non-written, with state pensioners generally or WASPI women specifically. I have heard that point made several times today, but the Government’s position is very clear: this was not a contract. State pensions are technically a benefit. I add no value judgments to that, but since he made a legal point, I felt I should place the answer to it on the record.
It is important to acknowledge that state pension age increases cannot be looked at in isolation. The acceleration of the state pension age is a consequence of serious and fundamental changes that continue to affect the wider state pension system, such as the significant changes in life expectancy in recent years, the huge progress made in opening up employment opportunities for women and the wider packages of reforms that we have introduced to ensure a fair deal for pensioners.

Life expectancy, as everyone knows, has been increasing for a number of decades; people are living much longer. However, the increase in life expectancy over time has not been linear. Between 1995 and 2011—in just 16 years—remaining life expectancy at age 65 increased by 3 years for women and 4 years for men, an unprecedented increase compared with past decades. There are significant variations across council authorities and within Scotland, for instance. I could spend a lot more time going into those differences, but I feel I have made the point.

Employment prospects for women have changed dramatically since the state pension age was first set in 1940, especially for women affected by the acceleration of the state pension age. The number of older women aged 50 to 64 in work in 2016 stands at more than 4 million—a record high. Some 150,000 more older women are in work this time last year, and 580,000 more than five years ago. In addition, independent research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that employment rates for women aged 60 and 61 have increased as a direct result of the changes in state pension age. Furthermore, to help older women remain in work, the Government have abolished the default retirement age.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I am really sorry but there is not enough time. Members should hear me out.

Some women may wish to continue to work but be unable to do so. The welfare system provides a safety net for those of working age, which has been ignored by many speakers, and there are a range of benefits tailored to individual circumstances. The system is designed to deal with problems ranging from difficulty in finding work to disability or ill health making work difficult, and to help those with increasing caring responsibilities.

Alex Cunningham: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I am sorry, but there is not enough time. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] Well, okay, out of respect for the hon. Gentleman.

Alex Cunningham: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I took eight minutes, leaving him with around 15.

I gave the example of a 61-year-old woman in dire straits, and we heard many other examples of individual women who are not being looked after by the state benefits system. What can we do together so that the most vulnerable can live a life?

Richard Harrington: I know about the eight and 15 minutes, but I was asked by the Chairman to leave some time for the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber; I was not being discourteous at all.

Benefits are a complex subject that I am sure we will have plenty of time to discuss elsewhere. Suffice it to say that the range of benefits is quite wide. If the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) feels that there are gaps in the benefits system, I would be pleased to discuss them with him, but obviously not now because there is not enough time. I am trying to make progress, as you requested, Mr Nuttall.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and many other MPs shared cases of hardship, and of course I am sympathetic to them.

Ian Blackford: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington indicated dissent.

Ian Blackford: I will be very specific.

Richard Harrington: Okay.

Ian Blackford: The new information that I provided in my introductory speech was that a woman who was born in July 1953, who would have expected to retire in July 2013, was told by the DWP only in January 2012 that she would not be retiring until 2017. When did the Government and the Minister know of those facts? Why will they not now listen on that basis? The statement is that there will be no further changes, but these women have been seriously negatively impacted. The Minister must respond.

Richard Harrington: I shall respond in due course. I want to finish my point about the welfare system. The Government are spending £60 billion on supporting people on low incomes, £50 billion on supporting disabled people and £15 billion on incapacity benefits for working people. According to some of the contributions we have heard, it would appear that the Government are really not spending any money at all.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Alison McGovern: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I really cannot take any more interventions, simply because of the time. It is not in my nature, because I like interventions, but I really cannot.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) and others mentioned a notional national insurance surplus fund. The fact is that, in order to maintain the minimum work balance of the national insurance fund, a Treasury grant of £9.6 billion was made in 2015-16. Public sector finance is complicated. It is easy just to pick out one bit.

I wish to spend a little time discussing the Scottish National party’s proposals. Its independent report suggests rolling back the 2011 Act and returning to the timetable in the Pensions Acts of 1995 and 2007, but that is simply too expensive for the Government to consider. The report puts the cost at £7.9 billion, but my Department’s direct comparison for the same period is £14 billion. We can discuss it however many times, but our modelling is comprehensive and no one is trying to take advantage of anybody else. I really believe that the SNP report has underestimated the impact by somewhere in the region of 50%. It has done so by ignoring most of the costs
and applying costs only to the five-year window from 2016-17. Costs beyond that horizon have simply been ignored.

The Pensions Act 2011 not only increased the female state pension age to 65 sooner, but brought forward the increase to 66 for both men and women. The increase to 66 generates significant savings of more than £25 billion, yet such an important element of the Act is omitted from the paper, along with the associated costings.

John Ralfe Consulting, which is independent, reviewed the SNP option. Mr Ralfe concluded that:

“Sadly, the SNP has not managed to pull a Rabbit out of its Hat. The real cost of Option 2”— the SNP’s preferred option—

“is almost £30bn... The SNP can claim the cost is much lower simply because it has chosen to ignore most of the costs.”

I hope that demonstrates that that option is simply not deliverable.

In the limited time remaining, I shall address the notification issue. In answer to the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott), between 2003 and 2006, the DWP issued 16 million unprompted products called automatic pension forecasts. People contacted the Department and it gave out all those forecasts. In 2004, the Department ran a pensions campaign that included informing people of the future equalisation of the state pension age. The Government made sure that the information was there, but I accept that it was not communicated by individual letter, as it was later when, as I am sure Members will be aware, millions of letters were sent out.

To say that nothing happened is not true. I have seen a leaflet on equality in the state pension age that was widely circulated, with many, many copies printed. A summary of the changes was issued and the general public were advised, although I accept that they were not informed by specific direct mailing in the way mentioned by some Members.

Lady Hermon: It is very kind of the Minister to give way. He will recall that in an earlier intervention I quoted the Prime Minister, whom he serves. Does he appreciate that his words sound extremely hollow? This is not a nation in which the Prime Minister appears to care about all the people of the United Kingdom. Will the Minister please take that message back to the Prime Minister?

Richard Harrington: I certainly will not take that message back to the Prime Minister, because I do not accept that anything I have said today is incompatible with what the Prime Minister said on the steps of 10 Downing Street. Governments have to make difficult decisions, and the allocation of public spending is one of the most difficult.

It is not fair to say that the acceleration of the women’s state pension age has not been fully considered. It went through Parliament, there was a public call for evidence and there was extensive debate in both Houses. The Government listened during the process and made a substantial concession worth more than £1 billion. Finally, Parliament came to a clear decision. As it stands now, it would cost more than £30 billion to reverse the 2011 Act.

Alison McGovern: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I am very sorry but I cannot give way because there are only three minutes remaining.

I conclude by reiterating what I have told the House and, indeed, the public before: we will not revisit the policy or make any further concessions. The acceleration of state pension age was necessary to ensure the system’s sustainability in the light of increasing life expectancy and increasing pressure on public resources. Mr Nuttall, I have left three minutes, as requested.

10.57 am

Ian Blackford: I thank all Members who have spoken in the debate. I have enormous respect for the Minister, as I think he knows, but I must say that I am plain disgusted with the response we have had this morning. To that end, I shall be contending that we have not considered the acceleration of the state pension age for women born in the 1950s.

This is not acceptable, because we are now looking at a cliff edge. As I explained, there is an increase in pensionable age of three months for every month that passes. The Minister talked about a leaflet—a leaflet!—that went to the women concerned. We now know that a woman born in 1953 was given just over one year’s notice in 2012 that her pension age was going to increase to July 2017. We now know that a woman born in September 1954 found out in February 2012 that, rather than retiring in 2014, she would be retiring in 2020. Where is the fairness? Where is the notice from this Government?

I have heard various figures from the Government, but this is the first time the House has been told about that £14 billion. The Minister should come with me and I will take him through the Institute for Public Policy Research model. I stand fully behind the £7.9 billion. To hear him dispute that figure is disingenuous, to say the least. The Government have failed to accept responsibility for the WASPI women. The Minister should hang his head in shame. The Government must act, and we will continue to push them.

Question not decided (Standing Order No. 10(13)).

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): The fact that the Question is not decided shall be reported to the House. It is possible for the Question to be put to the House subsequently for a decision without further debate.

Ian Blackford: On a point of order, Mr Nuttall. Given that this debate was granted by the Backbench Business Committee, I understand that it is open to any Member to take this to the Committee and ask its members to push for a vote on the matter in the House. The Government must and will be held to account.

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): As Mr Blackford will be aware, that is not a point of order for me. He is aware of the rules relating to access to the Backbench Business Committee, as all Members are.

Could Members who are not taking part in the next debate leave quietly and quickly, so we can make progress?
Yazidi Former Sex Slaves: UK

11.1 am

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the treatment and care of Yazidi former sex slaves of Daesh in the UK.

As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I will begin by putting on the record my thanks to Members from all parties in both Houses of Parliament for the good will and support that they have shown in the days leading up to this debate. I also thank politicians from as far afield as Canada and Germany for the support they have shown me, as well as the many UK and Irish citizens who have contacted me in recent days to thank me for securing this debate and to urge me not to forget the plight of the Yazidi women and children who are currently being held in sexual enslavement by Daesh, particularly those in the city of Mosul, which we hope will be liberated soon.

My reason for seeking this debate is very simple. While every one of us earnestly hopes that in the coming weeks or months the liberation of Mosul will be complete and that Daesh will finally be driven from the city and out of Iraq once and for all, we also recognise that, as a result of that liberation, there will be hundreds of thousands of terrified people fleeing the city, and that a massive humanitarian support operation will be required to help to rebuild Mosul, allowing its citizens to return home and resume their lives in peace. I applaud the efforts being made by the UK Government, the Iraqi Government and the international community to prepare for that operation.

However, I will concentrate today on the fate of one small, specific group of people who are being held inside Mosul—3,000 or so Yazidi women and children. Since 2014, they have been raped, tortured, brutalised, bought, sold, held in sexual slavery and even murdered by Daesh. I plead with the UK Government not to allow this group, which is arguably one of the most abused and vulnerable groups of people on this earth, simply to be subsumed into the greater refugee crisis that is being predicted for northern Iraq in the coming months.

Brendan O’Hara: I will give way briefly to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) rose—

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab) rose—

Brendan O’Hara: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. This subject is very important and I thank him for bringing it to Westminster Hall for consideration.

None of us fail to be moved by the violence and degradation that has been carried out against those who have been made sexual slaves. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we must address not only the victims’ physical issues but their mental issues, including the trauma that they have suffered? The Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development should work together to ensure that they can help these Yazidi families, especially as they are in our hearts every day.

Brendan O’Hara: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I know that he is a great champion of minority communities in the middle east and I entirely accept what he says. I will develop that point later in my speech.

Graham Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. It is very timely that he has brought this subject to Westminster Hall. I was fortunate enough to be on the edge of Mosul last week and I saw six of the camps for internally displaced persons, which is why I have come here today to contribute to the debate.

However, I would like to ask the hon. Gentleman a question of fundamental importance. We all want to help those people who are victims of sexual slavery. The British Government and the Ministry of Defence have provided forty 50 calibre machine guns to the Peshmerga, to try to help to relieve the situation in Iraq. In addition to wanting to help the Yazidis, does he support the position of the British Government and the MOD in helping the Peshmerga?

Brendan O’Hara: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and yes I do. However, that is an entirely separate issue to the one I am considering today. While we support and will continue to support the military defeat of Daesh, I will concentrate today specifically on this tiny minority—the members of the Yazidi community—who are in desperate need of our help.

These innocent women and children—whose plight, in many ways, has become emblematic of the base depravity and callous barbarism of Daesh—need our help. These innocent women and children have witnessed the slaughter of their husbands, their sons and their brothers as Daesh has attempted genocide to try to erase all trace of the Yazidi community, and they need our help. These innocent women and children, who come from a very traditional and conservative religious community, and may well have been physically and psychologically irreparably damaged, need our help.

My motion today simply says to the Government: when Mosul is liberated and these innocent Yazidi women and children are free from the sexual enslavement of Daesh, please do not let them become lost in the throng of civilians fleeing Mosul towards the refugee camps. I ask the Government to recognise what these women and children have gone through; to see them as the unique case that they are. Together let us find a specific UK response that recognises the unspeakable atrocities that they have suffered, simply because of who they are and what they believe.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am sure that we are all aware that there are British citizens among the members of Daesh in Mosul and in Syria, and that they have committed crimes of violence against Yazidi women and other women. Will the hon. Gentleman join me—I am sure he will—in urging the Government to act as an agent of justice, collecting evidence so that justice may be brought against those British citizens?
Brendan O’Hara: I absolutely concur, and the full force of the law must be brought against any British citizen who is in any way involved in what has been happening within Iraq and Syria.

I am sure that everyone in Westminster Hall today is very well aware of the catalogue of atrocities carried out by Daesh against the Yazidi community. I will not go into too much detail, but it is worth reminding ourselves of the level of barbarism displayed by Daesh in its genocidal assault; some of it beggars belief. At the start of this year, I arranged for a young Yazidi woman to come to the UK to speak to this Parliament. Her name was Nadia Murad and the personal testimony that she gave that evening in February will live long with everyone who heard it.

Until August 2014, Nadia lived quietly in the village of Kocho with her mother, her brothers and her sisters. Then Daesh arrived, with the sole intention of completely destroying that small community through murder, rape and kidnap.

That evening in February, Nadia told us in her own words that “They used rape as the means of destruction for Yazidi women and girls, ensuring these women will never return to a normal life.”

Days after Nadia was taken captive, she had to watch from a school building as six of her brothers were executed. Thereafter, she was taken to Mosul, where she says she was among thousands of women and children being held in the city. It was there that she was given to a Daesh fighter. She was repeatedly tortured and raped by the man, before one night, in desperation, she tried to escape. She was caught and punished. She said, about the man, “he beat me up, forced me to undress, and put me in a room with six militants. They continued to commit crimes to my body until I became unconscious.”

Three months later, remarkably, and showing incredible courage, she attempted another escape. This time she was successful and is now resettled in Germany.

Graham Jones: As I said, I was in the camps last week. What the hon. Gentleman says is very powerful and true. Just how bad the situation with the Yazidis is cannot be overstated. When I asked the people who work in the camps, “How bad is this? What is the youngest person who has been raped and abused by Daesh?”, the answer that came back was, “A two-year-old”. That is the youngest person they have had in the camps who has been raped and sold as a sex slave. I just want to put that on the record, to reinforce the hon. Gentleman’s point.

Brendan O’Hara: I genuinely thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. It is unthinkable to any normal person what the community have had to suffer. I do not want to go into too much detail because I believe it is far too upsetting, but the detail is there for people to see. But what I will say in praise of Nadia Murad, who was a teenage girl at the time, is that rather than hiding away from the world she has devoted her life to highlighting the plight of the people of her community, pleading with the world not to turn its back on them.

Brendan O’Hara: Yes, absolutely. I take the hon. Gentleman’s point.

Nadia Murad is, without doubt, one of the bravest and most courageous people I have ever met or, indeed, am likely ever to meet. I am absolutely delighted that her selfless dedication to the cause of her people has been recognised internationally. As well as being nominated for a Nobel peace prize, she was recently awarded the Václav Havel human rights prize by the Council of Europe, and the highly prestigious Andrei Sakharov award along with another young Yazidi girl, Lamiya Aji Bashar.

In September, I was given the enormous honour of being asked to go to the United Nations with Nadia, where she was made a UN goodwill ambassador for the victims of people trafficking by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. It was while I was in New York that I met a remarkable man—Dr Michael Blume from the State Government of Baden-Württemberg in Germany. Dr Blume runs what is known as the special quota programme, a scheme that has taken approximately 1,100 Yazidi women and their children to Germany so that they can receive specialist psychological treatment as well as get the much-needed physical and emotional support that will assist them in their recovery. Working alongside Dr Blume is Dr Jan Kizilhan, who this year was the joint winner of the Geneva summit’s international women’s rights award for what was described as his “extraordinary and inspiring” work in rescuing Yazidi women and other women who had been enslaved, assaulted and sexually abused by Daesh.

Together, Drs Blume and Kizilhan have taken some of the most terribly damaged and vulnerable women and children out of northern Iraq and are currently providing them with treatment they could not have had if they had stayed there. As Dr Blume explained, part of the problem is that there are only 25 psychologists in the whole of northern Iraq and the vast majority of them are male and Muslim, meaning that a heavily traumatised Yazidi woman would not want to be treated by them.

Let me be clear that I am not demanding that the UK Government adopt the Baden-Württemberg model lock, stock and barrel, but what I am saying to the Government is, “Please look at what can be done by an Administration with the desire and willingness to make things happen.” The Minister-President of Baden-Württemberg, Mr Kretschmann, said when launching the scheme: “This is an exercise in humanity, not in politics”.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): How we deal with the plight of these innocent Yazidi women and children speaks to our collective attitude to supporting the rights and safety of religious minorities. Does my hon. Friend agree that more than ever we must commit to helping these poor women and children and say that we will always stand with those who are so vulnerable?

Brendan O’Hara: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. We must commit to helping. We cannot stand by and leave it to others to take up what is a very challenging position.

I would like to point out briefly how the Baden-Württemberg scheme works. Dr Kizilhan, himself a German-Yazidi, and his team go to northern Iraq to identify women and children they believe they can best help. The selection is based on the following criteria:
first, whether the woman or girl has escaped from Daesh captivity; secondly, whether there is clear evidence of severe abuse and psychological damage from their period of captivity; and, thirdly, whether treatment in Germany will help, beyond what is available locally. If those three criteria are met, with the approval of the Kurdish Regional Government the women and her children are offered refuge and intensive treatment in Germany. As I said, there are currently 1,100 former Daesh sex slaves, both women and children, in the Baden-Württemberg area—the youngest is eight, the oldest is 55 and the average age is about 19.

In Germany, once the women and children are sufficiently settled in shelters, they receive not only specialist trauma counselling but German language lessons, and for those who are of school age it is compulsory for them to attend school. I understand from what I have read that the results of the programme are very encouraging. Indeed, some of the women now have jobs and are able to rent their own apartments. Admittedly, recovery varies considerably, and for some it will take much longer, but Dr Blume told me that in Germany they have not had a single case of suicide, whereas in the camps in Iraq suicide among traumatised women is, tragically, fairly common.

This is a programme that works and I believe that the Government would do well to look at it very closely, to see how this country can directly help those innocents victims of Daesh. When we spoke in September in New York, Dr Blume was clear that any Government or Administration wishing to establish a programme to help these women and children would be welcome to avail themselves of the tried and tested model currently in place. Germany provides a safe haven for the women and children, and I can see absolutely no reason why the United Kingdom cannot also do that.

Graham Jones: My experiences last week showed me that a lot of the Yazidi women are traumatised because their children have been taken from them. All of a family's members are not located in the camps—they did not escape together. One of the psychological problems the women have is coming to terms with the fact that some of their children remained in Mosul and were sold on as sex slaves, and they do not know where they are. They do not want to be located further away from Mosul. They want to be located back there, so that they can go and find those children, who are being repeat sold on as sex slaves.

Brendan O'Hara: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. It comes down to choice. The women are given the choice to go to Germany; they are not forcibly taken there. Many women who apply do not go; likewise, many women who could go choose not to.

As I said at the start of my speech, it looks increasingly likely that the people of Mosul, having been held captive by Daesh for more than two years, could be liberated within weeks. In the immediate aftermath, there will be an urgent need to care for civilians fleeing the fighting. In that mandate, we must ensure that the Yazidi women and children, who have been most wickedly and cruelly affected by Daesh, are given the care they urgently require and deserve. If learning from what others have done is the best way to do it, I urge the Government to do that and to act quickly and decisively.

As I understand it—the Minister can confirm this—the Government’s policy for victims of modern slavery recognises that up to two and a half years of discretionary leave to remain can be given precisely in such cases as that of the Yazidis. If that is the case, I urge her to move quickly to ensure that the United Kingdom becomes a safe haven for those victims.

Time is running out. I hope that the liberation of Mosul is near, but let us be honest: if we do not do something now, we will not do anything. If we do not do anything, history will be our judge, and I predict it will pass a particularly harsh judgment on us.

11.20 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): This has been a wide-ranging debate, and I will not have the opportunity to answer every point in these 10 minutes. I will ensure that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development respond to some of the specific questions. I thank the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) for securing this debate on an incredibly important subject. To hear about the plight of the Yazidi people at the hands of Daesh is utterly harrowing. We must do all we can to support the victims and defeat the vile perpetrators.

It is inspiring to hear about the case of Nadia Murad, who survived such appalling abuse and is now using her freedom to raise awareness about these terrible crimes. Nadia’s Initiative is working to ensure that all marginalised communities subject to mass atrocities, sexual enslavement and human trafficking can have a global voice and get the support they need. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman invited Nadia to speak in Parliament earlier this year and attended her appointment in New York as the first United Nations goodwill ambassador for the dignity of survivors of human trafficking.

Tackling modern slavery, which includes human trafficking, is a top priority for this Government. The enforced sexual slavery of Yazidi women by Daesh is a particularly horrendous example, but sadly modern slavery is a global problem that exists all around the world, including our country. That is why just three weeks ago at the Vatican the Home Secretary announced a new modern slavery innovation fund of up to £11 million. It will be used to test innovative programmes to reduce the prevalence of modern slavery, particularly in those countries from which we see the greatest number of victims in the UK. That is also why we have announced a new child trafficking protection fund of up to £3 million, which will primarily fund work in the UK to support victims of child trafficking from aid-eligible countries.

Both funds are primarily seeking innovative ideas and are open to bids from organisations in the private, public and third sectors. Both funds form part of the £33.5-million UK aid programme that the Prime Minister announced in July. Working with our partners, that investment will help to tackle the root causes of slavery. It will support effective co-ordination among international partners and help to uncover and test new ways to tackle this horrendous crime.

Brendan O’Hara rose—
Yazidi Former Sex Slaves: UK  
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Yazidi Former Sex Slaves: UK

Sarah Newton: I will just make a bit more progress.

The hon. Gentleman talked about what more we could be doing right now for the several thousand women he identified who are in Mosul. While I totally agree with him, we need to be focused on defeating Daesh and bringing lasting peace to these countries. Clearly there is more that we need to do right now. Through our human rights and democracy fund, we are supporting projects on the ground in Mosul that are particularly targeted to support those members of the Yazidi community, whether male or female, who have been exposed to the most appalling sexual violence, as the hon. Gentleman said. That work is reaching several thousand people right now.

We have a long and proud tradition of bringing people into our country who seek refuge. There will be the possibility of the victims of this awful sexual exploitation coming to our country, but our priority is to support those communities on the ground now. As Members have said, people want to stay in their communities and their homes.

Brendan O’Hara rose—

Graham Jones rose—

Sarah Newton: I will give way once I have finished this point. We are providing psychiatric help and all sorts of other help on the ground to the people who have experienced these horrendous things.

Brendan O’Hara: Will the Minister accept the voice of experience that says that specialist treatment for the most traumatised victims of Daesh is not available on the ground and that there has to be something more than just saying, “We can deal with this problem in northern Iraq”? We have a responsibility to ensure that we give them the best, and the best is not in northern Iraq.

Sarah Newton: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to provide good psychological and other support for people in Mosul right now. My understanding is that the available DFID funding is being put in place. I am sure that more can be done. Because we have so little time this morning, I will ensure that the DFID Minister who is funding this work writes to the hon. Gentleman and other Members who have raised the issue this morning to ensure that we communicate exactly what is happening on the ground, including the amount of money, support and specialists we are sending over there to support local people in delivering these things.

Graham Jones: I concur with the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara). There are very few mental health services. There are also very few non-governmental organisations operating in the field of mental health services in northern Iraq, as he said. It is a huge problem. The first thing the British Government could do to try to resolve the situation is ensure that the Yazidis are kept in a Yazidi camp, with other populations, such as Arabs—the Yazidis may fear them due to the mental issues and torment they have experienced—located in a different camp. At the moment, they are in the same camp, and that is proving exceedingly destructive. The first thing the British Government and the Minister could do is ensure that Yazidis are looked after in a camp of their own.

Sarah Newton: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. We are part of a global coalition of 67 countries working hard to support the Iraqi Government as Mosul is liberated to ensure that civilians are protected and the humanitarian impact is minimised. We are also looking at long-term programmes of reconciliation and peace in the area. Good progress is being made, with several dozen settlements already set up.

I happened to visit a fantastic NGO in my constituency on Friday, called ShelterBox, where I met someone who is a frequent visitor to Iraq. ShelterBox is part of the team of British NGOs setting up new camps literally as we speak. Its intention is to provide support in a co-ordinated way. With people flooding out of Mosul, it wants to ensure that each of those communities is properly looked after, with all the issues about their different faith backgrounds and the levels of trauma they have faced properly taken into consideration. I heard at first hand from people who are in Iraq and are going to Iraq—I hope they have arrived safely today—about the work that is going on. The best thing I can do is ask the Secretary of State for International Development to provide the quantum of the activity that is going on. Members will appreciate that it is a fast-moving, dynamic situation, but we will ensure that they get the latest information about the number of people going there, the type of support and the specialist provision that has been called for that focuses on the Yazidis.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute asked another important question, which was about whether we would be doing everything we can to ensure that data and evidence are being gathered so that we can secure prosecutions. I reassure him that we are doing everything to collect and preserve evidence so that it can be used by judicial bodies to make a judgment about the atrocities that have been taking place. Any UK nationals who have gone there and are participating in those atrocities can be prosecuted for crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide in our domestic courts. Our absolute priority is to do our best to support the victims now. It is important that we send out a clear message that people cannot act with impunity. The appalling atrocities will be dealt with and people will be brought to justice. I hope that reassures Members that we take this matter extremely seriously and are doing everything we can to help the victims of the appalling situation in Iraq.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
### Circular Economy: Leftover Paint

**[Mr Graham Brady in the Chair]**

2.30 pm.

**Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the circular economy for leftover paint.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. I thank those Members who have turned up for the debate on this important issue. Originally, my near neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) was to lead the debate, but was unfortunately unable to do so at the last moment and I gladly offered to take over. Had he been able to be here, my hon. Friend, whom I have known for a long time, would have been a great champion on this issue, not least because he sponsored early-day motion 300 on his constituency, a very old company headquartered in my constituency and, unsurprisingly, I have been nailed to the floor several times on this issue. She is right: what we should do is get a critical mass of sales of recycled paint, as paint, to stimulate the market and move the issue in the public’s mind. Government support is often required to get markets aligned and to make sure that we have developed those markets to maximise the potential of the concept. Although the Waste and Resources Action Programme has helped to make progress, much more remains to be done.

**Sir Paul Beresford** (Mole Valley) (Con): As the hon. Lady may have heard before the start of the debate, the British Coatings Federation is headquartered in my constituency and, unsurprisingly, I have been nailed to the floor several times on this issue. She is right: what we need to do is get a critical mass of sales of recycled paint, as paint, to stimulate the market and move the issue in the public’s mind. Government, particularly local government, should be able to do that. I was also interested in the briefing. As hon. Members can tell from my accent, I come from New Zealand, where, despite being an earthquake country—as people may have recognised—paint materials are being used to make a sort of porous concrete, although I hope not load-bearing.

**Angela Smith**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He points to the importance of society recognising the win-win situation here. Nobody likes waste, and common sense tells us that if we can reuse it, we should. The ingenuity of modern science is such that it looks as though waste paint can be used to manufacture certain types of concrete. Work on that is ongoing. One only has to look at the paper industry to see what can be done if our minds are truly focused on maximising the potential from waste products.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned that the BCF is in his constituency. I have the world-famous Ronseal in my constituency, a very old company headquartered in Chapeltown. It is now officially Sherwin-Williams, but to local people it will always be Ronseal, a famous name. I have to say this: it does exactly what it says on the tin. No doubt every hon. Member present has used one of its products at some point.

I am proud to have such a company in my constituency, not just because of its amazing slogan that is now part of the language, but because it is good in every way. It makes quality products. It has a workforce to be proud of, who are very loyal to their employer, and it has a real commitment to innovation. I had the pleasure of visiting the company once again the other week to be shown how it is changing its manufacturing processes to decrease waste wherever it possibly can, not just because that is good for the environment but because it is good for the company as well. It reduces cost and effectively improves productivity.

I do not think there will be any division here today on just how important the paint and coatings industry is to the British economy. The sector supports some 300,000 jobs and sells 675 million litres of coatings each year. If we do the maths, that works out at 21 tins of coatings sold each and every minute of the year. The sector directly contributes £180 billion per annum to the UK’s GDP and is a great exporter to the rest of the world.

Why do I and the industry believe that a circular economy is important to the sector and to consumers? Before answering that, I will first set out the scale of the problem that we as a country face with leftover paint. The best way of putting it is to relate it to everyday experience, and I do not think Members of the House will be any different from the rest of society on this one.

There is no doubt that in our garages and sheds we all have unwanted and unused paints. The average UK household has six cans of leftover paint—probably more in my case, if I am honest—taking up space somewhere on the premises. Although some of that paint is no doubt kept for repair and touch-up work in the future, some 30% of people have responded to surveys saying they over-purchased the product in the first place. It is easy to see why that might happen. People overbuy paint because they want to buy from the same batch to get the same colour, which can lead to some of the oversupply problems. Through the project PaintCare, the industry is trying to develop tools to enable customers to be more precise about what they buy, which can only help the situation. I applaud that initiative.

The cost to local government of disposing of the 55 million litres of waste each year, or 71,500 tonnes, which is equivalent to the weight of a luxury cruise ship—albeit, I admit, a fairly small luxury cruise ship nowadays—is estimated at about £20.6 million. The problem is mainly left to local authorities to deal with through general waste or at their household recycling waste centres.

Currently, only 2% of paint or other coating is reused or remanufactured. Most of the remaining 98% is lost to us as a resource, principally because it is incinerated or ends up in landfill. The reasons for that are many and varied, but in the main it is due to the fact that two-thirds of household waste recycling centres do not accept liquid paint, because the disposal of liquid waste, including liquid paint, to landfill is banned in the UK, pursuant to EU requirements. The cost to local authorities of dealing with it is very high, which means they are effectively disincentivised and feel unable to accept liquid paint as part of their waste collection service. Householders...
are therefore often left with no option but to dispose of paint in general waste. In other words, many residents throw away their waste paint in the normal waste collection, no doubt in black bags so that the bin men do not see it. By so doing, they pass on the problem to others to deal with.

PaintCare consumer research also indicates that 62% of households would use their household waste recycling centre to dispose of waste paint given the opportunity, which points to the importance of that network as a means of disposal for leftover paint. I therefore very much welcome the BCF PaintCare project. I pay tribute to the BCF—it is located in the constituency of the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford)—which has been assiduous in pursuing this project for the reason I outlined earlier: it is good for society, the environment and business, so it is a win-win all around.

The PaintCare project is attempting to turn an environmental threat into an opportunity by working towards a systematic approach to collecting and sorting waste paint. It will also make the remanufacturing of paint from waste products a more viable economic process, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out. However, a remanufacturing industry needs a market—I will come to that point later. The project also involves the BCF working with local government to develop new processes to deal with the waste. At the same time, paint manufacturers are investing millions of pounds in projects to demonstrate how remanufacturing can be made more viable, with a view to developing a long-term market for it.

That innovative work is an excellent example of how a circular economy can work and secure both waste reduction and economic growth. I know that the Minister has a certain view of circular economies—at least, she said in a previous debate that she does not like the term. I also know that there can be a negative side to the concept of the circular economy, because it can be seen to trap economic growth within a certain space, but in my view it is a sophisticated way of describing a common-sense process that has the potential to make the circle bigger and encourage economic growth. There is a saying—I do not know whether it is special to the north of England—“Where there’s muck there’s money.”

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Brass.

Angela Smith: Yes, “Where there’s muck, there’s brass”.

The important point is that, wherever possible, we should be generating economic growth from waste. It does not matter which term we use to describe the process by which we systematically embed this concept into our economy more generally; we should be committed to doing it. If we are to embed the circular economy on a national scale, it needs Government support. I therefore challenge the Minister to act and to commit to ensuring that 5% of all Government painting contracts use paint products containing a significant percentage of remanufactured content. That will help to stimulate a market for reused paint.

Paint manufacturers are doing their bit; the Government must now step up and play their part too. After all, many companies of all sizes are demonstrating their willingness to invest in this sector and in solutions. Several million pounds has already been invested in commercial ventures and in supporting social enterprises. If the Government are really going to have an industrial strategy—I believe they are serious about doing that—let us ensure that that kind of commitment is at the heart of the process. Let us ensure that the concept of making the best possible use of our resources and recycling them over and over again is embedded within the industrial strategy.

As long as we have houses to paint, and as long as consumers have a desire to protect and look after their homes, we will need a painting industry, which means that we will also have an issue with leftover paint leaking into our environment or being disposed of in general waste. We need to tackle that issue, so creating a circular economy in paint surely makes perfect sense. Not only will it benefit the environment; it will help hard-pressed councils to reduce costs and create a new industry in the remanufacturing process. Like many things, however, Government assistance is needed to help that contribution to the circular economy to grow and prosper. I therefore ask the Minister to update the House on the Government’s progress in this area. Will she commit to a 5% Government target? It is interesting to note that California in the United States—one of the more progressive elements of that continent as it stands now—has made that kind of commitment to procurement, and I think there are initiatives along those lines in New Zealand. The UK should take the lead in Europe. If we are going to leave the European Union, let us at least make the most of where we are and show a bit of leadership on this issue.

What work is the Minister doing with the industry to develop the innovative approaches we need to deal with leftover paint? What will she do to help local government to develop capacities to deal with the mountain of waste paint that we consumers leave behind each year? I look forward to her response and the responses of the other Front Benchers.

2.46 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady—I never thought I would be saying it is a pleasure to speak in a debate about paint so early in my parliamentary career. I thank the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) for introducing the debate and for being an able substitute for our colleague, the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman).

What we are discussing is a very simple concept, but given the statistics that the hon. Lady outlined, it is clear that action is needed. The fact that only 2% of leftover paint is recycled and reused at the moment is startling, especially given that we have a drive towards recycling in general and that people are more aware of the issue in a wider context. As she outlined, disposal to landfill results in £20.6 million of extra costs to taxpayers, although that comes through at local level.

Another issue is the widely adopted waste management strategy of the non-acceptance of liquid paint at recycling and waste disposal centres, which runs the risk that people may dump paint, although it does not give them an excuse to do so. I always get really irritated when the public complain that dumping has happened and blame it on the local council. It is not councils’ fault, but they can sometimes allow bad behaviour to happen. As the hon. Lady outlined, people may hide paint disposal in
black bags in their general refuse, which defeats the purpose of disposal. Another risk is that people seem to think that sinks, drains and toilets are a fantastic disposal mechanism. They think that liquid paint can go down there, but unfortunately it still goes into the waste disposal system. It either goes through the sewage treatment works or, worse, there is a risk that it enters the river system, which presents another hidden risk of pollution.

We need to ensure that people recycle more and buy less. We need to work with retailers, because they actually encourage us to buy more. Many of the paints and coatings at DIY shops are three for two, for example. Our human instincts kick in and we say, “Well, I’ll just buy the extra tin to get a saving, and if I’ve got any left over I’ll keep it for the future.” We have to educate the wider public and retailers.

I double-checked the waste management strategy at the local authority where I used to be a councillor, and it has fantastic recycling rates, but it confirmed to me that it is unfortunately now in the same position as many other local authorities and does not accept liquid paint. It had a tie-up with a charitable organisation, RePaint Scotland, which folded locally due to a lack of funding, so now there is no way to recycle paint. So my local authority, too, only takes paint to landfill, once dried out or filled with sand to continue the drying-out process. We need to consider how to support such charities. We are paying for paint to go to landfill, once dried out or filled with sand to continue the drying-out process. So my local authority, too, only takes paint to landfill, once dried out or filled with sand to continue the drying-out process. We need to consider how to support such charities instead. In the long run, they can also make a difference by supporting other community organisations, vulnerable tenants, or people in new tenancies, and giving them pride in their homes.

Without wanting to allude to typical jokes about Scotsmen, I have an instinct for recycling and reuse. Last year, I was in the States with my in-laws—I was staying there because my wife is American—and they were selling a property, which had a basement full of leftover things, including years of leftover paint. However, we cleaned out the basement and actually used a lot of the paint to paint it, brightening it up, which made a huge difference and made the house sellable. That was my instinct: not to dispose of the paint, but to reuse it.

I discovered something else with the remnants of the leftover paint. As has been outlined, we were not able to dispose of liquid paint in waste disposal, so we had to dry it out. I can tell the House that sometimes drying out paint is not an easy job, believe it or not. It was really warm in the States, we had the paint tins sitting out open and we spent days literally watching paint dry—I had to get that pun in. So we can see how, if people without patience want to dispose of paint quickly, the risk is that they will choose the wrong behaviours.

I also want to touch on the wider circular economy. We buy into the principle of it, and I will mention a couple of things that the Scottish Government are doing for the wider circular economy. They are starting to lead the way, and I hope that the UK Government will follow suit. Earlier this year, the Scottish Government published “Making Things Last”, a strategy to do with developing a circular economy strategy for Scotland. They also launched a £70 million circular economy fund, which is aimed at stimulating innovation, productivity and investment.

At the time, David Palmer-Jones, the chief executive of Suez Environment’s UK recycling and recovery business, suggested that the UK Government should take “a leaf out of the Scottish administration’s book”, by incorporating circular economy principles into business, energy and industrial policy, and I hope we will hear something from the Minister on that. I also agree with the proposed challenge to achieve 5% of Government contracts using recycled paint—I am interested to hear about that as well. I again commend the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge for introducing the debate.

2.52 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) for putting on the agenda this important issue of the circular economy—important to debate in itself, and important in the context of where leftover paint fits into that agenda. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) for her contribution, which outlined the importance we should give to some of these niche areas, because the principles behind them then obviously expand to so many other areas.

A startling amount of paint is left over—55 million litres a year, which I understand is equivalent to 20 Olympic swimming pools-worth of paint. That is a baffling thought. I want to put on record my thanks to PaintCare and the British Coatings Federation for their interest in the subject. They are really putting an aggressive agenda forward on how we draw the reuse of leftover paint into the circular economy, and on the opportunities before us, which we are debating this afternoon. There are real opportunities in the reuse and remanufacturing of paint.

I always think that any debate on the circular economy has to begin with the issue of consumption. As the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) said this afternoon, offers that encourage us to overbuy clearly move things in the wrong direction. We also know that there are issues around the size of containers, because they are so large. Price is not proportionate to volume in those containers, so we often buy the larger pot of paint, just in case we need it and, obviously, to see the same colour match, as opposed to buying smaller quantities, which is de-incentivised by the size of the containers. That in itself is an issue that the paint industry could look at. Again, I ask for the Minister’s comments on that, and perhaps on how the Government could help the paint industry look at how to reduce the amount of leftover paint. We know that this is an issue right across industry, and hits on so many other areas too.

We recognise the incredible work of PaintCare in trying to educate the public about the use and volume of paint. PaintCare has a calculator for use on its website, which I had a look at, to help customers make better choices about volumes of paint. We can all benefit from that, because it means a reduction in cost for ourselves as customers, and it provides very useful advice using the technology that is available.

There are other principles to look at, and this afternoon I want to focus on the opportunities we have to reuse and remanufacture paint. We all understand that too
much paint is being disposed of at landfill sites or going to incineration, which clearly has a detrimental impact on the environment. Therefore, it is really important that we both support and encourage what steps we have to take to move the agenda forward not just in generality, but by having targets year by year.

First, many have identified the fact that far too few household waste and recycling centres accept paint. There should be a universal approach, not a postcode lottery. Will the Minister therefore look at how she may support local authorities to ensure that all centres accept paint that has not been used? Having that postcode lottery is detrimental to the whole recycling business. We know how there are different rules from local authority to local authority. We press the Minister to move forward and to have a universal system, so that we may all understand what gets recycled and how we can dispose of things in the best way possible, and so that we have that link back to reuse and remanufacturing. Everything should be collected in the best way possible, and not put into landfill or sent for incineration.

I was struck by a meeting I had recently with Tetra Pak, the manufacturer, looking at how it disposes of its materials. It is a unique manufacturing sector, and it now recycles 100% of its products through a process that begins with universal collection. Tetra Pak itself, as an industry, started to put its own banks in place for that begins with universal collection. It continued, where kerbside collection points were not being taken up by local authorities, by having Tetra Pak’s own collection, so there is now 100% coverage of opportunity.

That seems to be a sensible way of introducing a universal approach, but clearly we want to see local authorities having the responsibility, with support from Government, to take waste products. There are of course issues about storage, but they can be addressed. What Tetra Pak does with the products, once collection is done, is carry out its own remanufacture of 100% of the materials—the aluminium, the plastics and the pulp of cardboard is remanufactured by Tetra Pak and put into other products. That just shows what can be done, and we urge the Minister to look at that.

The UK clearly needs to ensure that there is continued research into the chemical composition of paint and how it can be reused. We know that the paint that is currently remanufactured is mainly water-based paint, and therefore we need to look at the science behind paint to ensure that we can recycle an increasing amount of the material. That is an important part of this—putting money into research is so important in the whole waste sector. Likewise, there is an onus to deal with packaging for paint—the paint containers can often be appropriately recycled, but at the moment they themselves end up in landfill, which is a blight on our environment.

We have heard that only 1% of paint products are reused and 1% are remanufactured. Just 2% are reutilised; 98% go to waste. That is a very poor statistic, and having a 5% obligation on local authorities through their procurement processes would be a good way to start to move the agenda forward.

We also have to look at the opportunities for reusing paint. We have heard that there are lots of opportunities for local authorities to be in touch with local projects and voluntary sector organisations that could really benefit from that as opposed to having to budget for paint. If such projects are properly managed, they could be scaled up nationally, not just focused on locally, to support voluntary organisations and other community interest companies to reuse paint.

I observed a couple of weeks ago a fresh pot of paint being used on external boarding around a building site and thought, “Actually, that could be reused or recycled paint that has been collected from elsewhere.” We know that there is a lot of waste, and that adds to the on-costs of projects. Dialogue could therefore take place not just with the voluntary sector but with the construction trade, where there could be real opportunities in looking at how organisations could use remanufactured and leftover paint. If we are going to see an expansion in the construction industry, there is certainly an opportunity to reuse such products and ensure that they do not go to landfill.

People probably do not know much about remanufactured paint, but it is around 25% to 30% reused paint, to which new paint is added. There is an opportunity for remanufactured paint to be available on the market, perhaps at a reduced cost. That could address some issues around inequality and help to move paint on an industrial scale. There are opportunities that we can look at to address that issue.

I want to raise the issue of why paint ends up in incinerators or landfill at all. What I will say about paint applies to so many other products; this is about the whole approach that the Government need to take—whether it is about organic material or manufactured goods—to the whole issue of the circular economy, and why it is so important to mainstream the circular economy into manufacturing processes, everyday public sector use and the way we think and operate as a country.

Yesterday, in another debate, I mentioned the research that is being undertaken into how we mitigate sending anything whatever to landfill and move away from incineration. The techniques of chemically breaking down materials or autoclaving them with high-pressure steam enable waste products to be separated into raw products in different ways, so that a far higher proportion of the components of the original material can be put to alternative use. Those components can be put back into manufacturing processes or even put into energy production. I know that work is being undertaken on how paint can be reused in products such as load-bearing concrete, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), who I am sorry to see is no longer in his place. It is important that we look at all options for repurposing paint.

Investment in research on those processes is vital to prevent so much more from ending up in landfill. As I mentioned yesterday, the Biorenewables Development Centre just outside York, a project that has sprung from the University of York, is looking at how we can mitigate waste altogether. That is of huge interest to me, and I know that it will also interest the Minister, given her background. It is a very interesting issue to look at the opportunities that are being created through the research that is being carried out and try to bring that agenda back into the mainstream.

Ahead of next week’s autumn statement, I note the call from the British Coatings Federation and PaintCare for remanufactured paint not to be subject to VAT. Not only has VAT been paid previously on part of the
product, but that would result in a narrowing of price margins between remanufactured paint and new paint. That seems a sensible incentive, and I trust that the Minister will raise that with the Treasury ahead of the autumn statement.

This has been an interesting debate. I have to say that I did not know we could debate the reuse of paint in such depth, but it springs into so many other agendas. I trust that the Minister will embrace the circular economy, as the Opposition do. I know that she has some issues with it, including its name, but it is being promoted heavily and the concepts are good and right for our future. It is right for our environment, after all. I therefore trust that she can move on from that position to ensure that we see the research and long-term funding that are needed.

I make one final plea in light of the uncertainty about the future and our relationship with Europe. Many of the research projects that are currently being carried out are funded by the EU and involve relationships that have been built between academia and industry across Europe. I would like to see the Minister get behind those projects and ensure not only that they continue, even if that takes us beyond 2020, but that those relationships are sustained into the future and that we will be able to take forward many more initiatives to ensure that our environment is safe.

3.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I thank the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) for leading this debate on the circular economy for leftover paint. I am off script now, but I also want to thank my officials for doing their best to produce an interesting speech. This issue clearly matters, but let us try to spice it up a bit with some real candour.

We have all been through the ritual when doing DIY of going to B&Q, Homebase or whatever, doing the painting and ending up with half a tin of paint that simply is not used. Being the good people that we are, we do not like to throw anything away, because we may need to touch it up again later. That has led to the situation that has already been described. The average UK household has six cans of leftover paint stored in their home, and surveys show that people buy more than they need. I agree strongly with the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) that simply throwing away paint that is not used is a waste of resources and a waste of money.

I accept that if we are to achieve the transition to a circular economy, innovation is essential—not only the development of efficient new business models but the innovations to which the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) referred. I will bring to the attention of the hon. Members for Derby North (Paula Sherriff) and for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy the research project and the institute that she mentioned, but she will be aware of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor’s comments about Horizon 2020 projects and his intention for the United Kingdom to remain engaged in those—and indeed our own funding streams—on the basis of value for money.

Rachael Maskell: One of the concerns from both academia and from where there is applied research is that 2020 is only just round the corner. People are now looking beyond 2020, to what their futures are. Although I heard what the Chancellor said, it is important that we look to the future and give further guarantees to ensure that projects continue.

Dr Coffey: I recognise what the hon. Lady says, but it is not unusual for a Government to talk about the spending envelope for which they have responsibility. I am not privy to what will be in the autumn statement next week or in future Budgets, but given that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has talked keenly about the need for future investment and having innovation as a key priority, I am sure the hon. Lady and I will both be listening with interest to what he has to say next week.

The hon. Lady also referred to VAT. She knows it goes against EU law to not charge VAT. A considerable battle was eloquently championed by her hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), among others, to try to secure zero rates for certain products, but who knows what the future holds once we leave the EU or what the future of VAT will be?

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate, Mr Brady. I was making an application to the Backbench Business Committee for another debate.

Is the Minister aware of the report by WRAP—Waste and Resources Action Programme—which claims that by 2030 the circular economy sector could require an extra 205,000 jobs, but that if we embarked on what it calls a transformational scenario, whereby we are incredibly ambitious about it, it could create more than half a million jobs? Does she feel this is something that can
simply be left to the market or should we be far more proactive? It would also potentially offset about 18% of the future job losses expected in skilled employment, so it could be of real benefit.

Dr Coffey: The good news is that this Government have successfully created more jobs than the rest of the European Union put together over the last six years. I am not aware of the unemployment forecasts the hon. Lady is referring to. I have no doubt that new and efficient profit-making business models will create jobs. The Government are currently negotiating with the rest of the European Union on the circular economy package, so there is an element of the regulatory framework that may create incentives. However, Governments often create regulations that prevent the circular economy from functioning as effectively as the markets coming up with those opportunities. Often, regulation gets in the way.

In DEFRA we have been working constructively with organisations such as the British Coatings Federation on making better use of leftover paint, including identifying potential regulatory barriers to its recycling and remanufacture and how those might be overcome. We welcome the federation’s voluntary initiative, PaintCare, which aims to promote the reuse or remanufacturing of about 20 million litres of paint that would otherwise end up being disposed of. It is good to see the paint industry seeking to resolve this waste problem through creative thinking and working in partnership.

As the PaintCare initiative has developed, DEFRA has been looking at the regulatory barriers. As part of that, the Environment Agency is providing detailed guidance to determine the parameters within which materials such as leftover paint can meet end-of-waste criteria, through its IsItWaste tool. The agency will continue to work with such programmes and businesses to facilitate the development of operations to encourage further reuse of valuable materials.

We are aware of the challenges with many household waste recycling centres not accepting paint for recycling. The PaintCare report points out that councils face various challenges with that. DEFRA is engaged in regular discussions with the Department for Communities and Local Government about providing effective household waste and recycling services, but it is for local authorities to decide the best disposal options for paint and other materials, based on what options and facilities are available locally and what the market generates.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I was about to answer the hon. Lady’s point about the postcode lottery and wanting a universal system. She gave the interesting example of how Tetra Pak, which is subject to elements of extended producer responsibility, came forward with its special process to try to make sure that as many Tetra Pak cartons as possible are collected. The EPR principle does not currently apply to paint, but perhaps it should. Instead of putting the onus on—dare I say it?—councils and central Government, perhaps the paint manufacturers themselves should think about how they start to ensure that paint is collected in every local authority area, which would then help them to reuse it in remanufacturing and similar.

On pricing, I was surprised when I suddenly detected some conservative notes from the hon. Member for York Central. She is absolutely right that one of the best ways to shift remanufactured paint would be for it to be cheaper than standard paint, and people can feel virtuous about it as well. I recognise that that is not as straightforward as it sounds, because the process needs investment and so on. Nevertheless, there are ways to encourage people to do things, often by pricing.

Through WRAP, guidance is provided to local authorities, including options for best practice when dealing with paint through reuse schemes such as Community RePaint, which I am sure hon. Members are aware of. It is a UK-wide network of more than 60 community-run paint reuse projects. However, the numbers are limited and quite a lot of them are concentrated in certain parts of the country. Perhaps we will want to consider not only encouraging manufacturers but good local schemes to come forward.

Rachael Maskell: I want to come back to the relationship between central Government and local authorities, because we clearly have a problem at the moment. Only 2½% is reused or remanufactured, yet we know the potential in the industry is huge. What interventions will the Government make to support local authorities to be able to increase beyond the 2½%?

Dr Coffey: To be candid, I am not sure that central Government are going to do anything apart from what I have already described in relation to the WRAP guidance and the Environment Agency. I personally believe we should try to reduce the amount of paint coming into the system in the first place. We need a better consumer understanding of how much paint is needed to paint a room. People should be able to take the room measurements to the shop and easily calculate how many litres are needed. That is the best way to prevent the problem in the first place.

Rachael Maskell: The circular economy is not an either/or strategy; it is both. It is about having active interventions to drive an agenda forward. We have a real problem with paint, as we have heard so eloquently put this afternoon. The Government standing back and saying they will make no further interventions means that local authorities will never have the means to move the agenda forward, so I press the Minister again about what interventions she is prepared to make to progress the circular economy around this issue.

Dr Coffey: I have already answered the hon. Lady. I have said what I was going to say. From what she has said, I take it she agrees that perhaps having extended producer responsibility on the paint industry might be the way to go. That is not currently being considered by the EU in the circular economy package, but perhaps we will consider it when we leave the EU. The concept of extended producer responsibility is about trying to reduce waste and recovering the cost of waste. The Government have supported a pilot paint reuse project in Cheshire. We have provided more than £30,000 in match funding through the innovation in waste prevention fund.

3.17 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.
Dr Coffey: It is a pleasure to resume the debate. I was pointing out how the Government have supported a pilot paint reuse project in Cheshire with more than £30,000 of match funding through the innovation and waste prevention fund. That project involves local charities and work with the local recycling centres and housing associations to increase paint donation and minimise disposal. The provision of clearly marked paint collection containers, the training of recycling centre staff to sort paint and advise the public, and an awareness-raising campaign led to 23.5 tonnes of paint being collected, which is more than double the original target of 11.4 tonnes. The reuse rate was also much higher than anticipated, with 78% of the donated paint—more than 18 tonnes—being reused and only 22% needing to be disposed of.

WRAP will publish a summary of the project and lessons learnt along with a video case study next year. That shows there was an opportunity for other people to use the leftover product. In that case it was housing associations, but in other cases it could be the construction trade, to which the hon. Member for York Central referred earlier.

A question was asked about Government procurement. Government buying standards do not currently include remanufactured paint, and DEFRA and other Departments do not purchase a great deal of paint directly; contractors who undertake work on the Government’s behalf tend to purchase the paint. Overall, the Government’s policy commitment is to buy sustainably, which is set out in “Greening Government Commitments”, and Government procurement officers will take account of that when buying more sustainable and efficient products and getting suppliers to understand the need to reduce the impacts of the supply chain.

Industry-led initiatives such as PaintCare are important if we are to achieve the vision of a more resource-efficient circular economy.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I will not.

We must make the best use of resources in a way that supports growth and protects the environment and human health, as has already been said. The industry’s proactive action so far should be supported by an efficient and effective regulatory framework. That is why we are working with the industry to look at regulatory barriers. As I have already indicated, the Government are undertaking some projects through WRAP or the Environment Agency to try to stimulate admittedly modest changes, but I genuinely believe that the real impetus will come from the industry, whether that is about establishing a wider network for recovering paint or helping consumers generate less waste in the first place.

This has been an important debate. The hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge will be delighted to know that I have started to use the phrase “the circular economy.” As she said: it is a mechanism limiting. However, I assure her and others that businesses—especially high-value businesses—are clear that recycling and recovering materials is an important part of helping the environment, and it makes sense commercially. To that end, I thank all those who participated in the debate.

Angela Smith: This has been an interesting opportunity to air the issues relating to paint. The Minister seemed to indicate—I am sure she did not mean it this way—that this is a rather boring topic. The old saying is that something is “like watching paint dry”, but most people use paint decoratively to make life better, not worse, to cheer themselves up and make their homes look brighter and nicer to live in. I therefore think that paint, and the paint and coverings industry, is an important part of our everyday lives and plays a significant part, too, in our economy. I contest the view that paint is a niche topic or that it is not really something that should engage the interests of parliamentarians.

The role of Government in our economy is increasingly clear—they have acknowledged it with the industrial strategy they have promised to develop—so I was surprised to an extent by the Minister’s remarks, which, in summary, were focused on a hands-off approach to the development of the circular economy and the work being done by the coatings industry in particular. I recognise that the Minister supports the work being done by the industry and that many of the efforts of Government have been delivered through WRAP and the environment agency. Nevertheless, the feeling was, “It is up to the industry and consumers, and the industry working with consumers, to deliver what the industry is looking for.”

Developing the remanufactured paint aspect of the industry is not just about supply and demand, pricing and markets. It is actually about confidence in the recycling process and the quality of what is produced. One of the reasons why the industry is keen to see Government take on a 5% target for procurement is that it would send a strong signal to consumers more generally, both commercial and domestic, that that paint is worth buying, worth using and serves a valuable purpose. I think that the Minister missed that point in her response.

I would also compare the Minister’s response with what we heard from Ministers in what was the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, which we now call the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy or BEIS—I cannot get my head around that acronym—in relation to other manufacturing processes. In the steel industry, the message about procurement has been heard, and procurement rules have been changed not just for steel but for the benefit of manufacturing more generally. On top of that, real efforts have been made to enable the steel industry to develop extra capacity to meet future demand. For instance, in relation to shale gas, there are projects, I believe supported by Government, to ensure that UK steel can—if possible—take advantage of that developing industry. It is really disappointing to hear that kind of commitment on the one hand, and the lack of commitment we have heard today on the other.

The point about jobs is moot. We do not really know whether any extra jobs will be created in recycling and remanufacturing paint, because we do not know whether the overall demand in the UK would increase. The Government believe that exporting—building free,
international trade—is our way out of Brexit and, even without Brexit, that would be the way to grow our economy. I actually believe that that is correct. On that basis, it is absolutely right that we should expand our economic activity. We should consider manufacturing more paint but, when doing so, we should maximise our resources. I do not accept the argument that there is not necessarily any job potential in that kind of initiative, because the more that we can produce and export, and the more that we can produce paint and coverings material sustainably, the better it is for UK plc.

On household waste recycling centres, I was particularly disappointed. When it comes to plastic, paper and glass, we no longer expect consumers or industry to take responsibility for the collection of those waste materials. That job is now with the local authorities, and local authorities up and down the country are working with the recycling industry—companies such as Viridor—to ensure that that material is collected properly, sorted and processed and then used for the purpose of making new materials.

**Dr Coffey:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Angela Smith:** In a moment. On that basis, it is absolutely inexplicable to suggest that consumers or industry should take responsibility for waste materials. I take the point entirely, and I made it myself, that paint use should be reduced wherever possible, but there will always be a quantity of leftover paint. Different people paint in different ways, believe it or not. There will always be a market for collecting paint for recycling, and on that basis it is hard to understand why the Minister seems to think that dumping waste paint in general waste, which is actually illegal, is something for the industry to think about. I accept that it is the consumers’ responsibility, but we need to make it easier for consumers to dispose of their waste paint sustainably. I give way to the Minister.

**Dr Coffey:** I cannot intervene on a closing contribution.

**Angela Smith:** Okay. Finally, I will go back to procurement. The Minister admitted that buying sustainably is at the heart of the Government’s procurement strategy. In that sense, it is really hard to understand why the Government cannot make a simple commitment to a 5% target. It is not a particularly ambitious target; it is a fairly sensible, modest target. If the Government sent out a clear signal to all of those public sector bodies that procure and use paint—prisons, schools, hospitals and so on—that they expect 5% of paint and coatings orders to be made up of remanufactured paint, that in itself would help to send out a signal to the market that this is a serious business that is capable of growing in the future.

I have to say that I have been very disappointed indeed with the Minister’s response. I would have thought that an industry that is so important to UK plc—I gave the statistics earlier—is not being given more support by the Government. We have illustrated in the debate that it is doing everything it can itself to ensure that it becomes more sustainable, that it reduces waste and that it absolutely makes the most of the resources that are wasted at the end of the day. The Government are doing very little to support that industry, and in the context of Brexit, that is very disappointing indeed.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved,**

That this House has considered the circular economy for leftover paint.
Red Wednesday Campaign

[ROBERT FLELLO in the Chair]

4 pm

Robert Fello (in the Chair): We have an extra 15 minutes for this debate, given the earlier suspension.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Red Wednesday campaign against religious persecution.

It is a pleasure to speak on this very important subject under your chairmanship, Mr Fello. All over the world, thousands of people are persecuted because of their faith, through false imprisonment, physical and mental torture, rape, slavery and, more subtly, discrimination in education and employment. For some, their faith can cost them their lives.

In partnership with the charity Aid to the Church in Need, on Wednesday 23 November Westminster abbey and Westminster cathedral will be lighting up their iconic buildings in red. Other faiths will join in that act of solidarity as a tribute to the people worldwide who are suffering injustice and risking their lives for their faith. I have written to Bolton Council to ask it to join this movement and light up Bolton’s historic town hall in red on 23 November to promote solidarity with those who are suffering. Aid to the Church in Need is also encouraging smaller, more personal acts of recognition on that day that everyone can take part in—for example, simply wearing red for Red Wednesday or using the hashtag #RedWednesday on social media to raise awareness of the plight of others. Having greater awareness and understanding will help to ensure that we never take our freedoms for granted.

This year, I joined colleagues from both sides of the House on a visit to northern Iraq to meet persecuted Christians fleeing the terrorist group Islamic State. In Mosul and elsewhere, Christians have been systematically targeted and the noon symbol, the Arabic equivalent of the Latin N for Nasara or Nazarene, has been daubed on their homes. They have been given the grim choice of killing or converting to Islam or being put to death. Many chose to flee, especially when their money had run out and they could no longer pay the extortion. That persecution, along with that of the Yazidi and many Muslims, led last April to the debate, granted by the Backbench Business Committee and led by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), on recognition of the genocide perpetrated by ISIL in the region.

The Christian community in Iraq is one of the oldest in the world, dating back to the first century. There were thought to be 1.5 million Christians in Iraq before the invasion in 2003. However, that number is reported to have fallen now to about 230,000. Although many people have been persecuted and have fled the region, that figure shows the targeted nature of the persecution and, if it continues in that direction, we will soon see the end of Christianity in much of the middle east.

We know that there is a civil war in Syria and Iraq, but sometimes the religious context is overlooked or obscured by more dramatic events. When we met His Holiness Ignatius Aphrem II, the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, he gave us a sense of how overlooked many people feel. He used the example of the protection given to eight frogs in Australia. The pond in which the frogs lived was the subject of a huge local campaign, and a small fortune was spent to save them. He said that, in comparison, many Christians in Iraq felt ignored. Of course we have to protect our natural environment, but I am sure that many colleagues would be as concerned as I am about the scarcity of letters and emails on religious persecution compared with, say, badgers and bees.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on initiating this timely debate. Is he aware of the persecution faced by the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Pakistan? Since they faced criminalisation in 1984, hundreds of Ahmads have been murdered in sectarian hate crimes. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government must continue dialogue with countries such as Pakistan to better promote religious tolerance?

Chris Green: I agree wholeheartedly with what the hon. Lady has said. It is so important now to reflect on the effects of increased globalisation. What goes on in one country, especially if endorsed by the Government—I am thinking of the Ahmadiyya community no longer being recognised as Muslim and being proscribed from describing themselves as such—is transmitted around the world as an idea and does not help to foster community relations here, so the hon. Lady makes a superb point.

In October 2016, Archbishop Sebastian Shaw of Lahore, Pakistan, told a Foreign and Commonwealth Office conference about his niece’s first year at school. That Christian girl was required to memorise a lesson that she was a Muslim and all non-Muslims were infidels. He spoke about how some textbooks in Pakistan’s schools foster prejudice against members of religious minorities, including Christians, Hindus, Jews and Sikhs.

Studies of the problem have been carried out both by the Catholic Church in Pakistan’s National Commission for Justice and Peace and by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. The report, which covered the Punjab and Sindh provinces, noted more than 50 hate references against religious minorities in those provinces’ textbooks. That is a very important example of religious persecution not always being about death and destruction. It can be found in all kinds of other measures, including ones that normalise the sense of persecution in schools. That kind of literature or information and that kind of understanding can be developed in schools and the wider community. I would be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister included in his reply what steps the Government are taking to stop that happening, particularly in nations that receive British aid to provide not just education but security in the region and beyond. I think that that is an aspect of what the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) was highlighting.

Oppression of religious communities is not always due to conflict between religions; it can also be part of state oppression, particularly in the remaining communist countries. North Korea is perhaps the most notorious, but we can also see the oppressive treatment of Christians in Cuba and of Muslim Uyghurs in western China.
Britain has her own problems with religious persecution, so it is not just an international problem. The case of Nissar Hussain from Bradford is a particularly shocking example and has gained widespread public attention only after 20 years of suffering following his conversion from Islam to Christianity. Violent punishment for apostasy has no place in any society.

Organisations such as Aid to the Church in Need and Christian Solidarity Worldwide have done a huge amount of work to improve the lives of the persecuted across the world, but we are looking for long-term solutions and, especially for the middle east, one that does not lead to the disappearance of Christianity or other religious groups.

I encourage colleagues and people watching the debate to take part in Red Wednesday next week, to read the report, which will be released on 24 November, or to write to their local council to turn a local monument red. The importance of raising awareness of this issue cannot be overstated.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this very important issue to Westminster Hall. The Red Wednesday campaign against religious persecution is very important. The hon. Gentleman and I were together on a trip to Iraq just in September, so we know very well about the persecution. It is good to remember such persecution on Red Wednesday, because this year 100,000 Christians will be killed because of their faith; 200 million Christians live in a persecuted neighbourhood; and 2 billion will face persecution and discrimination. If ever there was a good cause to follow and to recognise, Red Wednesday is it. Does the hon. Gentleman agree? I am sure he does, but let us see what he says.

Chris Green: I absolutely agree. The figures that the hon. Gentleman highlighted show how widespread concerns about persecution across the world are. On every continent, people of all religions suffer in so many different ways. I will conclude with the quotation from an Iraqi Christian, which sums up the way many Christians feel at the moment:

“The attacks on Christians continue and the world remains totally silent. It’s as if we’ve been swallowed up by the night.”

4.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure to work under your chairmanship, Mr Jim Cunningham, and an honour to respond to this important debate by spelling out our approach to human rights. I am pleased to see hon. Members here in the Chamber who have gained a reputation for raising these matters and for holding the Executive to account to see what we can do to make sure we underline the values that are important to us in the United Kingdom.

After the last election, we had a rethink about how best to consolidate our international approach to promoting human rights and democracy abroad. Our manifesto commitment was:

“We will stand up for the freedom of people of all religions—and non-religious people—to practise their beliefs in peace and safety”.

Before the election, we had eight themes, which I think was a bit too cumbersome. They have been narrowed down to three core pillars. They are, first, the values, including democracy, the rule of law, freedom of the media, freedom of religion or belief and women’s rights; secondly, the rules-based international system, supporting human rights as one of the UN’s three pillars that help to provide a nominative framework for the prevention of conflict and instability; and finally, human rights for a stable world—so, managing the risks of UK engagement in countries with poor human rights records, which includes our overseas security and justice assistance framework and contributing to tackling extremism.

4.12 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

4.37 pm

On resuming—

Mr Ellwood: Before we were interrupted by the Divisions, I was explaining that in this House we often ask ourselves what is the value of international aid. We can contextualise the support we give and the trade we do with other countries in terms of the influence we derive when we have questions about their democratic values, concerns about how they follow the rules-based international system or, indeed, worries about whether they are following human rights. I make it clear that, where we can, our support and financial assistance go to non-governmental organisations, rather than directly to Governments. When we provide support to Governments directly, we try to ensure that they abide by our shared commitments and standards.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): When the Minister has discussions about international trade and aid in relation to human rights, for example, what sort of response does he get? More importantly, what is the role of the United Nations? Does it make much progress?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman speaks of the United Nations as if it were another organisation. We are part of the United Nations. We affect the approach of the United Nations on such matters. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, we are concerned not only about security matters but about improving standards of life, democratic values, the rule of law and humanitarian rights across the world. We want to use the UN as a vehicle through which we can leverage change.

Let us look at our own history. Without going into detail, it took us time before monarchs did not have their head removed, before people were not sent up chimneys and before the slave trade was abolished. I am not making an excuse for not pushing such things but, ultimately, we have to effect cultural change at a pace that works, rather than galvanising the opposite message from the one we want to push.

Jim Shannon: The Minister knows, as he said earlier, that I am one of those who have spoken out many times in this House on behalf of Christians. The all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, which I chair, speaks out for those of the Christian religion, those of other religions and those of no religion. When it comes to human rights, we want Muslims to speak up for Christians and Christians to
Mr Ellwood: I remember the debate well. I made it clear—I think that I was the first Minister to do so—that I believe that war crimes have been committed in Iraq and Syria and that crimes against humanity have been committed by Daesh and other extremists in that location, but it is not my opinion or the Government’s opinion that counts, because it is not a political judgment. It must be a legal judgment, and there is a process that must be approved. We cannot get a UN Security Council resolution passed until the evidence is gathered. There is a mechanism to get to the International Criminal Court, and it includes the collection and collation of evidence, as my hon. Friend highlighted.

I will not go into too much detail, other than to say that gathering the evidence, by its nature, requires people to expose themselves to dangerous circumstances. As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has said on a number of occasions, the wheels of justice grind slowly, but they grind fine. As we saw in Bosnia and the former Yugoslavia, it can take many years until those people end up in The Hague, but they are held to account. That is why the Foreign Secretary, when he visited Washington DC in July, made the case and encouraged others to support his view that we must not allow the issue to be missed. We must collect the evidence.

If I may, I will speak to my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). In particular, we are working internationally to deliver our commitment for Christians in the middle east.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The Minister will recall the debate held on 20 April this year, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) referred and to which the Minister responded. The House unanimously called on the Government to make an immediate referral to the UN Security Council, with a view to conferring jurisdiction on the International Criminal Court so that perpetrators could be brought to justice. I was pleased that the Minister said in that debate that the Government were “supporting the gathering and preservation of evidence that could in future be used in a court to hold Daesh to account” and “will do everything we can to help gather evidence that could be used by the judicial bodies.”—[Official Report, 20 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 996.]

I have two questions for the Minister. How have the Government been facilitating the gathering and preservation of evidence of crimes, as they promised, and what steps are they taking to ensure that members of the global coalition, united to defeat Daesh, are also gathering and preserving such evidence? Given that Daesh is now rapidly losing ground in Syria and Iraq, and with the battle of Mosul raging, does he not agree that the Government should make clear how they intend to deal with the perpetrators when they are caught, and should do so with a sense of urgency?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to stress that. We want believers and non-believers to allow freedom of belief. That is what we are pursuing, and it is exactly Britain’s approach when we have dialogues with other countries. The fact that we have an economic relationship with other countries allows us to have necessary frank conversations, sometimes behind closed doors; I appreciate that many hon. Members might feel that they do not hear enough of what we are saying and what pace of change we expect from other countries as they raise their game. A great example, which I know the hon. Gentleman has raised on many occasions, is the use of the death penalty. We abhor it, we ourselves have moved through it and we encourage other countries that use the death penalty to meet EU guidelines and ultimately to remove it.

If there are no further interventions, I will move on. I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) on securing this important debate. It is an opportunity to confirm the Government’s commitment to the right to freedom of religion or belief. It is understandable that his speech focused on the harrowing situation faced by Christians in parts of the middle east. I certainly share his concern. As I mentioned earlier, this Government have a manifesto commitment to support freedom of religion or belief for people of all religions and non-religious people, which is exactly the point raised by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). In particular, we are working internationally to deliver our commitment for Christians in the middle east.

In Iraq, we have funded a series of grassroots meetings between religious leaders of all faiths to promote religious tolerance. It is also worth mentioning that we are working further afield than the middle east, as well. In Pakistan, we regularly raise concerns about the freedom of religion or belief. In March 2016, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, the then Foreign Secretary, raised the importance of safeguarding the rights of all minorities, including religious minorities. In Nigeria, we are providing a substantial package of intelligence, military development and humanitarian support in the fight against Boko Haram, including training and advice on counter-insurgency, and £5 million in support for a regional military taskforce.

Promoting religious tolerance is critical to reconciliation and securing a lasting peace in any combat area, but particularly in Syria and Iraq. That is why we developed the Magna Carta fund, which is being used to support several projects to promote freedom of religion or belief. In Iraq, we have funded a series of grassroots meetings between religious leaders of all faiths to promote religious
tolerance. Over the past year, we have supported a project promoting legal and social protection for freedom of religion or belief in Iraq. The project aims to prevent intolerance and violence towards religious communities by inspiring key leaders in Iraqi society to become defenders of freedom of religion or belief.

Our commitment to promoting freedom of religion or belief is not confined to the middle east but extends right across the piece. It is integral to our diplomatic network in promoting fundamental human rights around the globe through our conversations with host Governments and other influential actors such as faith leaders, and through our project work and organisations such as the United Nations, the European Union and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Is the promotion of religious tolerance in Iraq being done from primary school age? I have seen some documentaries in which certain charities run schools to promote better understanding between different religions. Has there been much success with that?

Mr Ellwood: Yes, I can write to the hon. Gentleman with more detail, but he is absolutely right that that is the age at which messages about understanding, reconciliation and recognition of the various pressures and influences are most received. Our work involves primary and secondary schools as well.

The foreign and commonwealth conference on this matter, which took place last month, was a ground-breaking conference on how protecting freedom of religion or belief can help combat violent extremism by helping make societies more inclusive and respectful of religious diversity. The conference brought together a range of experts and high-profile speakers. All participants, including many Foreign and Commonwealth Office staff, shared and benefited from practical and innovative ideas to advance the cause. We have also updated and reprinted the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s “Freedom of Religion or Belief” toolkit, which provides officers with guidelines on how to identify violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief and what to do about them, and with further sources of information for those who wish to examine the subject in more depth.

In conclusion, the Government will continue to fight for the freedom of religion or belief internationally. We do so not only because it is right and is enshrined in the universal declaration of human rights and in article 18 of the international covenant on civil and political rights but because extending freedom of religion or belief to more countries and more societies helps to make the world safer and more prosperous, which is in all our interests. We recognise that progress requires a response from the whole of society, so we welcome the opportunity to work with this Parliament and other Parliaments, with religious groups and with civil society partners such as Aid to the Church in Need, Open Doors and Christian Solidarity Worldwide. We believe that freedom of religion or belief is a universal human right and we will continue towards the ambitious goal of ensuring that it is enjoyed by everyone everywhere.

Question put and agreed to.

Release of Spectrum Band

4.51 pm

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered release of the 700 MHz spectrum band for mobile data in 2020.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Fello. I vote that we also give you control over air conditioning. I hope that this afternoon we can provide a beacon of hope for people with poor connectivity in rural areas, but that beacon might be my face after standing here talking for more than 10 minutes.

Robert Fello (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman reminds me to say that if right hon. and hon. Members wish to remove their jackets, they may do so.

Calum Kerr: Definitely my favourite Chair.

There can be little doubt that mobile connectivity is changing every aspect of our lives. Even in Westminster, this new way of doing things has had an impact—we need only look around this Chamber to see that. Someone somewhere in the country might be live streaming this very debate on a mobile device—I would not want to bet on that, but the appearance of the former Minister, the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), may enhance the chances of it.

We can all agree on the basic truth that mobile connectivity, which was once a luxury, has become a fundamental part of the way we now live. I am sure I am not alone in being able to remember having to drive around looking for a phone box when my pager went off—I was just out of school at the time—but we now constantly carry around devices that far exceed the functionality and processing power of the desktop computers that not so long ago seemed to represent the cutting edge of what digital technology could offer.

I want to use this debate to underline the ever growing importance of mobile connectivity and to consider the specific potential of the release of the 700 MHz spectrum band, which if correctly managed could make a major contribution to a society that is more connected than ever before. Using 700 MHz mobile data could provide coverage over a wider geographical area, and the signal could effectively penetrate buildings, so it could play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between where the UK is now and the next wave of connectivity-driven innovation with the emergence of 5G. As we move towards the 5G world, we will require a mix of short-range high-frequency spectrum bands, backed up by long-range low-frequency bands such as 700 MHz.

I want the debate to demonstrate that the type of digital infrastructure that we choose to create involves fundamentally political decisions. Although this place may not be renowned for moving with the times, it must be recognised that we need frequent, better-quality debates in Parliament about connectivity. With that in mind, I want us to consider how other European countries are tackling the connectivity challenge, and how different political choices have been made on spectrum and different outcomes achieved, but let us first consider the reality today.

We already know that a major shift in consumer behaviour means that many people are switching to mobile devices for access to the internet. In 2016, 66% of
adults used their mobile phones to go online, up from 61% in 2015. Some 86% of UK mobile customers currently use a smartphone. Perhaps most significantly, 92% of under-35s now view their smartphone as their primary device for accessing the internet. We can also point to a growing trend of favouring mobile data over public wi-fi. Research has found that 72% of people prefer to use their device’s 3G or 4G connection to access the internet even when they are in a public space. That demonstrates that behaviour is already straining at the leash when it comes to—

4.56 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.6 pm

On resuming—

Robert Flello (in the Chair): The debate may now continue until 6.15 pm.

Calum Kerr: I return to the theme of the importance of mobile connectivity. I was about to mention the transformative potential of what is generally known as the internet of things, which we see on the horizon. It is becoming more of a reality day by day, and will involve a tremendous number of devices being hooked up and the aggregate power of the internet really bearing fruit. With that, the demand for mobile connectivity is only going to increase.

Mobile data will underpin the use of new technologies such as precision farming, driverless cars, remote healthcare and smart energy grids. We are already seeing the cutting edge of the process coming into play with the increasing use of immersive augmented reality apps such as Pokémon Go, which is the reason why my phone is currently broken—thanks to my two sons, it went for an 8 km walk to hatch an egg, but that is a different story. At the same time, media companies are increasingly adapting their content for mobile users, and technology is constantly pushing the parameters of what mobile devices are capable of.

It is clear that we know why we want to transform mobile data connectivity, but I want to focus on how we can make that change happen. We know that the Government agree that connectivity represents a fourth utility, but they need to match the rhetoric with unambiguous action. I put it to them that we have moved far beyond the stage at which spectrum licensing could be seen as a cash cow for the Treasury. Previously, the 3G spectrum auction raised about £22 billion, while the 4G licence auction raised £2.34 billion. In contrast, other countries sought to raise much less, in return for operators delivering greater coverage.

Spectrum should be considered in terms of the wider economic and social benefits it can provide, particularly when considering the ongoing challenge of rural connectivity. The UK’s approach to the mobile sector has left more than a quarter of Scotland’s landmass without any voice coverage, and nearly half of it without any data coverage. Across the mobile networks, indoor coverage drops to 31% in rural areas, compared with 91% in urban areas. Those are exactly the kind of disparities that 700 MHz could be pivotal in redressing.

The problems currently facing rural mobile customers are well documented, and will be particularly familiar to rural MPs. Unless the Government tackle the problems at the outset, when they are setting the terms for spectrum licences, they will end up having to apply retrospective sticking-plaster solutions to problems ultimately of their own making. We saw that with measures such as the mobile infrastructure project, which delivered only one tenth of the 600 potential mast sites identified in its original plan.

Although we can recognise the pragmatism behind such projects and the current positive direction of travel on getting more from existing licences, the UK should be moving much further, much faster on rural connectivity. As new licences for spectrum become available, let us get things right from the outset. There is an historic opportunity to redress centuries of rural isolation and exclusion by making mobile a truly universal service, which means access to the internet on any device, any time, anywhere.

That is why we need a better picture of the Government’s thinking on spectrum policy at this crucial moment. One solution that was proposed recently—it has received a great deal of coverage, but in my view that coverage was unwarranted—is so-called national roaming. That may be attractive on the surface but it is fundamentally flawed, because on its own it will not encourage mobile network operators to improve coverage. In fact, it could end up acting as a disincentive to the improvement of coverage.

What the proposal for “national roaming” demonstrates is the basic difficulty we face when it comes to making the mobile marketplace work. Currently, mobile network operators lack the significant profit motive to roll out infrastructure and improve rural coverage. A network operator’s revenue comes from subscriptions and the consumption of content. So from a purely market-driven perspective, those companies have little incentive to invest in comprehensive rural infrastructure.

To get the best outcome from 700 MHz, we can learn a lot by looking at licensing models that are already in use throughout Europe. In Germany, coverage obligations for 700 MHz state that providers must get broadband coverage to at least 98% of households nationwide and at least 97% of households in each federal state. Indeed, across Europe we see far more comprehensive 4G coverage on offer than is the case here. If Swedish network operators can offer 99% population coverage for 4G, in a country that has a larger landmass and a lower population density than the UK, why are we lagging so far behind?

How competition works in practice is also key. The UK has gone from having an equitable distribution of spectrum holdings to having the worst spectrum imbalance in the G20 countries. With half of UK operators now constrained by small spectrum holdings, the competitive pressure that kept prices in the mobile market low is lessening. Will the Government consider a cap on spectrum allocation to redress that imbalance, and will they consider having a fundamental review, which will be needed anyway when 5G comes?

We also need to consider additional mechanisms that target market failure in areas of low population density. As with broadband, getting mobile connectivity to households that are very hard to reach will be a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. In Germany, the 800 MHz
licence involved an “outside to in” approach across four stages, requiring operators to provide 90% coverage in smaller towns before moving on to the next stage. Will the Government consider using such a model?

One nation—one small nation—that has made strong progress is the Faroe Islands. With challenging topography and a population density of 91 per square mile, it now has 100% population coverage and 98% geographic coverage for 2G and 3G, including 100% coverage on roads, even in tunnels, and in a radius of about 100 kilometres in the seas around the islands. The Faroese are currently in the process of rolling out 4G, which is expected to achieve a similar level of coverage to 2G and 3G. Faroese Telecom has shown that that is the way forward, and it is keen to offer solutions for rural Scotland and engage with the challenges we face, which are similar to those it has already faced. I believe that the Minister or his officials may already have a meeting coming up with its representatives.

Such willingness only underlines the case, which I know Ofcom recognises, for a “use it or share it” solution in rural areas. Such a policy is a sensible and workable alternative to a step such as national roaming. As groups such as Faroese Telecom show, there are organisations willing to step forward to fill any gap. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s views on such a policy, which has already been put in place in other countries, including the US.

If digital connectivity is now considered a utility, a radical shift towards comprehensive mobile data coverage is required. Will the Government commit to looking at the examples I have cited as they consider the criteria for new licensees? Will the Minister also consider setting new targets of 95% landmass coverage and 99% population coverage indoors, not only for voice but for data?

I want the debate around spectrum policy to acknowledge that where there is market failure, it is incumbent on Ofcom to intervene to address the situation. Spectrum is a public asset and we must do all we can to make sure that it gets used in the public interest where possible.

There is a compelling case for fresh thinking and a longer term view of mobile connectivity from the Government. They ought to accelerate the move away from the traditional revenue-focused approach and instead consider this asset in a holistic manner factoring in all the social and economic benefits that comprehensive mobile connectivity can provide.

Before I finish, I will explain the need for universal connectivity in terms that are closer to home. I want visitors to my constituency to enjoy a rail service with world-class connectivity when they travel from Edinburgh along the Borders railway, which was recently recognised as the best tourism project in the UK. I want visitors who opt instead to take in the stunning coastal scenery along the Berwickshire coast to get constant access to mobile data throughout their visit. On arrival in my constituency, I want all visitors to have constant access to online information about local businesses and landmarks. I want them to visit hotels and restaurants that can receive electronic payments. When they take to the hills around Liddesdale, I want them to be connected when they visit remote but remarkable sites such as the imposing Hermitage castle, so that they can make use of an immersive app to enhance their experience. I want people in every corner of these islands to have the option to experience the benefits that connectivity brings, and I want them to be able to do so on any device, any time, anywhere.

5.17 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr) on securing this important debate.

As the hon. Gentleman has already mentioned, there are obviously many benefits to releasing the 700 MHz band, but we should not lose sight of the fact that there are some current users of the spectrum who will be negatively affected. Chief among them are the UK’s programme making and special events, or PMSE, sector. It is the backbone of our creative industries, using wireless radio equipment such as microphones and in-ear monitors to stage concerts, festivals, west end musicals, sporting events and a whole host of other key cultural events in the United Kingdom.

I recently met the British Entertainment Industry Radio Group, or BEIRG, the industry body that represents the sector. It is profoundly concerned that unless adequate mitigating steps are taken, the industry faces severe problems as a result of the 700 MHz release. Most notably, without the allocation of adequate replacement spectrum for the sector’s use, standards of production will fall, as more wireless devices are forced to operate in a much smaller amount of spectrum, increasing the risk of interference.

Ofcom has allocated the 960-1164 MHz band, for which the sector is grateful, but no other Administration or regulator in the world has shown any intention of following Ofcom’s lead and allocating this band for PMSE use. That means that the market for new equipment to operate in the new spectrum will be UK-only, which means it is too small for any serious manufacturer of wireless equipment to make the business case for, or to commit to making new products for. PMSE users therefore face being forced to vacate the 700 MHz band in quarter 2 of 2020, without being able to use the new spectrum because no equipment exists that can operate within it. With lead times on equipment of around three years for most manufacturers, the UK faces a situation whereby spectrum-intensive events, such as TV broadcasts, festivals and west end theatre, will be unable to continue offering the world-leading production values that consumers have come to expect.

Calum Kerr: The hon. Gentleman is making an important contribution. I could not possibly have got every aspect of the matter into my own speech without talking for far too long, so I welcome what he is highlighting. Does he agree that there needs to be—there already is an element of this—a fundamental review of all parts of spectrum and a strategy for not just tomorrow but further into the future, to address those kinds of concerns, as well as looking at existing allocation across all media areas?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. We need to be careful about the unintended consequences of some of these changes. Some of those consequences can, with careful consideration, be anticipated; others will probably come in time, but that needs to be carefully reviewed and monitored.
The PMSE sector comprises many small operators, which are not all in the robust financial circumstances we would like them to be. Without assistance, they face some difficult times in the future. The Government and Ofcom’s recent announcement that a compensation scheme will be introduced is hugely welcome, and I thank the Minister for that. Although the importance of increasing mobile phone and broadband coverage is clear for all to see, we must ensure that unintended consequences do not have a negative impact on our hugely successful creative sector and that PMSE operators are able to continue their world-class work. I would be grateful, therefore, to hear from the Minister whether the Government have any further plans to assist the PMSE sector with the transition.

5.21 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Flllo. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr) on securing this important debate. I am sure that the tens of millions of people who have heard about it will be streaming it right now on their mobile phones, to get Members’ words of wisdom.

An important set of points have been made. On the point made by the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), there is a clear need for further debate and scrutiny, and for far more attention than is given to the subject at the moment. That was laid bare in the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk, who highlighted a number of issues that are important—nay, essential—to ensuring a fair distribution of the opportunities provided by the technology in the future. He mentioned the need for rural coverage to take priority—for an outside-in approach to be applied. For far too long, people in rural or less commercial areas have found themselves stuck at the back of a queue, unable ever to get to the front because they are always overtaken by a commercial imperative. The situation in the Borders is, I think, similar to that in my own area, where some 432 miles of road are not covered by 2G, let alone 3G or 4G signals. Those issues must seriously be addressed.

I commend my hon. Friend for his suggestion about the approach taken by Germany. He pointed out that not only is there a requirement there to get to 90% coverage in smaller towns before widening access, but they managed to raise €5 billion through the licensing process, so that approach can be taken and at the same time a return made for the public purse.

Calum Kerr: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is also noteworthy that in Germany they have mandated minimum data speeds, with a minimum average of 10 megabits? Coincidentally, our own measly universal service obligation for fixed wired broadband stands at that same speed.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend shows just how on top of his brief he is by pointing out that anomaly and the lack of ambition we often see when it comes to broadband and wireless access.

That brings me on to the need to accelerate the process. Although it is important that there is further debate and that the considerations for manufacturers and those using the facility at the moment need to be carefully taken into account—I think we would all support that—we should not allow that to hold up the development of something that should be giving us not only a commercial edge, but a social edge for people across the whole UK.

There is rural-proofing and the need to accelerate, and I also completely agree with the “use it or share it” approach. There needs to be an acceptance that we must access all the technology as productively as possible. When we consider ambition, it is important to remember that in the United States they freed up the spectrum in 2008. That is how far behind we are. The UK already lags behind countries such as Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden, which have all committed to accelerate the programme. There are important debates to be held, but there is also a need to pick up the pace—I hope the Minister will indicate how that will be achieved—to ensure that we can take advantage of the benefits.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk also mentioned the need to be ready for the internet of things. That is not something we need to be ready for; it is being deployed here and now, and nowhere is it more important to rural areas than in mobile healthcare. There is an opportunity to give people the chance to improve and restore their health and get the kind of social benefit from the technology that at the moment they cannot access. Until the spectrum issues are solved, people will not, however, be able to do that.

I conclude by repeating one of my hon. Friend’s lines that we should all take away: everyone—the people in every corner of these islands—should be getting the best and fastest possible access and the best possible advantage from new technology.

5.26 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Flllo. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr), who I congratulate on securing this important debate. He has considerable experience and expertise in the area and brings a wealth of knowledge to the debate and to the House in general. He clearly set out what we can achieve if we get this right from the outset, tackling the considerable disparities across the UK.

The hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) clearly laid out the unintended consequences that could arise from the changes, particularly for our creative industries and the PMSE sector. He made clear the need to determine from the outset exactly how spectrum licensing is to be used and how to mitigate any possible issues. I echo many of the comments made, some of which I will come on to.

The auctioning of an electromagnetic frequency for public use may not set pulses racing or minds whirring, but it is the quality of the debate and not the quantity of people here today that shows how important this is. It is a matter of considerable significance for the public, our businesses and our country’s economy. In fact, it is one of the public sector’s most significant assets. How it is auctioned and regulated and, crucially, how the public stand to benefit from any auction are issues of critical importance to the expansion and growth of the digital
economy and the economy at large. That is why we have been pushing the Government to be so much more ambitious in this crucial area. The sector is crying out for more clarity, vision and ambition.

In an always-on world, where the demand for mobile data is increasing at almost the same rate as digital entrepreneurs can think of novel ways to use it, the provision of mobile data, both geographically and in terms of residences and businesses covered, is crucial. It should absolutely be seen as a utility in this day and age, and we should, as far as practically possible, do everything in our power to achieve near-universal coverage, regardless of any vested interests that may try to hold back progress, and to overcome the flaws and market failures that hold back investment in infrastructure.

Recent analysis by Ofcom made the future trajectory of data usage clear. It suggested that between 2015 and 2030 demand will increase forty-fivefold. Since March 2011, data traffic has increased by 710%. It is not just usage, but the way in which data are used that is transforming our economy. The next decade will see only more change—change that we cannot currently imagine.

Let us look at some recent examples from around the country and the globe. In Germany, the annual harvest is on the cusp of a digital revolution, with sensors monitoring everything from air temperature to harvesting rates in real time, increasing productivity and bearing down on food insecurity. One German company has spent more than €2 million developing ways to automatically transmit information from the harvester operating in the field to grain experts thousands of miles away who can instantly assess the yield.

For there to be a true success story in Britain, data coverage is vital. That is not just in residences and not just on one mobile network, but across all networks, on the many transport arteries that criss-cross the United Kingdom—motorways, train routes, where coverage is still abysmal, and our waterways—and in the most rural parts of the country. The 700 MHz spectrum will help in achieving coverage in hard-to-reach places, particularly due to its ability to penetrate through thick walls. It will help to provide that foundation layer of connectivity. To do that, however, the licensing conditions for auction have to be ambitious and tough. The auction cannot just be a boon for the Treasury; it has to bring substantial benefits to the public at large and to our digital economy.

Drew Hendry: Does the hon. Lady agree that it is possible, as we can see from the German example, to put tough conditions in place and still raise some money from the auction?

Louise Haigh: Absolutely. I could not agree more. The issues that have been raised today need to be seen alongside that point. The income for the Treasury should not be the first and only priority.

In our view, while Ofcom does a fantastic job of regulating and auctioning the frequencies, such decisions are in reality political. Where and how coverage targets are met matters greatly, and we in this place should be setting tough conditions for the auction. We would like the Government and Ofcom to be much more ambitious, and we would like to see clear licensing commitments to reflect that ambition. Geographical coverage is still poor, as we have heard. The targets set by the Government—to reach 90% of geographical coverage for voice and text by 2020—simply do not go far enough to meet the challenges of a data-driven world. In fact, as the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) mentioned, we are lagging behind many of our international competitors, who have significantly improved coverage through different and imaginative approaches to licence obligations. For example, Denmark has focused on specified postcodes. France has covered an incredible 99.6% of its population, the Netherlands has covered all main roads, waterways and airports, and Cyprus has specified rural areas and high schools as priorities.

With that in mind, I will conclude by asking the Minister a number of questions, in addition to those asked by the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk.

Calum Kerr: Just before the hon. Lady asks her important questions—I can see the Minister is desperate to hear them—does she agree that there is a false economy here? By seeking money up front for the sale of licences, we inhibit the speeds that exist out there in the country. That holds back productivity, where we have an enormous challenge. If we show a bit more vision and foresight and plan for the longer term, we will get faster speeds and the overall benefit to the country and the public purse will be far greater.

Louise Haigh: That is absolutely right. The hon. Gentleman will know that we discussed that point at length in the Digital Economy Public Bill Committee. In fact, we have brought the band back together again—it is nice to be in the Chamber with all the team. He is also right that the Minister is desperate to hear my questions—he always is—so we will crack on.

Does the Minister still expect mobile data on the spectrum to be available by quarter 2 in 2020? Working with Ofcom, what conditions does he specifically expect to set to achieve much improved geographical coverage and coverage along major transport routes? In particular, what consideration has he given to outside-in licensing, as was mentioned earlier? Will he ensure that the prime focus of the auction of an enormously valuable public sector asset is on ensuring public benefit through increased and expanded coverage, rather than on raising revenue or maximising benefits for the mobile network operators? As the hon. Gentleman just mentioned, that will bring incredible benefits to productivity and our economy.

Finally, as regards the European Union, the Ofcom strategy document, which was written before Britain’s decision to leave the European Union, makes explicit reference to the importance of the EU to the 700 MHz clearance programme, in terms of consultation and technical considerations. The European Parliament and the European Council are leading the joint decision on the timing and release of the frequency. The Minister will be aware that the European Commission recently published a draft decision that includes proposals that would require member states to allow the use of the 700 MHz band for electronic communications services under harmonised technical conditions by 30 June 2020, yet the timetable laid out by the Prime Minister indicates that we will have left the European Union right in the middle of that deadline. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed the steps he and Ofcom are taking.
to ensure that Brexit does not adversely impact achieving data usage on the spectrum. Finally, what contingency plans are in place?

5.34 pm

**The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock):** Rarely has Westminster Hall seen a debate of such technical expertise and such unanimity on the thrust and direction that Members want to see. They were unanimous that increased connectivity is important and drives productivity; that when we clear the 700 MHz spectrum, we need to ensure that the concerns of those who currently use it are taken into account; that we need to use licence conditions for mobile operators in order to reach more people; that we must work appropriately to deliver the very best connectivity that we can; and that demand for that connectivity is going up. That is a reasonable summary of the points made on the direction of travel.

First, I will cover the current use of the 700 MHz band, why that is changing and what will happen as a result. I will then turn to the broader points raised on connectivity. This band of spectrum is an important public resource, and we will auction the use of it with the aim of getting the best benefit. It is currently used for digital terrestrial television, which is the TV we get through an aerial. Some 75% of UK households use it in some way. When TV was first launched in 1936, it used a large block of radio frequencies for which there was no competing use. Today those frequencies are in demand for mobile phones—in particular for mobile phone data—and other technologies, such as wireless microphones for the programme making and special events sector, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) referred.

Demand for mobile data is growing exponentially, as Members have said. The figures I have are that in January 2011, 27% of UK adults had a smartphone and 2% had a tablet. By August 2016, that had grown to 71% and 59% respectively. That meant that demand for mobile data doubled every year from 2012 to 2015. That trend is forecast to continue, and Ofcom has decided to reallocate some spectrum from DTT to mobile, namely the 700 MHz band. That will mean that there is enough spectrum for DTT services and new spectrum to carry a lot of data longer distances, making it very useful for providing coverage across the UK. The 700 MHz spectrum is important because it can carry heavy data loads over longer distances, which is particularly important to the debate about ensuring that we have rural connectivity.

Working with Ofcom, we have set up a programme to ensure that we can clear the 700 MHz band, and up to £600 million is available to support the necessary changes. The main change is to adapt the infrastructure for TV to ensure that that switchover can happen. Support is also available for that for the PMSE sector, as my hon. Friend for Mid Worcestershire mentioned. To answer his questions specifically, Ofcom is consulting on the assistance to be provided. The details of exactly how that support will flow will follow from that consultation. I met the industry body last month to hear the concerns directly, and we will continue talking to the industry to ensure that the switchover happens effectively. Although the spectrum is essentially domestic, in that the distances it covers mean that there is not overlap, there is overlap in the fact that other countries use equipment on similar spectrums and therefore in the manufacture of equipment. I acknowledge that, but I think that the issue can be dealt with, given the taxpayers’ money set aside for mitigation.

On the questions on rural connectivity raised by the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr), I agree strongly that we have seen a positive direction of travel. It is rare that an SNP Member describes the Government thus, but I am pleased that that he did. No doubt he will agree that this week’s announcement by Virgin that it will cover 360,000 more premises in Scotland, the majority with fibre to the premises, was extremely good news.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh)—I almost called her my hon. Friend, we have spent so much time together—made a very interesting speech. Both she and the hon. Gentleman raised the need to ensure that licence conditions include coverage, which is well understood by the Government. It was a mistake by the Labour Government in the early 2000s to set out licence conditions without such geographic coverage requirements. We had to reverse that after the licences had been set, in 2014, to get enforceable targets into the licence conditions, and we are strengthening that enforcement in the Digital Economy Bill that is currently before the House. There are now licence conditions for the four main providers to reach 90% geographically, which is equivalent to about 98% indoor coverage.

**Drew Hendry:** Can the Minister confirm that he is saying that the Government will adopt an outside-in approach to licensing in future rounds?

**Matt Hancock:** We have actively brought that into the existing licences, even after they were struck by the previous Administration. The hon. Gentleman can see clearly the attitude that we take to the need for high-quality, ubiquitous coverage of voice and text and then of 4G, as well as to the groundwork needed to make sure that we prepare for 5G in the years ahead as that technology comes on stream.

**Drew Hendry:** I just want to push a little further on that point, if I may. The Minister has suggested that there is an attitude and a direction of travel, and has accepted what needs to happen. Will he go a bit further and say that that will be the Government’s approach?

**Matt Hancock:** We expect to auction mobile licences for the 700 MHz band in late 2018 or 2019. It will be for Ofcom to conduct those auctions. The hon. Gentleman can see that the Government’s existing policy is to insist on licence conditions on mobile coverage. We are clear about the need for broad mobile coverage and the need to hold the mobile network operators’ feet to the fire on their licence conditions. Some licence conditions go further than 90% geographic coverage—not least those of EE, because it has the emergency services licence—and also include road coverage, to make sure that we get not simply geographical coverage but coverage of the geography where people use phones, which, along with premises, is on the roads.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk mentioned the Faroe Islands. I am meeting Jan Ziskesen from the Faroe Islands Government tomorrow to understand more about what they have done. Areas of
sparsity with similar geographies to some parts of Scotland can always give us a greater understanding of what can be used to deliver connectivity in those geographies. I am enormously looking forward to that meeting and to hearing what more we can do.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley asked a number of specific questions. First, she asked whether we expect availability by 2020. The answer is broadly yes, we do. As I said, the auctions will take place beforehand, but we want to get on with this as soon as we make the switchover. I have answered her question on coverage being included in licence conditions; that is existing Government policy.

The hon. Lady asked a question about maximising revenue. She said that we should not maximise revenue first and foremost, but should instead look to the benefits of productivity. If only that had been the approach of the last Labour Government, perhaps the list of countries that we are behind would not be so long.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked whether we will work with EU partners. Yes, of course we will. I will be travelling to the Telecommunications Council myself next month to make sure that while we are a member of the European Union, we continue to work with our European partners to get the very best connectivity for the whole country.

**Calum Kerr:** This is a happy, consensual debate, is it not? The Minister almost gave my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) a positive commitment—he managed to row back as fast as possible, but the direction was still positive. Does he support the concept of “use it or share it”, and will he consider it as another potential solution in rural areas, where existing spectrum licence holders are clearly not providing a service?

**Matt Hancock:** That is a matter for Ofcom to consider in setting the details of how the spectrum is auctioned. It will of course consult on exactly how that auction takes place, and I am sure it will have noted the hon. Gentleman’s comments.

I hope that I have answered all the questions asked today. This is a very important issue, if a rather technical one. I am grateful for the interest in it—

**Drew Hendry** rose—

**Matt Hancock:** That interest extends to constant interruption by SNP Members while I am trying to finish my speech—I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

**Drew Hendry:** I am extraordinarily grateful for one last opportunity to intervene on the Minister. I asked a question during my speech about the opportunities for accelerating the process. I wonder if he could give an answer on that.

**Matt Hancock:** I apologise for not answering that question. These changes are best done in an orderly way, with a clearly set timetable. In this case, there are three and a half years still to run. Having set the timetable, I think it is best to stick to it, especially because of the impact on existing spectrum users, and to make sure that the changeover happens in the most orderly way possible.

With that, unless there are any further interventions, I will finish by saying that I am grateful to Members for the broad consensus of support for what we are trying to do to improve connectivity through the use of the 700 MHz band.

5.47 pm

**Calum Kerr:** I will just say a few words to wind up the debate. I thank hon. Members for coming and taking part in the debate.

I am concerned that because of the backgrounds of people in this place, there is not enough knowledge on this subject. The moment my colleagues saw “700 MHz” in the debate title, I got umpteen taps on the shoulder and people saying, “What is that? Is it broadband?” and I went, “Well, actually, it is mobile, but mobile broadband.” I am concerned that there is a lack of knowledge in this place. As I often say, we cannot move for tripping over a lawyer, but try finding somebody who understands technology and it is a challenge. Because of that, the danger is that we shy away from the issue, pass the buck to Ofcom and do not debate it. I say well done to the hon. Members who are here for taking part—we all have a responsibility to keep talking about this.

**Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con)** rose—

**Robert Flello (in the Chair):** Order. It is not usual to have interventions in the winding-up speech.

**Calum Kerr:** That is a shame. I am sure it was going to be a very good point; the hon. Gentleman is very well respected in the technology space.

We should be more conscious about what we do in that space, because there is a political dimension to policy setting on spectrum. We have talked today about the level of coverage. That is a political decision, and it is not fair to pass the buck to Ofcom. I am not saying that we are doing that fully, but we must debate and decide and be conscious of the direction of travel. The Minister has made some positive noises, but I would like to see more details firmed up. I would like to see 99% indoors coverage. 95% geographical coverage and an out-to-in approach. A fundamental review of spectrum policy is needed if we are to get the infrastructure that will deliver the access that I am sure the Minister and all of us want.

*Question put and agreed to.*

**Resolved,**

That this House has considered release of the 700 MHz spectrum band for mobile data in 2020.

5.49 pm

**Sitting adjourned.**
Centenary of the Balfour Declaration

9.30 am

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the centenary of the Balfour Declaration.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I am pleased to have secured this debate. It is particularly fitting as just a few days ago, on Tuesday 2 November, we marked the beginning of a year of events leading to the centenary of the Balfour declaration—one of the most defining moments in the UK's shared history with Israel.

On that November day back in 1917, a Conservative Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour, gave the official approval of His Majesty's Government to the Zionist movement's aspiration for Jewish self-determination. That paved the way for the creation of the state of Israel in their historic homeland following centuries of exile and persecution around the world. This landmark letter, comprised of just three paragraphs, has been the subject of intense historical debate right up to, and I am sure, including, today.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The British Government of that day could well be accused of duplicity. Not only were they issuing the Balfour declaration, but they had guaranteed, one way or another, to the Sharif of Mecca and other Arab leaders, that the Arabs would be allowed to have a homeland, so they were either duplicitous or incompetent in 1917.

Caroline Ansell: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. My understanding is that that challenge has been made, but was refuted strongly by Churchill back in the day.

This landmark letter, comprising just three paragraphs and the subject of our debate today, sets out that aspiration for a Jewish homeland. I am proud that our country supported the establishment of that national home, and I am also proud of the strength of the UK-Israeli relationship. Our partnership in trade, technology, medicine and academia, and our shared values, have flourished in the 68 years of Israel's young life.

In his letter, Foreign Secretary Balfour pledged to Lord Rothschild, a leading member of British Jewry, that he would “view with favour”, and that His Majesty's Government endorsed, “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country”.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am glad that the hon. Lady read the letter through. Does she agree that the first part of that equation has been dealt with, which is the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine—not, obviously, the whole of Palestine—and that perhaps concentration for the next immediate period should be on the second part, the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities, which clearly has not been achieved? That should be our priority.

Caroline Ansell: The hon. Gentleman's point is well made. Where we might disagree is on reasons why that second aspiration has not come to pass. What is really important about the letter, which has been contested, is that this non-binding Balfour declaration was swiftly endorsed and enshrined in binding agreements ratified by the international community in the San Remo resolution and the Sèvres peace treaty, and was then ratified by all 51 countries of the League of Nations when the British mandate for Palestine was approved in 1922.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Although we are living in a fast-changing world and no treaty at any time is entirely immutable, my hon. Friend, I and many of our colleagues present here today acknowledge the importance—hopefully, the globally acknowledged importance—of the recognition of an Israeli homeland. Although I accept that there is still work to do to ensure that every aspect of the Balfour declaration is put in place, and we will hopefully play a part in that work in the decades to come, it is equally important to recognise that Israel has been a success story and its right to exist should be recognised globally.

Caroline Ansell: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reaffirmation that, although Britain led in this regard, that shared, stated intention to see a homeland returned to the Jewish people was supported across the world.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On the subject of leadership, does the hon. Lady agree that, given Britain’s prominent historical role, it needs to play a very active part in trying to find a solution and ensuring that a two-state solution is implemented?

Caroline Ansell: Indeed I do.

The League of Nations, the precursor to the United Nations, formally recognised, and this is critical to what follows, “the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine” and “the grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country”. Through its use of the term “reconstituting”, the international community formally recognised the pre-existing ties of the Jewish people to their homeland, in which there had been a continuous Jewish presence for millennia.

A hundred years on and Israel today is a multiracial, multi-ethnic democracy where Arabs, Druze and other minorities are guaranteed equal rights under law. Israel’s 1.7 million-strong Arab minority—around 20% of the local population—participates fully in Israel’s political system, and there are currently 17 Israeli Arab members in the 120-seat Knesset. Israeli Arabs serve as university professors, senior police and army officers and heads of hospital departments, and an Arab judge sits in the country’s Supreme Court. Opponents of Zionism and the state of Israel have freedom of speech and are
permitted to form political organisations within the country. In fact, Israel is the only country in the world whose Parliament has Members advocating the destruction of the state. Elsewhere in the middle east, minority communities live in starkly different circumstances. The Christian community, for example, is in serious and dramatic decline across much of the middle east because of persecution and oppression, while in Israel Christians enjoy full rights and freedoms. Indeed, Christians make up the largest religious community in Israel after Jews and Muslims, and the holiest sites in Christianity are protected by Israel.

Britain and Israel have an enduring relationship shaped both by our historical ties and by our extensive co-operation and shared interests today. The Prime Minister recently described the relationship between our two countries as remaining

“as strong as ever, based not only on bilateral trade, scientific research and security co-operation, but the values we share, like freedom, democracy and tolerance.”

The value of bilateral trade in both directions over the past 10 years has increased by 60%, and in 2015 reached a record high of almost £6 billion.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. She is making an insightful speech but, on the point about trade, does she believe that there should be trade with the illegal settlements or with businesses that are located in the illegal settlements? I ask that particularly because the European Union has recently banned trade with businesses in the Crimea, which, as we know, is an illegally annexed land. Given that there are now 600,000 settlers living in the illegal settlements, and those settlements are clearly—

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. We will have to have shorter interventions.

Stephen Kinnock: I apologise, Mr Chope. My question is—

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. Will the hon. Gentleman resume his seat, please?

Caroline Ansell: On the point about settlements, we need to see a far bigger picture. We are looking to determine today, and in the hereafter, a peace deal whereby Israel and Palestine can live, co-exist, share, prosper and trade with one another. The hon. Gentleman, in focusing on that point, is perhaps neglecting the much bigger picture and the bigger ambition: we want free trade across those borders and security for both peoples and all businesses operating in the region.

Mark Field: I was very pleased with what my hon. Friend had to say about co-operation between Christians, particularly in this country, and the Jewish community. Does she recognise that as well as the trade to which she refers, a huge amount of incredibly important co-operation on security and intelligence is happening between our two countries to make the middle east and, hopefully, the world a safer place in the years to come?

Caroline Ansell: I recognise the great merit in what my right hon. Friend says. In particular, the new relationships in that part of the world—with the peace deals with Egypt and Jordan—are securing much greater stability in the region and, courtesy of that technological advancement, greater security across the world.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The hon. Lady rightly draws attention to the much better relations between Israel and its Arab neighbours. Is not the key to a sustainable peace that those who are involved in negotiations commit themselves to full recognition of the state of Israel, securely positioned alongside a Palestinian state with international guarantees, and a rejection of the groups that campaign against the existence of Israel? Should not all those who participate in this debate make clear their commitment to that as the starting point of the process?

Caroline Ansell: The right hon. Gentleman’s point is so very well made; that is the starting point and the journey. We would do well to preface all our speeches with the intention that we want to see both sides come together and engage in peace talks for the peace and security of both countries, the region and the world.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Would we not have a two-state solution today if the armies of five Arab states had not invaded the newly independent declared state of Israel in 1948? It is really from that decision that the Palestinians lost their allocated share and their homeland.

Caroline Ansell: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. The UN-sponsored partition plan for Palestine in 1947 was a very significant missed opportunity. How different might the region be today and how many lives might have been spared—because there is suffering and loss on both sides—if the Arab leadership had taken up that UN-sponsored partition plan back in the day.

Let me reprise Britain’s ties with Israel and how we feel the benefit of that relationship. Consider, for example, that one in six generic prescription drugs issued by the NHS comes from an Israeli pharmaceutical company. Indeed, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), announced a few weeks ago that, without these supplies from Israel, “significant shortages of some medicines important for patient health” would be likely. Brexit provides us with an opportunity to negotiate a new trade deal with Israel, and I welcome the fact that the Government have already confirmed their determination to secure a deal and further strengthen our trading relationship.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Does Israel’s participation in Horizon 2020 indicate, post-Brexit, that the European Union will still be open not only to Israel, but to Britain in the really important area of scientific research?

Caroline Ansell: Indeed it does; I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.

Although the UK’s relationship and ties with Israel are strong and we see Israel’s contribution to our economy, its contribution to the world should also be recognised at this landmark moment. Israel has defined the challenges posed by an arid climate, a small population and security
threats to make significant contributions to the advancement of the world. Israeli inventions have transformed the way we live our lives. The algorithm for sending emails, mobile phone technology, technology for anti-virus software, instant messaging and the USB flash drive were all developed in Israel. It is little surprise that so many multinational tech giants have established R and D facilities in Israel. Apple, Windows, Intel, HP, Google and many more all have a presence in a country that is the size of Wales.

From helping refugees in Lesbos to fighting Ebola in west Africa, Israeli aid teams are a common and welcome sight for countries in their time of need. On my visit to Israel last year, I had the great pleasure of visiting Save a Child’s Heart, which is an extraordinary project that provides life-saving surgery for children with cognitive heart defects. The lives of children throughout the developing world have been saved by Israeli doctors. There is much to recognise, value and celebrate.

**Andy Slaughter:** Did the hon. Lady speak to Palestinians and see what is happening in the west bank? Next year is also the 50th anniversary of a brutal military occupation of someone else’s territory. Until that key point is resolved, we will not have two peoples living together in peace.

**Caroline Ansell:** I had the opportunity during that visit to meet Palestinians, business leaders and property developers. I saw a development at Rawabi, the likes of which I have never seen before in its scale, scope, vision and ambition. A whole city is rising out of the ground. I have never seen anything so truly astonishing. That place, being built by Palestinians for Palestinians, with 40,000 homes looking to be delivered, is a really positive vision for what the future could look like.

Events to mark the declaration’s centenary began earlier this month and will continue until the 100th anniversary in November 2017. Jewish communal and Israel advocacy organisations have launched an official Balfour 100 campaign, providing helpful educational resources, and will be hosting a series of events. The Prime Minister has expressed her desire to mark the occasion, as has the Minister, and I thank him for his remarks.

However, Israel does not live in peace and security and the Palestinians have not acceded to their own recognised state. As my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) said earlier, how different things might have been if the Arab leadership, back in 1947, had adopted the UN partition plan. The region could look very different today, with two prosperous states—one Arab, one Jewish—working together and more faithfully reflecting the Balfour aspiration that the civil and religious rights of all be safeguarded.

Over the years, proposals have been rejected for a two-state solution, including, in recent decades, at Camp David at the turn of the century, and more recently, in 2008. Israel unilaterally withdrew from Gaza in 2005 in an effort to bring more momentum to the peace process. Gifted with a highly educated population and a very beautiful Mediterranean coastline, it has been said that Gaza had the potential to be the Singapore of the east, but rather than being able to seize that opportunity, the Islamist terror group, Hamas, has committed Gazan civilians to ongoing rounds of violence.

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): When I asked a Palestinian official why several thousand greenhouses had been destroyed during that period, I received the reply, “We were very stupid to do so.” That great opportunity was squandered. Does my hon. Friend agree that that was surprising?

**Caroline Ansell:** Yes, indeed, that was an opportunity. I think, with the benefit of hindsight, how different things might have been.

Instead of participating in face-to-face talks, the Palestinian Authority have chosen to pursue unilateral measures in the international arena, but unilateralism is the rejection of the peace process, not a means to revitalize it. Worse yet, the Palestinians remain divided, with fierce internal rivalry between Hamas and Fatah. Following the recent cancellation of the long overdue local elections, it does not seem that the two camps will come together anytime soon.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is very difficult to have sensible negotiations on a two-state solution if the other side does not turn up or, indeed, recognise the existence of the other side?

**Caroline Ansell:** My hon. Friend highlights two essential, beautifully simple truths: there must be mutual recognition and there must be direct talks. Without those, the process cannot move forward. I hope that in this landmark time, the call from us all, with one voice, is to urge both sides to come together again to take up talks.

As the engineers of the Balfour declaration, it is even more important for our country to work with both parties to return to the peace talks. Therefore, I ask the Minister what recent discussions he has had with his Israeli and Palestinian counterparts on the return to direct negotiations, and what the prospects are for the resumption of peace talks without preconditions.

The Palestinian people deserve to live their lives in peace and prosperity. As I said during my time in the west bank, I visited the remarkable new city of Rawabi, which offers up such hope for a better future. Very recently—during the summer in fact—new partnerships have been coming forward. At the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, two new programmes are bringing Israelis and Palestinians together. The lead professor said:

> “As a leading academic and research institution, we are committed to advancing science for the benefit of all people. Through this new partnership with the British government, Palestinian graduate students are already contributing to world-leading research at the Hebrew University, and we are delighted to have them with us. This program not only advances science, but through it sends a message of hope and friendship, and of the importance of working together to find solutions that improve the health of our communities.”

Such projects bring hope and show what can be achieved.

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that the Palestinian people have been badly let down by their leadership? When I spoke to the Palestine Liberation Organisation about duplicating Rawabi, it told me that it did not want anything to do with the project because it involved the private sector. That is a disgraceful approach to a very significant project in the region.
Caroline Ansell: Yes, indeed. I understand that much negotiation was done to bring the project to light without the blessing of the leadership, which perhaps pulls back from wanting the world to see a more prosperous Palestine.

Although leaders need to step up, it is through relationships between everyday people from both communities that a real and lasting peace will ultimately be established. There have been no direct peace talks for several years now, but there have been some recent signs of progress on both sides. We should welcome the fact that Israel’s Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has underlined his commitment to restarting peace negotiations without preconditions, and that PA President Mahmoud Abbas attended the funeral of former Israeli President Shimon Peres in September. Recent polling has shown that there is still an appetite for a two-state solution among Palestinians and Israelis; the people.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): We have found in Northern Ireland and other locations across the globe that, until we get to the point at which those who advocate violence or give it quiet endorsement accept that there is no point and that violence is totally counter-productive in reaching a successful conclusion, it is exceptionally difficult to arrive at, in this instance, a two-state solution. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is the case?

Caroline Ansell: The hon. Gentleman is right in everything he says, but peace is possible and there is a precedent for peace in the lasting peace deals with Egypt in 1979 and with Jordan in 1994.

In conclusion, there is much in the past century to value, recognise and celebrate, and there is much more to which we need to aspire to ensure that the peoples of both communities can continue to live and prosper.

9.55 am

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) on securing the debate and on a good set of opening remarks.

This debate gives us the opportunity to reflect on the unique contribution of this country to the creation of the modern state of Israel. There is much to be said about the historical significance of the Balfour declaration, but I will focus my remarks on its significance in the context of today’s stark realities. We are seeing a serious and concerning resurgence of anti-Semitism globally, which more often than not is inextricably linked to a hostility towards the state of Israel. In many quarters, Zionism has become a toxic word that is equated, by some, with the oppression of the Palestinian people. In the recent past, there was a global campaign by Israel’s strongest critics to falsely equate Zionism with racism.

Although it is true—and we should make this point—that some people inappropriately label any criticism of the Israeli state as anti-Semitism, it is also true that hostility towards Israel and Zionism too often consists of language and imagery that crosses a line and becomes anti-Semitism—or, to give it its true name, Jew hatred. This is the case among some on the left in this country including, sadly, a small minority in my party. Such hostility has led to a significant flight of Jews from France, and is a growing problem in many European countries. Too often, anti-Semitism is viewed as a second-class form of racism, and justified or legitimised by many who claim to be staunch anti-racism campaigners, but who abhor Israel and attack Zionism.

It is chilling that, 100 years on from the Balfour declaration, Marine Le Pen has a serious prospect of power in France, and the President-elect of the United States has appointed someone with well-documented anti-Semitic views to a senior position in his forthcoming Administration. Incidentally—it is important to put this on the record—it is equally chilling that misogyny, homophobia and Islamophobia are trivialised as just part of the rough and tumble of an election campaign, as though women, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, Muslims, Mexicans and other minority communities can simply move on, the morning after an election, and that the anger, fear and insecurity for many citizens in a country that prides itself on being the world’s leading liberal democracy should be relegated to a mere footnote in history. That would be the worst kind of double standard.

No serious attempt to tackle contemporary anti-Semitism can duck the Zionism question. All too often, those who talk about tackling anti-Semitism do not want to recognise that fact. I raised that point forcefully in my direct representations to the leader of my party and Shami Chakrabarti as part of their recent inquiry. Zionism is the right of the Jewish people to self-determination in their own state—a right to self-determination that many of Israel’s fiercest critics demonstrate for on behalf of many other minority communities now around the world.

It is true that a small minority demand, in the name of Zionism, a greater Israel, which means the expansion of her current borders, but that is not the Zionism of the overwhelming majority. I passionately support a two-state solution, which means a viable Palestinian state and opposition to settlement expansion by Israel. I have profound differences with aspects of the current Israeli Government’s policies, but I am proud to be a staunch supporter of the right of the Jewish people to self-determination in the state of Israel—a right supported by the United Nations in 1947 and enshrined by full recognition in 1949.

That right is in the finest traditions of the Labour party and many socialists who were the pioneers of the modern state of Israel. It was the British Labour party that led the way in supporting the right of Jews to have a homeland in Palestine. Three months prior to the adoption of the Balfour declaration, Labour’s stated policy was:

“Palestine should be set free from the harsh and oppressive government of the Turk, in order that this country may form a free State under international guarantee, to which such of the Jewish people as desire to do so may return and may work out their salvation free from interference by those of alien race or religion.”

The party’s then leader, Arthur Henderson, said:

“The British Labour Party believes that the responsibility of the British people in Palestine should be fulfilled to the utmost of their power. It believes that these responsibilities may be fulfilled so as to ensure the economic prosperity, political autonomy and spiritual freedom of both the Jews and Arabs in Palestine.”

This debate is a welcome opportunity to challenge both the rewriting of history and the ignorance of history, a toxic combination that is fuelling so much of today’s anti-Semitism.
Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend, like me, recognise and acknowledge that it was the Labour party that first expressed such support for the creation of the state of Israel and advanced the Balfour declaration? The Labour party went on to re-establish and recommit its support 11 times in the months and years that followed.

Mr Lewis: My hon. Friend is right. That is a historical fact. The reason for repeating that point is that there are some who talk about a two-state solution, which she and I support, but whose rhetoric and language often appear to be about a one-state solution—and that state is not the state of Israel. Her intervention is an accurate reflection of history, and it is important to make that point in the debate that often rages in our party. It is important to clarify the difference between the two, because people are saying that they want two states when they really want one state. That too often appears to be the language and rhetoric.

This timely debate has given us an opportunity to debate something that is incredibly important, particularly because of the impact in contemporary Britain, in Europe and across the world. To be clear, Zionists have no right to seek exemption for Israel from legitimate criticism of the actions of her Government or to brand those who engage in such criticism as anti-Semitic. Equally, some of Israel’s fiercest critics must not be allowed to get away with the delegitimisation of Israel through the rewriting of history, which seeks to deny the legal and moral basis of the Jewish people’s right to self-determination in their own state. It is entirely consistent and morally right both to support and celebrate the Balfour declaration and to strongly and passionately support a two-state solution that includes a viable state for the Palestinians.

10.2 am

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I welcome the opportunity to take part in this important debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) for securing it. I am a long-time friend of the state of Israel and am proud to be so. I am pleased to say that a significant number of my constituents have been in contact with me about taking part in this debate, and I welcome their input.

As my constituents point out in their emails to me, the Balfour declaration was the first official statement of recognition by a major foreign power of the right of the Jewish people to national self-determination, free and safe from persecution. The support that the British gave to the creation of a Jewish democratic state was a key stage in a process that eventually brought relief from two millennia of persecution and exile, as my hon. Friend so eloquently stated.

As we have heard, the Balfour declaration was subsequently ratified by all 51 countries of the League of Nations when the Mandate for Palestine was approved in 1922, recognising the historical connection of the Jewish people to Palestine and the grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country. Over the years, many sought and found refuge after the holocaust and the expulsion of some 800,000 Jewish people from across the middle east and north Africa. Since its rebirth in 1948, Israel has sadly been attacked many times and has repeatedly faced existential threats. Despite those threats, Israel is a liberal, pluralist democracy that is committed to working for a peaceful settlement with all its neighbours.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does the right hon. Lady agree that, despite all the rhetoric about talks or whatever, the people who suffer most greatly from those attacks are the men, women and children, especially the children?

Mrs Villiers: Yes. The hon. Gentleman makes an entirely valid point. As others have said, I fear that the Palestinians have often been let down by their leadership.

It is also important to recognise that Israel is a multi-ethnic, multi-faith democracy in which Arabs, Druze and other non-Jewish minorities are guaranteed equal rights under the law. It was a point well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne that Christians enjoy full freedom of religion in Israel, unlike in almost any other part of the middle east. Unlike in many countries of the middle east, the rights of women and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are fully protected in Israel, which is something to celebrate. Of course, there are a famously independent-minded media in Israel and an equally independent judiciary, both of which are always willing to hold the Israeli Government to account.

This debate is an important opportunity to speak out against those organisations that use boycott campaigns to seek to delegitimise the state of Israel. The 12-month run-up to the centenary of this important declaration provides us with an opportunity to celebrate Israel’s contribution to the global community. It is an opportunity to condemn the sorts of anti-Semitism that we have heard about this morning, and it is an opportunity to reflect on how to restart the peace process in the middle east.

Although hon. Members in this room may be divided on many issues, I am sure we can all unite in supporting efforts to deliver a negotiated peace settlement for Israel and the Palestinians. Throughout the build-up to this important centenary next year, I am sure there will be a strong focus on seeking to get those negotiations going once again, with a view to finally securing the two-state solution for which we have already heard such strong support among hon. Members this morning. We could then finally see a safe and secure Israel living beside a viable Palestinian state.

The centenary is also an opportunity to celebrate the bilateral relationship between the UK and Israel. Since its creation, the state of Israel has had an enduring partnership with our country that covers many areas, including trade, technology, science, medicine and academic research. Trade between our two countries is now at record highs. The UK is Israel’s second-largest trading partner, with more than 300 Israeli companies operating in this country. We have already heard about British-Israeli co-operation in technology, which is facilitating significant numbers of business partnerships that support jobs in both countries in areas such as FinTech, cleantech, cyber-security and health. Israel is a world leader in medical research, particularly stem cell research. Research under way in Israel is giving hope to many people with debilitating diseases such as Parkinson’s.
The forthcoming centenary is an opportunity to further strengthen ties between our country and Israel in culture, trade and academic life. Of course, the Brexit decision opens up the opportunity of a trade deal. We should also use the forthcoming centenary to see whether we can make further progress towards a long-term peaceful settlement in the middle east, which continues to be a foreign policy priority for our Government.

I hope the Minister will reassure us on those points. Today’s debate is a reminder of the significant role that the United Kingdom played in the creation of the state of Israel, and with that comes a continuing obligation to do all we can to support efforts to deliver a negotiated settlement so that we can finally see a peaceful outcome and a two-state solution in the middle east.

10.9 am

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I welcome this debate. I should perhaps declare that I am a patron of the Balfour Project and explain its purpose:

“The Balfour Project invites the British government and people to mark the centenary of the Balfour Declaration on 2nd November 2017 by...learning what the Balfour Declaration means for both Jews and Arabs...acknowledging that whilst a homeland for the Jewish people has been achieved, the promise to protect the rights of the Palestinian people has not yet been fulfilled...urging the people and elected representatives of the UK to take effective action to promote justice, security and peace for both peoples.”

I am sure Members will have noted that the Balfour Project is inviting the Government and people of Britain to mark the centenary. I understand why the Jewish community will want to celebrate the centenary of the Balfour declaration, which enabled the creation of the state of Israel; as someone who has family in Israel, I celebrate that too. Equally, I understand why the Palestinian people will want to grieve or lament on its centenary the failure of the British Government to protect the rights of the Palestinian people, and I will grieve and lament with the Palestinian community too. That is why the Balfour Project talks about “marking” the centenary.

The Balfour Project takes its educational role seriously. To help to inform British citizens of our historical role in that region, it has produced a film about the Balfour declaration, which was shown at an event I hosted in Westminster in May, and a booklet that supports the initiative.

Mrs Villiers: Will the right hon. Gentleman join me in condemning the meeting that his former party colleague Baroness Tonge hosted in the House of Lords, at which the discourse was anti-Semitic? Will he condemn that meeting and his former colleague?

Tom Brake: Of course I condemn that meeting. The right hon. Lady rightly described her as my former party colleague; I am pleased that she is no longer a member of our party.

Bob Stewart: As I understand it, there was no anti-Semitism from the bench at that meeting. It was a question asked from the audience that Baroness Tonge did not even hear. That meeting has been grossly misconstrued, and that is wrong.

Tom Brake: I was not present at the meeting either, but as I understand it the comment was made not by Baroness Tonge but by a person in the audience, and Baroness Tonge did not make a blunt statement to rebut it. However, the fact is that she is no longer a member of the Liberal Democrats.

It is our historical role in the region that led me to get involved in the Balfour Project. I had not forgotten the bitterness and anger felt towards the British by the young Palestinians I met some 10 years ago as part of an initiative from the organisation Initiatives of Change. They felt that we had a central role, both in the failure to deliver for the Palestinian people and in trying to ensure that that was now delivered.

How should the UK Government be celebrating, commemorating or marking the centenary? That is obvious. They should fully support any peace initiatives that seek to implement the two-state solution before time runs out. I hope Members will agree that there is a real risk that time will indeed run out. We know that the election of President Trump is unlikely to help with implementing a two-state solution. As far as I am aware, the only game in town, in terms of peace initiatives, is the one that the French are currently running. The Israeli Government have said that they believe the French plan “greatly harms the possibilities for advancing the peace process.”

I wonder whether the Minister agrees with the Israeli Government on that score.

Will the Minister take this opportunity to express a difference of opinion with the Israeli Education Minister, who says that there is no two-state solution? As far as I am aware, the UK’s position is that that is what our Government are seeking to implement, so I hope the Minister will challenge that statement from a senior Israeli Minister. Is the Government’s position that they want to encourage the Israelis to engage with that initiative in the way that Abbas has? Will the Minister support proposals from that initiative that would lead to greater economic co-operation—that is an area in which Israelis and Palestinians can mutually benefit—or proposals to strengthen ties between Palestinian and Israeli civil society organisations, perhaps as a first step towards a more meaningful peace process?

The UK has a particular historical responsibility towards the Palestinian people. We failed to honour our promises nearly 100 years ago. We have a duty now to actively support the peace process and to secure a viable Palestinian state. That is what our Government must do—indeed, a number of Members have said today that they want the Government to do it. It will be the most effective and meaningful way of marking the Balfour declaration that would mean that in future years its anniversary could be celebrated by both the Jewish people and the Palestinian people.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. The wind-ups will start at 10.30 am. The shorter the speeches, the more Members we will be able to accommodate.

10.15 am

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope—I believe I will have that pleasure again in several weeks. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) on introducing the debate in such a balanced way.
We should clearly be talking about the celebration of the centenary of the Balfour declaration. I take the point that the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) made, but the meeting that was held in the House of Lords under the auspices of the Palestinian Return Centre was a Balfour apology campaign. The President of the Palestinian state has sought to get Britain to apologise for the Balfour declaration and potentially to sue the British Government for it. That is the context in which we must put the debate.

I have had the opportunity to visit Israel, both as a tourist and with Conservative Friends of Israel. I have also visited Jordan and the west bank with the Palestinian Return Centre, to see both sides of the argument. The reality of life in Israel or the west bank is such that no one should really speak about that part of the world unless they have been there. Israel is the only country in the world in which someone can go to one side of it, see the other and know that they are surrounded by neighbours that want to destroy the state in its entirety. That, of course, leads to the reasons why Israel acts as it does.

We should celebrate the Balfour declaration, but the one element that was not put in it was the borders of the state of Israel. Had those borders been determined at the time, when Britain was drawing lines on maps in many other parts of the world, possibly we would not still be trying to reach the two-state solution that we talk about today. It took three years for the Balfour declaration to be accepted worldwide, but accepted it was. Israel has since had to endure the second world war; the Holocaust; the 1948 war of independence, when it was attacked by Arab states that sought to wipe Israel off the face of the planet on its inception; a war in ’67, when it was invaded again; and a war in ’71, when it was invaded. Yet Israel continues to exist.

During various discussions, we have heard about the Israeli Government’s supposed intransigence. However, Israel has demonstrated that it will give land for peace. The unilateral withdrawal from Gaza left behind buildings and agricultural opportunities that could have been used by the Palestinian people but were just demolished or ignored. The result of the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza has been more than 11,000 rockets descending from Gaza on to the state of Israel. If you were in that position, Mr Chope, you would react, and the Israeli Government have reacted.

We have also heard the reality of the situation in this country. Anti-Semitism is on the rise; it is often conflated with a belief that the state of Israel should not exist at all or with attacks on the Government of the state of Israel. We have to confront anti-Semitism wherever it rears its ugly head. We must ensure it is understood that it is unacceptable to express such views and that it is unacceptable that anyone in this country should have to suffer anti-Semitism.

We have already heard from several Members, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers), about Israel’s contributions to the world through trade, security, medicine, technology and science. We should remember that Israel is the world’s 10th biggest economy: it is a key trading partner of the UK’s, and beyond. Once we leave the European Union, we will have great opportunities for continuing our trade under a new international trade agreement, and we have the chance to set that out clearly over the next two years.

One issue that has not been mentioned, but should be, is the plight of the Jewish people throughout the middle east. Back in the 1950s, when Israel was in its infancy, there were 2.3 million Jewish people living in Arab states; today, there are fewer than 100,000. They all had to flee Arab states in fear of their lives. We should remember that we are getting greater polarisation of the peoples of the middle east, which is of particular concern.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that there are countries in the Muslim world that have been very positive about Jews? I am thinking particularly of relatively enlightened countries such as the Kingdom of Morocco, which has always welcomed Jews and treated them extremely well.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. There are clearly exceptions to the rule, but the unfortunate generality is that the Jews have had to flee.

We look forward to a two-state solution, but we should remember that the Palestinian state has never existed as an independent state; it has always been occupied, either by Jordan, the Ottoman empire or someone else. We are therefore creating a state, and when we do so, we must ensure that there is peace, security on all sides, and an opportunity for everyone to live in peace.

We are running out of time with the Obama Administration, from which I suspect we will not see any movement between now and January, when we will have a new President of the United States. Will the Minister ensure that the Government and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are negotiating with the incoming regime in the States on initiating urgent talks between Israel and the Palestinians that can lead to that two-state solution? That would give us the opportunity, during the anniversary of the Balfour declaration, to have real, meaningful talks, without preconditions, with the Israeli Government and the Palestinians sitting down side by side so that everyone can benefit.

10.22 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) for presenting the case so well. I am conscious of the time and know that other Members wish to speak, so I shall try to be brief.

I am well known as a friend of Israel; indeed, in my former role as a Member of the Legislative Assembly, I sponsored the Stormont Christian Initiative, which had a strong focus on Israel. The historic ties that began with the Balfour declaration still bring dividends some 99 years later. Other Members have outlined our close economic ties with Israel—our bilateral trade is worth £5 billion and has doubled over the past 10 years—but I want to celebrate our country’s historical contribution to the modern state of Israel. I also want to celebrate the contribution that this tiny country on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean sea has made to the world.

The formal recognition of the right to an internationally established homeland for the Jews was one of the more interesting developments to arise at the end of the first world war. The Balfour declaration was clear: it was the first statement of recognition by a major foreign power.
of the right of the Jewish people to national self-determination in their homeland, free and safe from persecution. It is good news that Christians can worship freely and without fear of persecution in Israel.

Since its rebirth in 1948, Israel has been attacked many times, and faces many threats daily.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): It is worth reminding the House that in 1922 the League of Nations overwhelmingly ratified the Balfour agreement—it was unanimous.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I can well remember the six-day war from when I was a boy. It will always stick in my mind as the underdog holding fast and winning the battle. I remember listening to the radio and my parents discussing what was happening. It was one of those things: from a very early age, I could understand that this fight would seem always to exist.

A debate such as this could easily degenerate and make the motion appear anti-Palestinian, but that is not what it is about. We are celebrating the declaration that was instrumental in the Jews being allowed to establish an internationally recognised homeland. The debate is about recognising the formalisation of the right for that area of the middle east to be asserted as their homeland—as the Israel we all know from biblical times.

The policy expressed in the declaration—the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine—became binding in international law following the 1920 San Remo conference and the 1922 British mandate from the League of Nations, which was referred to earlier. UN resolution 181 reinforced the state of Israel’s acceptance into the family of nations following the 1948 war of independence.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the motion is not anti-Palestinian; it is quite the opposite. Does he agree that the centenary is an opportunity to encourage both sides to get together and look towards a formal peace process?

Jim Shannon: That is absolutely what it is about. We are positive about this debate, and that is what we are trying to achieve.

I have spoken many times in the House about the benefits of our being allies with Israel, along with the trade that other Members have referred to. Think of the pharmaceuticals, technology, cyber-security and research. Israel has made new drugs for Parkinson’s sufferers; an implantable bio-retina that stimulates neurons to send messages to the brain; and a new plasma that amazingly eradicates the need for stitches, staples or glue. Those are some of the things that Israel does, and does well.

Israel is a nation that can do so much for the rest of the world. It should be allowed to carry out that work free from the prejudice and the cloud of distrust that so often surrounds it. I spoke on anti-Semitism in the House two years ago; it is unfortunate that it is still to be found, including in the so-called boycott of Israeli products. If people only knew what they would be doing without, they would think seriously about that.

Along with so many colleagues, I am anticipating the plans that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will bring forward for the commemoration of this historic event. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Before my hon. Friend concludes, does he agree that one thing we found in the Northern Ireland peace process, from which many lessons have been drawn, was that growing economic prosperity for everyone makes a major difference? Boycotts and economic sanctions, and all that kind of talk, damage the prospects for peace.

Jim Shannon: My right hon. Friend and colleague has very wise words, and they are important to listen to.

I stand today in celebration of the Balfour declaration and its historic impact. Furthermore, I stand today in celebration of Israel, and in continuing solidarity with her in her struggle to be allowed to exist and to provide safety and security to Jews and non-Jews alike.

10.27 am

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) on securing this tremendous debate.

In the few minutes I have, I shall explain a little of the reasoning behind the Balfour declaration. It is unusual because it was not a settlement or reaction to any kind of nationalist war or terrorist activity, in the way we are now used to; rather, it had its roots in lobbying carried out in the Parliaments of Europe, mainly by the bourgeoisie and aristocrats. Herzl and Lord Rothschild would have been seen as pretty distant characters to say, their Polish ghettocooligionists, who were much more likely to follow the socialist kibbutz-type Zionism that eventually had an important role in the practical settlement of the new state.

What actually happened? What did Herzl do that made such different Jewish characters and political creeds all move generally in the same nationalist direction? Herzl was the first person to explain how Europe’s Jews were not only individually or nationally in peril, but internationally at risk. In less than a decade he persuaded most Jews of most classes and political views that, whether or not they as individual Jews wished to live in Europe, the Jews’ collective future depended on their once again having their own independent nation on their own soil. He suggested that the concept of Jews as a wandering diaspora should be replaced with Jews being allowed to lead the life of normal people, with all the rights, benefits and, indeed, challenges that go with that.

Herzl died in 1904, some 13 years before the declaration, but the dream he created was that of a functioning Jewish homeland, and it was that dream that brought the Jews out of the ghetto culture and mentality and out of the ghetto language of Yiddish, and that brought many of them physically out of the ghettos and into Israel. The dream empowered Jews as human beings; it permitted them to be proud to stand up for their rights with a united destiny, based on shared religious and cultural values, not least the rebirth of the spoken Hebrew language.

It was that Zionist movement that increasingly persuaded world leaders to understand that Jewish homelessness must come to an end and that the solution was down to the international community and world leaders, working together with the Jewish people.
That was the spirit of recognition encapsulated in the Balfour declaration, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne explained so well, was then incorporated into the Sèvres peace treaty with the Ottoman empire and finally the UN resolution that established the state of Israel. It is for this reason that Jews around the world highly valued the Balfour declaration then and it is why I believe it should still be celebrated now by those who understand or accept the then Zionist dream, now reality of a Jewish homeland in Israel.

10.30 am

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) for initiating what I am sure will be a year of these discussions. I have the honour to represent East Lothian, which, of course, was the seat that Arthur Balfour represented in this House. His name is still very much alive in East Lothian. I visited Whittingehame, where he lived and where—I think—there were Cabinet meetings occasionally in the long recess. Whittingehame also became the home to around half of the Kindertransport children who came to the UK in 1939. They were sent to Whittingehame because the Balfour family had turned it into a farming school and during world war two the children there learned farming skills. Many of them then went to Palestine in the late 1940s and were involved in the kibbutz movement. I therefore have an affinity with this subject.

It is right that we should mark the 100th anniversary of the Balfour declaration, but I use the word “mark” very carefully, rather than “celebrate”. It is an important historical moment in time but it is—and this is my basic point—unfinished business. The declaration foresaw not only one homeland for the Jewish people but that the rights of other people and other growing nationalities in the region would be protected. Clearly, that has not happened. So the underlying message, and the thing that we can give to history and the peoples of the middle east in the next 12 months, is to reanimate the peace process, so that we end up with two states.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am just back from a week in the middle east as part of the first Scottish National party delegation to Israel and Palestine, and I have returned with a number of thoughts. Above all else, as my hon. Friend said, it is absolutely vital that we do everything we can to support progress towards a sustainable two-state solution for these two peoples. Does he agree?

George Kerevan: I do indeed. Given the time, however, I will not take further interventions. Please do not think that I am being disrespectful to other Members. I will comment very briefly on the two-state solution. The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) made the point in his speech that sometimes the two-state rhetoric hides other agendas. On behalf of the SNP, I will be very plain: we are genuinely supportive of a two-state solution. In fact, finding that solution is the key to Israel’s security.

For good or ill, Israel has decided in recent decades that its security is basically based on force of arms. As the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), said, time is running out for that approach. I had the great opportunity to have conversations with Ariel Sharon while he was still Prime Minister about the whole issue of Israel’s security. As an old general, he tended to look at things in military terms and his explanation to me was that the extension of the west bank settlements and the maintenance of an Israeli security zone within the west bank was necessary, as he put it, to protect the tank avenues through which tank thrusts from Syria or Iraq would come into Israel and cut it off very quickly. That is because, as we know, the narrow waist of Israel is tiny and it is possible to get a tank thrust through there very quickly.

Does anyone in this Chamber really think that Syria or Iraq, or any of the other major states in the middle east, are in any sense capable, as we speak, of taking on Israel militarily, or even politically? Of course they are not. Therefore, Israel has a security window where it can produce a two-state solution. That is where we have to go. My question to the Minister is this: how will the British Government use this 12 months to ensure that that happens, because Britain has a responsibility?

The Balfour declaration is not quite as it has been presented today. It is a studiously ambivalent document and quite deliberately so, because Britain and France had decided to exclude the Ottoman empire from the Wilson principles, expressed at Versailles, of self-determination. The middle east was not given self-determination; it was carved up by the British and French for their own political and economic ends.

That remained the case all through the time of the British mandate. It is very strange—I say this because I want to try to find as much common ground here as possible—that in all the speeches we have had this morning, nobody has strayed into the territory of what happened during the time of the British mandate, when both the Jewish people and the Arab people rose in revolt against the way that Britain had handled its mandate. In fact, in 1948—sadly, in my view—Britain walked away from the mandate, leaving a mess. That was because the British mandate was not seen as a way of bringing two peoples to self-determination; it was a way of securing Britain’s military presence in the canal zone and in the middle east as oil production developed.

The Balfour declaration is nowhere near as selfless as it has been presented here today. It was part of a chain of diplomatic initiatives that Britain had, which broke up the old Ottoman empire. Anybody who sensibly looks at the state of the middle east now would say that those interventions made things worse rather than better. If we recognise that, we will be in a position morally—I say this to the Minister—to begin to come back and to say how we can provide some redress for the political and economic disaster that we caused in the middle east. We have a debt of honour, because of the Balfour declaration. If the declaration means anything to anybody, it means unfinished business.

That is as far as I think we should go in history. If we start picking over every single piece of “who did what?” over the last hundred years, we will not get anywhere; I say that humbly to Government Members. A lot has been made in a number of speeches about 1948, when it is absolutely clear that the UN declared a mandate for two nations within a particular map. That project founded in the first Arab-Israeli war. However, if we mention that war and if we say that the Arab states were wrong to intervene in 1948 and should have respected the UN
mandate, we are duty-bound—I put this to the hon. Member for Eastbourne—to accept all the other UN mandates and security resolutions. Those are the 12 UN Security Council resolutions that condemned the illegal settlements on the west bank.

I have also met the current Prime Minister of Israel; I talked to him and I understand his position of wanting talks without preconditions, which is a fair point to make. However, if Israel, while it is waiting for negotiations without preconditions with the Palestinians to begin, is expanding the illegal settlements—I use the word “illegal” because they have been condemned as illegal by the British Government and the UN Security Council—its good faith is called into question, and we need good faith somewhere in this debate.

I will finish by saying, “Let’s mark the Balfour declaration”, but the only way of making it is to finish the process that it started, which will end in two states and the recognition of a Palestinian state.

10.38 am

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate under your chairmanship, Mr Chope.

I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) on securing the debate as part of the commemorations marking the centenary of the Balfour declaration. As we have heard, the 1917 declaration signalled the beginning of Britain’s official support for the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people.

Even before the famous letter from Lord Balfour to Walter Rothschild, the Labour party supported that commitment. The war aims memorandum, which was adopted by the inter-allied Labour and socialist conference in 1918 and quoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) today, stated:

“Palestine should be set free...in order that this country may form a free State, under international guarantee, to which such of the Jewish people as desire to do so may return.”

Labour’s first Cabinet Minister, Arthur Henderson, outlined his support at the time of the war aims memorandum, stating:

“The British Labour Party believes that the responsibility of the British people in Palestine should be fulfilled to the utmost of their power. It believes that these responsibilities may be fulfilled so as to ensure the economic prosperity”—that picks up some of the points made earlier—“and spiritual freedom of both the Jews and Arabs in Palestine.”

That support for the state of Israel has been at the core of the Labour party’s foreign policy since those early days. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) alluded to, between 1917 and 1945 support for Zionism was expressed at Labour party conferences on no fewer than 11 occasions. We stand in solidarity as we mark the 100 years, and we stand firmly against anyone who questions Israel’s right to exist.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Both Israel and Palestine have a right to exist. Does the Minister agree that the UK Government should now join the 70% of the other member states and recognise a Palestinian state?

Catherine West: I believe that the Minister will answer that point shortly. The Labour party supports a comprehensive peace in the middle east: a permanent and long-term peace based on a two-state solution. That is a secure Israel alongside a secure and viable state of Palestine, respecting the boundaries as outlined in UN resolution 242 from 1967. Violence against Israel in any form is unacceptable and can never be justified. It represents a mortal threat to any peaceful, long-term solution. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South said, any hatred of Jewish people is anathema, wherever it is found.

At a time when peace is also under threat from the retroactive legalisation of settler outposts in the west bank and the prospect of new settlements in the west bank, we must continue to reiterate the importance of the Israeli Government remaining committed to the two-state solution.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Does the shadow Minister not think we should do more than just issue platitudes about the illegal settlements and the fact that outposts are now being legalised by the Israeli Government? Firm action needs to be taken.

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution, but I beg to differ: these are not platitudes; I am stating a position. Anyone who has visited the area knows this is a very sensitive topic that needs to be dealt with carefully without inflammatory language.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Is it not important to offer practical support to projects for peaceful coexistence, such as Save a Child’s Heart, the Peres Centre for Peace and Middle East Entrepreneurs of Tomorrow? Those organisations are showing the lead in terms of the spirit of Balfour and the peaceful coexistence we all want between Palestinians and Israelis.

Catherine West: The hon. Gentleman is right to mention the economic element. If we could somehow provide better livelihoods for people across the area, we would make some gains, but there are real barriers to proper economic development within various communities in the area. Any charitable work that is done to promote that development should be welcomed.

Israeli settlements in the occupied territories are unlawful under international law. The continued demolition of Palestinian structures undermines the Palestinian communities’ ability to develop socially and economically. That in turn undermines the viability of a future Palestinian state. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter)—he is no longer in his place—pointed out, the Balfour declaration also made the commitment that “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.”

We have heard about the Christian community today. We have supported and honoured Lord Balfour’s commitment to create a national home for the Jewish people. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (Mr Spellar) said, it is now incumbent on us all to honour the second part of the declaration. My right hon. Friend is no longer in his place, but he said we need international guarantees. I look forward to hearing how
the Minister interprets the concept of the international guarantees. We need to ensure the rights of the non-Jewish communities in Palestine.

As we approach the centenary of the Balfour declaration, the Labour party is glad to commemorate that historic anniversary. We express our continued support for the state of Israel. We remain committed to seeing the achievement of lasting security, stability and peace in the region. However, we find ourselves in something of a deadlock with the peace process. The Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan), referred to that earlier. Will the Minister enlighten Members as to what the Government are doing to rejuvenate the moribund approach to peace in this critical area of the middle east?

There are enough progressive forces on all sides of the Israel-Palestine conflict to shift the debate away from extreme and entrenched positions and towards that lasting peace. As we always have done, we will continue to do our part to support that process, to help ensure that the two-state solution becomes a genuine reality and to deliver the full intent of the Balfour declaration.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I begin, as others have, by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) on securing this important debate. It is an honour to be able to respond to a debate on the centenary of the Balfour declaration, which is the letter written on 2 November 1917 by the then Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour, to Lord Rothschild, the leader of the British Jewish community.

If I may, I will place in context today’s instability and conflict, which goes back beyond 100 years. Arguably it goes back thousands of years, because this complex part of the world—it is often referred to as the cradle of civilisation—forms the crossroads of three continents. Along the riverbanks, oases and coastlines, we saw the start of humanity, where we harnessed the skills of farming, writing and trading and built the first cities. This complicated real estate gave the world the three great monotheistic religions whose values underpin much of the morality of the world today.

Successive civilisations—the superpowers of their day, whether the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Romans, the Byzantines or the Ottomans—sought ownership of these tribal areas, the rich trade routes and the holy sites. With the collapse of the Ottoman empire at the end of the great war, it was Britain’s turn as the occupying power to manage this complex, multilingual, multi-faith tribal land. Britain was motivated by a range of ambitions, in the midst of the first world war and in the twilight of the Ottoman empire. Many people believe that establishing a homeland for the Jewish people in the land to which they had such strong historical and religious ties was the right and moral thing to do. It is for historians to assess the declaration in that context, and it is for Ministers to deal with today. Balfour’s 67 words are dissected and analysed, and that has happened today, but it was a statement of intent, rather than a detailed plan. The details came later, in the San Remo agreement of 1920 and in the League of Nations mandate for Palestine in 1922. The Israeli state was established after the end of Britain’s mandate.

The Balfour declaration had its flaws. It called for the protection of the “civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”. It should have protected their political rights, too, most especially their right to self-determination: a right that underpins the British commitment to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We will mark the centenary of the Balfour declaration next year. Planning is still at an early stage, but I want to make it clear that we will neither celebrate nor apologise.

We will not apologise, for the UK is a diverse country in which the historical show of support for the world’s Jewish community means a great deal to many people. We continue to support the principle of a Jewish homeland and the modern state of Israel, just as we support the critical objective of a Palestinian homeland. Nor will we celebrate the centenary as others have called on the British Government to do. The seriousness of the situation faced by millions still affected by the conflict is testament to the fact that the achievement of Jewish and Palestinian self-determination in the former British mandate of Palestine is a task as yet unfulfilled. I remain conscious of the sensitivities surrounding the declaration and the events that have taken place in the region since 1917.

We cannot change the past, but we can strive to influence the future. It is approaching 100 years since the Balfour declaration, and, as has been mentioned by hon. Members, it is 50 years since the occupation began. It is 70 years since UN resolution 181 in 1947 first proposed partition and the end of the British mandate. It is 23 years since the Oslo accords and 16 years since the Camp David discussions. It is 25 years since the Madrid talks and 18 years since the Wye River discussions. All those were opportunities when stakeholders were brought round the table to seek a long-term solution, and still that eludes us.

Catherine West: Will the Minister comment on the recent French Government initiative?

Mr Ellwood: I will come to that shortly.
[Mr Ellwood]

Agreements and gatherings have come and gone and we have not been able to make progress, but let us turn to the south and see the deal that took place 36 years ago between Israel and Egypt and, further to the west, with Jordan in 1994, 22 years ago. That proves that what can happen when sides come together, conflict stops, war is put aside and strong leadership comes together. The relationship between Israel, Egypt and Jordan is to be commended. It shows that deals can be struck regardless of what has happened in the past.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that leadership from Britain must include British values? There are more than 3,000 British graves in Gaza’s cemeteries. Does he agree that British values include protecting refugees and children, hence the right to return for refugees and protection of children in courts?

Mr Ellwood: I do. I will come on to what Britain is doing in the occupied territories in the west bank and Gaza as well as in Israel if time permits.

The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a highly emotive issue, as has been expressed today. Israel has achieved statehood while the Palestinians have not. The UK Government are very clear that the occupation of the Palestinian territories is unacceptable and unsustainable. In the long term, it is not in Israel’s best interest for the status quo to continue. If this is to be a homeland for the Jewish people, the demographics show that there will be an imbalance in the next few years. More than 40,000 Palestinians are helping to provide security in Areas A and B. Were that to be removed—were the Palestinians to give up—it would be up to the Israelis to provide that security. Is that a direction we would want to go in? Is that the path that we would want to go down or even test? It is in everybody’s interests not to believe in the status quo but to work towards a two-state solution.

Not everyone will be happy with the Government’s position on the anniversary of the Balfour declaration. I fully accept that. Some will want to celebrate the anniversary unreservedly and will see our position as insufficient. Some will condemn it. They will want us to make the apology and will consider marking the anniversary improper. There is no denying the document’s significance. I hope that it will not be used as a vehicle to incite further violence. We need to learn from the past, but work towards the future. A future with prosperity and security is what the Israelis and Palestinians want. On a personal note, it has been three years leading to the right hon. Gentleman’s point and it has been a privilege to be the Minister for the middle east. In those three years, the British Government, the Foreign Secretaries and I have been fully committed to doing what we can in leveraging our support and our influence to bring the parties to the table.

I have sat through a series of meetings in New York at the UN General Assembly and in Paris at the summit that took place there, and I asked who the leaders will be, given that so many years have passed since Oslo, Madrid, Wye River and Camp David. When will we finally find the solution, get an accord in place and recognise the two states? Of all my briefs and challenges, this has been the toughest and most frustrating not being able to make progress. In answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s question, at the moment we seem further away than ever from bringing the parties together. We are not seeing the leadership on the Palestinian side that would invoke the necessary measures of support to bring people to the table. On the Israeli side, it makes it much tougher to defend our friend and ally when we see the continuing building in the settlements.

I certainly hope that in the absence of moving closer to a solution, there will be a new opportunity with the new Administration in the United States. I ask the new Administration, as they settle in, to consider what needs to be done. Other issues across the world have come and gone. We have had conflict in the Balkans, the Berlin wall has come down, yet we now have new issues coming to the fore: Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Other problems can be solved, yet still the middle east peace process eludes us. I ask the United States to work with the international community, along with the Israelis and Palestinians. Let us recognise the 100-year anniversary, but let us mark 2017 not by what has happened in the past and the fact that it has been 100 years, but by what we can achieve for the future.

10.58 am

Caroline Ansell: As I had envisaged, the debate has been lively with passion on all sides. It really struck me when an hon. Member talked about grieving and lamenting. Today we can all grieve and lament the lives that have been lost and the conflict that we have seen, but I hope too that we can all see what has come forward and positively affected the world in the creation of the state of Israel and the justice that has been served there. I hope we can all with one voice urge again the resumption of direct peace talks that stand steadfastly in the interests of the people of Israel and Palestine.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the centenary of the Balfour Declaration.
East Anglian Fishing Fleet

11 am

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the future of the East Anglian fishing fleet.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I am pleased to have secured this debate. With Brexit pending, it provides a well-timed opportunity to highlight the challenges faced by the East Anglian fishing fleet, and the policies that are needed to reinvigorate an industry that has been an integral feature of the East Anglian coast for nearly 1,000 years.

In recent years, the industry has been reduced to a very pale shadow of its former self. Although I am not looking to turn back the clock and wallow in nostalgia, Brexit does provide an opportunity to put in place a new policy framework that can give fishing in East Anglia a fresh lease of life and bring significant benefits to the ports and communities in which the industry is based. It is an opportunity to start with a clean sheet of paper.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is not just about the East Anglia fishing community? It is also about other fishing communities, such as mine in Plymouth, down in the south-west, where they are very much hoping for better facilities in order to produce better fishing.

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. This is a debate about the future of the East Anglian fishing fleet. Unless my geography is wrong, I do not think that includes Plymouth.

Peter Aldous: I think I would say two things. A lot of what I am going to say is important for the whole of the coast of the British Isles. Our withdrawal from the common fisheries policy provides an opportunity to put in place a policy framework in which the East Anglian fleet and all those who work in the industry are given a realistic opportunity of earning a good wage and securing a fair return on the investment in their boats and equipment. That is the very least they deserve in what is the most dangerous trade in Britain.

It is appropriate to quietly reflect on the challenges faced by all those who go to sea, their families and those who support them, including the Fishermen’s Mission, so ably run from Lowestoft along most of the eastern and southern coast by Tim Jenkins, as well as the Royal National Lifeboat Institution crews in Lowestoft, Hunstanton, Wells, Sheringham, Cromer, Happisburgh, Gorleston, Southwold and Aldeburgh. Last month I had the pleasure of meeting Jeff Melton, the skipper of the Serene Dawn from Lowestoft, who lost his leg while at sea. His courage, determination and humour shone through. We owe it to people like him to grasp the opportunity that now presents itself.

The East Anglian coast, along with its ports, harbours and fishing villages, has been shaped by fishing over the last millennium. A significant industry and way of life grew up all along the coast, focused on such places as King’s Lynn, Wells, Sheringham, Cromer, Winterton, Great Yarmouth, Gorleston, Lowestoft, Pakefield, Kessingland, Southwold, Walberswick, Dunwich, Aldeburgh, Orford, Felixstowe and Ipswich. Part of the industry was and still is focused on shellfish such as crabs, shrimps and mussels, while large commercial fleets and allied industries grew up in the larger ports of Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth, where the industry was underpinned by herrings, the silver darlings of the North sea.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned King’s Lynn, in my constituency. The Wash shellfishery is one of the best and biggest in Europe and the shrimp fishery has had record catches this year, which is very good for exports. Is my hon. Friend aware that the Marine Stewardship Council is now recommending that 14% of the shrimp fishery be closed down, which could have very adverse consequences?

Peter Aldous: I was not aware of that precise detail. The shrimp industry is an integral part of the industry in East Anglia. We do have to keep in mind the risks as well as the opportunities presented by Brexit.

Seemingly overnight in the last part of the 20th century, those silver darlings—the herrings—disappeared, and an entire industry has been annihilated as a result of overfishing, red tape and poorly thought-through policies coming out of both Whitehall and Brussels, the high cost of fuel and changes in eating habits. With it, the whole edifice has come crumbling down. Ancillary industries such as boatbuilding, repairs and food processing have largely disappeared, although Birds Eye and processors such as Sam Cole remain significant employers in my constituency.

Lowestoft was the fishing capital of the southern North sea. In years gone by, one could cross the water from one side of the Hamilton Dock to the other by walking from boat to boat. Today, the dock is virtually empty of fishing boats. In the past four decades, Lowestoft has been particularly hard hit by wrong decisions by politicians and the vulnerability of the make-up of the industry, whereby large trawlers helped to sustain the smaller boats. The way that the quota has been allocated has been a major factor in Lowestoft’s dramatic decline, as it has taken away the trawlers that were the cornerstone of the industry. The six affiliated vessels in the Lowestoft
producers’ organisation have a fixed quota allocation of 80,419 units this year. That is a significant amount of fish, but none of it is landed in Lowestoft—68% goes to the Netherlands and 32% to Scotland. Those boats—the Wilhelmina, the Angsar, the Margriet, the Hendriks Brands, the Solia Fide and the Sol Deo Gloria—bring very little if any economic and social benefits to Lowestoft.

Today, the Lowestoft fleet and much of the East Anglian fleet is made up of small boats, known as the under-10s, which get a raw deal in terms of quota. Nationally, the under-10s comprise 77% of the UK fleet and employ 65% of the workforce, yet they receive only 4% of the total quota. That is not enough for skippers to sustain a business, let alone earn a sensible living, and that story is not unique to Lowestoft. It is a tale all along the East Anglian coast and beyond. The under-10s face significant challenges, including being forced out by a lack of quota, poor markets and unfair competition in fishing grounds from other sectors.

Brexit provides an opportunity to address those inequities. There is a need to reallocate fishing quota based on performance and impact so as to support small fishing communities such as those along the East Anglian coast. There is the added benefit that, by restoring fishing stocks to healthy levels, it will be possible to create more resilient marine ecosystems and preserve future fishing opportunities.

This may appear to be a statement of the bleeding obvious, but it is important to set the forthcoming negotiations for withdrawal from the common fisheries policy in a political context. Most of the East Anglian coast voted heavily for Brexit. Although I personally did not, believing that the reformed common fisheries policy, which my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) played such an important role in creating, provided an opportunity to regenerate the industry in East Anglia, I accept the outcome of the referendum. We now need to pull together to put in place a UK fishing policy that enables fishing to flourish along the East Anglian coast and around the whole of the UK. It is vital that we leave no stone unturned in regenerating our coastal communities, which are currently decimating our stocks.

Jim Shannon: On that issue, the six-mile limit that has just been imposed by the Republic of Ireland on fishermen from Northern Ireland is something that concerns us in the United Kingdom. Is the hon. Gentleman also concerned about that?

Peter Aldous: Yes, I am. It is vital that such communities have access to the nought-to-12-mile zone is exclusively available to the inshore fleet—the smaller, UK passive-gear vessels that are at present pinnned into the six-mile limit, as any pots or nets set outside that area are often towed away by foreign vessels, such as Dutch electro-pulse beam trawlers, which are currently decimating our stocks.
Peter Aldous: I think that is something we need to look at. I am very much East Anglian-focused today, but I respect the hon. Gentleman’s position.

Creating such a zone for the inshore fleet will have significant benefits for fish stocks and the wider marine environment. Secondly, it is necessary to address the elephant in the room—the flagship issue. Lord Justice Cranston’s 2012 High Court judgment appears to provide the basis for a step-wise repatriation of UK quotas, which should bring significant benefits to Lowestoft, where the Lowestoft Fish Producers Organisation currently lands no fish.

It is important also to bear in mind the fact that the East Anglian fishermen who specialise in shellfish, such as those in the Wash, export to EU countries, and the processing industries do likewise. Their interests need to be safeguarded in the Brexit negotiations. Many small-scale fishing businesses currently rely on shellfish due to a lack of access to finfish quotas. The Government should therefore give them more such opportunities. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs should work closely with the Department for International Trade to open up new global markets for shellfish and the processing businesses, such as in the far east.

I am aware that the negotiations will not be straightforward. There will be a lot of devil in the detail, and a lot of issues will need to be disentangled, as reciprocal fishing rights in many fisheries go back over centuries. That means that it will take some time to complete the exit negotiations, and it will be necessary to put in place transitional arrangements. In his reply, will the Minister confirm that that and the other issues I have mentioned are firmly on his and his colleagues’ radar?

Although there is much to be done in the short term on the Brexit negotiations, I would like to look ahead and think strategically about the shape and future of the new, UK fishing policy and what it needs to incorporate so that the East Anglian fleet can flourish and play an important economic, environmental and social role in the communities and areas in which it is based. I suggest that the new UKFP that replaces the CFP should include the following ingredients. First, it should be set in a wide context and take account of the fact that it is not just about fishing. We need to think holistically. A good, sustainable fishing policy has a positive impact on the whole community and the area in which the industry is based. Fishing is part of a wider, healthier environment. It is about attractive seascapes, good wholesome local food, local tourism, and local heritage, culture and identity.

Secondly, we need to start with a clean sheet of paper. We must not simply transfer the common fisheries policy to UK law through the great repeal Bill and then amend it. As the Institute of Economic Affairs noted, the CFP is not an effective way of managing fishing rights, so we need our own bespoke UK fishing policy, although I would like it to include policies that mirror articles 2 and 17 of the CFP, which promote a sustainable approach to fisheries management.

Thirdly, the new policy should be underpinned by science. That means that the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, which is based in Lowestoft, should have a pivotal role in monitoring and enforcing management. Fourthly, the management of fisheries needs to be localised. That could mean that there should be an enhanced role for the Eastern Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority. Fifthly, as I have said, the quota needs to be reallocated and it should be available only to active fishermen. It should not be held as an investment by large organisations with no involvement in fishing.

Finally, special emphasis and real effort must be focused on building up strong and resilient supply chains all the way from the net to the plate. They should include fishermen, boat builders and repairers, markets, merchants, smokehouses, processors, mongers, fish and chip shops, restaurants and food stores. This is something we need to do better in the UK. There are lessons to be learned from other industries and other countries. We need better supply chain integration and marketing at home and overseas to promote high-quality domestically caught fish and fish products. A new coastal production organisation, as proposed by Jerry Percy of the New Under Ten Fishermen’s Association, can help to achieve that, building on the good work of SeaFish. There may be a role for local enterprise partnerships, such as the New Anglia local enterprise partnership, and it is important that Government make necessary funds available to them and to others to do the work.

I sense that I have spoken for far too long, and we need to hear from the Minister. In conclusion, therefore, as we approach Brexit it is important to have in mind the three R’s: repatriation, reallocation and regeneration.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing the debate. He is a long-standing champion of the fishing industry generally and the under-10 metre sector in Lowestoft in his constituency specifically. Lowestoft is also home to CEFAS, the world’s greatest centre of excellence for fisheries science, and long may it continue to be so.

My hon. Friend described some of the history of the decline of fishing in areas such as Lowestoft and along the east coast. The reasons are varied. He highlighted the decline of the herring industry, for example, and the fact that herring became a less popular fish in this country. Further north, the decline of fishing in places such as Grimsby can be plotted against the cod wars and the UK long-distance fleet being displaced from the waters around Iceland. Now that we are leaving the European Union, however, we have many opportunities to reform and change the way we manage fisheries in our exclusive economic zone.

My hon. Friend made it clear that he had campaigned to remain. I should probably point out that I campaigned to leave, and one of my reasons for doing so was my experience as a Fisheries and Agriculture Minister over three years, which meant that I saw up close how EU law works in practice, as well as in theory. That made me conclude that we would do better if we took back control and made our own laws—we could get things done and change things when they needed changing.

In the specific context of fisheries, I highlighted two issues in the referendum campaign. First, at the moment we allow the EU to lead for us in important negotiations on pelagic species such as mackerel, and on the North
sea with countries such as Norway. Those negotiations would be more effective if we had a seat at the table. Secondly, leaving the EU gives us an opportunity to revisit the allocation of quotas, which in some cases is unfair—parts of the fleet do not get a fair share of the agreed international quota.

Now the referendum is over, however, it is important that we all stop fighting the referendum campaign. For me, the real challenge is to put together a new type of partnership to recognise what the people of this country were telling us: they want us to take back control, although they also want us to put in place a close working partnership with other countries. They want us to be an outward-looking country, which we certainly will be as the UK.

In the referendum campaign, I was also clear that some things would not change. First, we will still fish sustainably and in line with the science. The UK has been the champion of sustainable fisheries. Secondly, we need to have some kind of quota or effort regime to restrict fishing effort, because in a mixed fishery that is the only way to have sustainable fisheries. Thirdly, I was very clear that we must continue to strive to end the shameful practice of discarding perfectly good fish back into the sea. That remains a manifesto commitment and an objective of future policy. Finally, the reality of fisheries is such that there will always need to be a large degree of international negotiation. That will not change.

We are working on new policy, and a huge amount of analysis is going on. My hon. Friend will be reassured to know that many of the issues that he highlighted towards the end of his speech are indeed ones that we are looking at—I will touch on some in more detail. Broadly speaking, however, we have a good starting point in the United Nations convention on the law of the sea, which sets down certain principles on how we should manage fisheries in our exclusive economic zone—inside 200 nautical miles or the median line—and requirements such as the duty to co-operate with other countries, which we of course would do. They also have a duty to co-operate with us. The convention sets it down that we should have regard for historic access rights, but other countries should have regard for ours. Crucially, however, in our exclusive economic zone we will have the opportunity to change technical measures when they need to be changed, far more quickly.

My hon. Friend raised a number of issues specific to Lowestoft that I will touch on. First, he highlighted the fact that many of the vessels in the Lowestoft Fish Producers Organisation are foreign-owned—many are Dutch—and that a large amount of the catch is landed in the Netherlands and in Scotland. We are looking at that issue. We are about to review what is called the economic link, which is a set of conditions and criteria with which foreign-owned vessels must comply. We are looking at strengthening the link so that more benefits can be returned to local fishing ports such as Lowestoft, for whose vessels the quota was intended. We are planning to consult on the link and we will be looking at it as part of our longer-term review of things such as the concordat with other parts of the UK and as we develop future fisheries policy.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Will the Minister comment briefly on the point I made about the shrimp fishery and the Wash, and the damage that could be done by the MSC?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend has raised the issue with me. It is a matter for the IFCA, but I have asked officials to keep me informed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney drew attention to the under-10s. As he knows, we have a manifesto commitment to rebalance quotas towards the under-10 metre fleet, because the historic problem from when the quotas were set is that the under-10s probably did not get a fair enough share of the quota. We are already delivering on that manifesto commitment. Only this year, we made it clear that the discard uplift of the quota, the first 100 tonnes and then 10% thereafter would go to the under-10s. That means that this year alone they have already had 1,000 extra tonnes of fish, 573 tonnes of which are in the North sea, including more than 200 extra tonnes of haddock, 100 tonnes of saithe and 159 tonnes of plaice. We have already started to deliver on that and, as we roll out the discard ban, there will be further increases for the under-10 fleet—notably, cod is likely to be added for the North sea.

My hon. Friend mentioned access to the six-to-12 nautical miles zone, which dates from the London convention of 1964 and so predates us entering the CFP. We have had strong representations from the industry, however, that it would like to see that reviewed and to have exclusive access for our inshore UK vessels in the nought-to-12 zone. We are looking at that, but we have not yet taken any final decisions.

My hon. Friend mentioned the challenge of pulse trawlers. Indeed, I visited Lowestoft in his constituency back in June and I met local fishermen, who expressed that concern to me. I then asked Lowestoft to do some work urgently to review the impact of pulse trawling, because there are potential issues of concern—countries such as Japan have already taken action to curtail or prevent pulse trawling. I therefore assure him that CEFAS is looking at the issue.

My hon. Friend mentioned flagship issues. A lot of that goes back to the important Factortame test case, which was a big tussle between the sovereignty of Parliament and EU law. There is an opportunity to re-examine that as we leave the EU, but again we have made no prior decisions. The area is complex and we should recognise that the licences, vessels and attached quotas were sold by UK fishermen—we have to recognise that—but I also believe that through the changes to the economic link, which we are planning to consult on, we can go some way towards addressing that concern.

I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of trade. It is important to note that for countries such as Norway, which are in the European economic area, the customs union does not cover fisheries. Norway and Iceland, for example, therefore have separate preferential trade agreements with the EU. We will obviously be seeking to do something similar as we negotiate future trade agreements with our European partners. We are also keen to open new markets in countries such as China, Japan and others in the far east.

I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of science. We will continue to engage CEFAS closely on that. We are committed to sustainable fisheries. When it
comes to adding value to fisheries in the supply chain—something else he mentioned—we have set up a seafood working group led by Seafish, pulling together industry to see how we can improve the structure of the industry and the value it gets for its catch.

Finally, I confirm to my hon. Friend that as we approach Brexit the Department is working closely with every other Department, including the Department for Communities and Local Government, and he is absolutely right that we have a great opportunity as we negotiate future policy to get something that works for our coastal communities.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am
Sitting adjourned.

Immigration Rules
(International Students)

[Mr James Gray in the Chair]

2.30 pm
Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I beg to move, That this House has considered immigration rules for international students.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. Tomorrow is International Students’ Day, so I thank hon. Members for turning out to mark the occasion. I also thank the numerous organisations that have got in touch to provide helpful thoughts and briefings—enough to fill the debate, although I promise I will not do that.

The debate offers us the chance to celebrate the contribution of international students to our education sector, our economy and our whole society. But not just that—it is also the perfect time to reflect on where the UK is in the increasing global competition to attract international students, what our ambitions should be and whether the Government are pursuing the right immigration policies to achieve those. I suspect that hon. Members will need little persuading that we should celebrate international students, so I will only briefly put on record the economic, social and cultural benefits that they bring.

In economic terms, international students’ contribution to UK GDP almost certainly exceeds £10 billion per year and supports around 170,000 full-time equivalent jobs. Many international students go on to undertake post-doctoral research in the UK, helping to drive world-leading research. All analysis of the economic effect of taking on international students shows that they have a significant net benefit.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Leicester has two great universities—Leicester University and De Montfort University—that have a number of international students. Does he agree that not only is it important that we have fair and effective rules so people can answer criticisms that are made of them, but the Government’s rhetoric is extremely important? We should encourage more international students to come and study here in the United Kingdom. If they do not, they will just go elsewhere. There is a big market out there, and unless we have them here, we will lose the revenue and advantages that they bring.

Stuart C. McDonald: I agree wholeheartedly. Indeed, I will mention later the messages that the Government have been sending out and the negative headlines that they have been attracting in key markets for international students. The Government must seriously rethink those messages.

When considering the economic benefits of international students, we must also think about the personal and professional links that 84% of those students maintain after they leave the United Kingdom. They are a tremendous source of soft power for this country and allow trade links and political alliances to be built. We should also remember that those benefits are triggered not only by our universities; hundreds of thousands of other students are taught English as a second language in the UK each year at around 450 institutions accredited by the British Council.
The benefits of attracting the brightest international students go way beyond the economy. Such students enrich and diversify the research and learning environment by exposing our own students and staff to different approaches, contributing to their international experience and skills, and creating a more culturally diverse environment.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. Is he aware that Bangor University in my constituency has widespread international links, including a site in China, as well as students from all over the world, all of whom have been made to feel very uncomfortable by the current atmosphere? This is not just a matter of the £400 million that international students contribute to the Welsh economy; it counts at the individual level as well.

Stuart C. McDonald: Absolutely. There is a feeling of uneasiness among the migrant community more generally in the light of recent events. Again, I urge the Government to rethink their rhetoric about not just students, but migration generally.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Like some of my colleagues, I have two universities in my constituency: the University of Warwick and Coventry University. Students from abroad certainly make a major contribution—about £9 billion per year—to the British economy. That is a hefty sum. To put that another way, 380,000-odd students come to this country per annum. The Government are not really friendly towards students. The number of Indian students studying here universities fell by 10% in 2015 compared with the year before. The number of Indian students studying here has fallen by around 50% in the four years since the UK Government started to turn the screw while our rivals were all improving their offer. It is no coincidence that there is now a record number of Indian students in the US, which has, for example, opened up post-study work schemes.

Where do we want to go from here? If any other industry brought such a wealth of benefits to the country, the Government would be mad not to pull out all the stops to go for growth. Education is one of the UK’s most successful exports. In what other export market would we say that we were not going to bother so much with expansion and we were quite happy to see our market share to competitors?

The Government’s official ambition is for education exports as a whole to be worth £30 billion by 2020. In last year’s autumn statement, the Chancellor projected that the number of non-EU students in England alone would rise by just over 7% in the next two years and by 3.2% in the two years after that, but if the 0.6% increase in student enrolments last year is anything to go by, the Government’s goal, modest though it is, has no chance of being met.

The Government must be much more ambitious. While our share of international students is beginning to falter, international student numbers are growing much more significantly and strongly in countries such as the US, Australia and Canada—in fact, those countries are in a completely different league from us. International student numbers are expected to grow significantly around the world in the years ahead, so the opportunities are there if we want to take them. Countries such as Canada, Australia, Germany, New Zealand, China, Japan and Taiwan often talk about doubling their number of international students by 2020 or 2025.
Our universities are alarmed about the implications of Brexit, so the Government must step up to the plate to reassurance rather than seek to complete what essentially would be a triple whammy, with another crackdown and a persistent failure to listen to rational arguments about a post-study work visa. One of the key underlying problems is, as the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) said, the inclusion of students in the net migration target. At best it seems inconsistent for, on the one hand, the Treasury to be targeting an increase in education exports and, on the other, the Home Office to be quite clearly seeing student numbers as a target for reductions.

To make matters worse, the Home Office appears to be motivated by international passenger survey statistics and a belief that about 90,000 students are not leaving when their courses end. That is not a good thing, because serious questions about the accuracy of those figures are now being asked not just by me, but by the UK Statistics Authority, the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs, and the Institute for Public Policy Research, just by way of example. The main reason for the concerns is that the figures suggested by the Government are completely out of kilter with many other sources of information from Home Office longitudinal studies to the destination of leavers survey and the annual population survey. We are talking about not just a few hundred students here and there, but many tens of thousands.

As the Minister will know, just a few weeks ago an article appeared in The Times that suggested that the Home Office has in its hands an independent analysis that shows that just 1% of international students break the terms of their visas by refusing to leave after their courses end. Sadly, as I understand it, the Home Office has refused to share that study with other Departments, never mind with MPs or the public. Perhaps the Minister will explain why.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Has the hon. Gentleman considered that there is another dimension to this? Universities such as the University of Warwick export knowledge to different countries. They set up various sub-universities, for want of a better term.

Stuart C. McDonald: That is a good point that we should bear in mind. The export of education takes the form of study almost certainly takes into account new exit checks, which have been in place for about 12 months. Using exit checks and cross-referencing other data sources gives us a tremendous new opportunity to get a proper handle on student migration patterns. It simply is not common sense for the Government to press ahead with new goals for reducing student numbers until such time as the assumptions on which the proposals are based are thoroughly tested.

I know from speaking with the Office for National Statistics just this morning that it is taking on a body of work to look at this issue and that it will today put some information on its website to explain the nature of that work. Will the Government therefore undertake to share the exit check data with the Office for National Statistics, which is important for its work, and will the Minister wait until that work is complete, rather than pressing ahead with any rash policy decisions?

I turn finally to the policies we need, if hon. Members agree with me that we should be going for growth. What policies would allow us to do that? The obvious first answer is that we need to up our game on post-study work offers. Post-study work is something that our competitor countries are using as a key means to attract talented international students, and they are doing it much better than us. Canada has three-year visas with no salary threshold and New Zealand has one-year visas with no salary threshold. Australia conducted a big review on the subject back in 2010, when it was beginning to struggle to attract international students, and, lo and behold, it proposed a two-year post-study visa with no salary requirement, just like we used to have here, and now it is much more competitive than we are.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the thresholds set are unrealistic for many graduates such as young post-doctorate students who would like to remain in their universities?

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. I will turn later to how some of the thresholds set are unrealistic for specific sectors, and indeed specific parts of the United Kingdom.

Post-study work is attractive, and it is important in attracting international students, because for them it is an opportunity to gain priceless experience of the business environment and culture in the UK. It allows them to utilise knowledge gained from their studies in an English-speaking setting, build networks and, importantly, offset some of the costs of studying abroad. The range of voices speaking out in favour of a post-study work scheme is huge. It includes Universities Scotland; Universities UK; the Russell Group; the Scottish Government; Scottish Tories, Labour, Lib Dems and Greens; the Scottish Government’s post-study work working group; the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, twice; various all-party parliamentary groups; the Select Committee on Home Affairs; the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee; the Scottish TUC; business groups; immigration lawyers; and the Cole commission on UK exports, which was asked to make a report. They are not all wrong. Even a study funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills made it clear that our failure in post-study work offers puts the UK’s universities at a competitive disadvantage in attempting to recruit the best of the international student pool.

If the Government will not listen on a UK-wide basis, I repeat the call that they should allow Scotland to press ahead, as well as any other nation or region of the UK that wishes to do so. The arguments offered by the Government in response recently to the Scottish Affairs Committee did not stack up. It is not true that allowing Scotland to introduce its own post-study work scheme would harm the integrity of the UK’s immigration system. We all know that other countries apply different immigration rules in different constituent parts—indeed, so has the UK. It did with the fresh talent scheme and the tech nation visa, and the plain old tier 2 permit ties visa holders, at least by implication to particular parts of the UK, so it can be done.

The Government complained that, under the fresh talent working in Scotland scheme, some people used study in Scotland as a means to move to England. The first point is, so what? Even if the numbers the Government quote are accurate—the Minister knows that the study
probably was not comprehensive enough for that—we are talking about tiny numbers. We are also talking about people who were doing nothing illegal or in breach of their visa, because it was not a stipulation of the visa that the person had to live and work in Scotland.

If the Minister is so worried about a couple of thousand additional graduates entering the labour force outside Scotland, he should stipulate that condition in the visa. It really is that simple. Otherwise, the message from the Government to Scotland is that the demographic challenges and skills shortages it faces do not matter and that the priority is keeping a handful of extra migrants out of other parts of the UK.

To rub salt in the wounds, I cannot say strongly enough how many bridges were burned when the Government announced that their pilot of a half-baked alternative to the post-study work scheme would be piloted only in a tiny number of English universities. Even if rolled out, that pilot scheme is not remotely competitive with what other countries are offering. It offers just four months at the end of study and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) said, the starting salary thresholds are inappropriate for certain sectors and regions. Median salaries for graduates of Scottish universities are £19,000 or lower in biological sciences; agriculture and related subjects; law; languages; and creative arts and design, which is below the threshold for a tier 2 visa.

It is not just the absence of a post-study work visa that is problematic. There are serious concerns about the credibility interviews conducted by UK Visas that essentially reassess decisions made by the universities. Subjective criteria now operate alongside the Government’s decision to reduce the maximum visa refusal rates of an institution to 10%. That means that institutions are scaling back recruitment work in places from which there are higher refusal rates.

We are also alarmed at hints that a two-tier system is on its way, with visas for some universities incorporating more favourable terms and conditions than for others. All universities are quality assured—that is required by a tier 4 licence. I am therefore proud to speak up for all Scottish universities—indeed, all universities throughout the UK—and question the message that sends out.

I could speak for hours on the complexity of the application process and various other problems, but I will draw my remarks to a conclusion and leave it to other Members or for another debate to explore those issues. The key message is that international students are brilliant and we could do so much more to attract them here for the benefit of all. Government policy is misguided in the extreme and it is time for an urgent rethink. It is time to up our game and maximise our efforts to attract international students, who bring real benefits to this country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr James Gray (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, it might be worth noting that there is a large degree of interest in the debate. While I do not intend to apply a strict time limit, none the less, will everyone be courteous to their neighbours and keep their remarks perhaps to five, seven or eight minutes, or something of that order? I think we will then fit most people in.

Mr James Gray in the Chair: 2.48 pm

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): Thank you, Mr Gray. May I first congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald)? I think I have pronounced that correctly. [Interruption.] It is always a challenge. Do not worry, I am used to “Luger-bruger”. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this excellent debate on this important subject. It is nice to see the Minister in his place; I know he will listen carefully to what we all have to say. May I apologise to the Chamber for not being able to stay for the wind-ups? I will, however, read the concluding remarks—particularly from the Minister—with great interest.

I am here to speak up as the Member of Parliament for Loughborough, which has a hugely successful and internationally focused university. I also recognise the other successful universities in Leicestershire, which have already been mentioned by the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz): Leicester University and De Montfort University. It is fair to say that Leicester and Leicestershire Members are extremely proud of our three highly successful universities.

In my former role as Secretary of State for Education, and also as the Minister for Women and Equalities, I spent much of my time encouraging our young people to be outward looking and globally minded. That was at the heart of what the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East said about the importance of our internationally facing universities and higher education institutions to all of this country.

Given the interest in the debate, I will keep my remarks to two main points: first, numbers, and whether it is right to include students in the reduction in migrants to tens of thousands per year; and, secondly, the benefits of universities. I think the debate also speaks to a wider issue that we are grappling with as a Parliament at the moment, which is the kind of country we want to be after the referendum on 23 June. I firmly feel, and I suspect—or hope—that many Members agree, that we do not want to turn our backs on the world. If we were somehow to harm or to disable our higher education institutions, we would be at grave risk of doing just that.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): People of intelligence and good will voted both for and against Brexit. Does the right hon. Lady agree that many people are now frightened by some of the rhetoric they have heard around Brexit, and that it is the responsibility of the House to allay those fears?

Nicky Morgan: I agree with the hon. Lady. There has been some very unfortunate rhetoric, and I am sad to say that we have even had incidents—I know of at least one—on the campus of Loughborough University, in my constituency, whereby those who have come from abroad to work or study have been made to feel unwelcome. I do not think that is the kind of country any of us want to represent.

Keith Vaz: The right hon. Lady was a distinguished Education Secretary, and whenever she spoke on these issues it was about getting more students to study in our country. Now that she is no longer the Education Secretary, can I tempt her to confirm the rumour we heard at the time she was: her Department was in favour of more students coming here, the Foreign Office was in favour
of more students coming, the Business Department was in favour of more students coming—it was only the Home Office that spoiled the party. Will she confirm whether that was the case?

Nicky Morgan: The right hon. Gentleman is an old hand in the House. He knows he is tempting me down paths that are always dangerous for former Ministers to follow. I will say that this former Secretary of State for Education was very much in favour of making sure that our higher education institutions were open to international students, because we are at our best when we are outward looking. It is fair to say that there were certainly other Ministers who very much shared that view.

I hope the Minister will confirm that the Government are relying on reliable numbers when drafting their immigration policy. The annual population survey suggests that only around 30,000 to 40,000 non-EU migrants who previously came as students are still in the UK after five years. The rules introduced by the Home Office over the past six years have done the right thing in cracking down on abuses by those who came here for the wrong reason—not to study but to work without the requisite permission. However, we have to be careful that the rules do not adversely affect genuine students and institutions, and do not undermine the UK’s reputation as a desirable destination for international students.

I will also talk about public opinion, because it is important in the current immigration debate. We know that many of our constituents want immigration to be controlled. I think that means that we should know who is coming in, how long they are coming in for, why they are coming in and at what point, if any, they are going to be leaving, or whether we are going to get the benefit of their skills once they have finished their studies.

Recent polling from Universities UK and ComRes revealed that only 24% of British adults think of international students as immigrants. Of those who expressed a view in the poll, 75% said they would like to see the same number or more international students in the UK, which increased to 87% once information on the economic benefits of international students was provided. The poll also revealed that the overwhelming majority of the British public—91%—think that international students should be able to stay and work in the UK for a period of time after they have completed their studies.

In the interests of time, I will move on to my second point about the benefits that universities bring to our local communities, which the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East, (Stuart C. McDonald) set out very well. Of course, as I am constantly reminded by Loughborough, we should not forget that our universities are not just about teaching, although that is important, but about research and driving economic growth in our local areas. All three Leicestershire universities that I have mentioned are key parts of our local enterprise partnerships and, I suspect, should be key parts of the Government’s industrial strategy when that is announced.

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East talked about the contribution that universities make to our local areas. The international education sector is one of the UK’s biggest services exports. I want to make sure that the Department for Exiting the European Union listens very closely to what universities and higher education have to say on the deal that we will eventually negotiate with the European Union. UK education exports are estimated to be worth approximately £17.5 billion to the UK economy. International students, including EU students, support 170,000 full-time equivalent jobs across the UK and contribute £9 billion.

Those are big numbers but, if we boil it down, I know as a local Member of Parliament that my constituents are employed as researchers and academics, but also in less skilled jobs—the people who make the campus the place it is, who look after the students and who run businesses and other institutions, such as retailers, that rely on the student contribution to their local economy.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): Does the right hon. Lady agree that the contribution that EU students make is absolutely crucial and, as we approach Brexit, a particular signal of reassurance has to be given? There is already evidence that researchers and students are apprehensive about their future in the UK, post-Brexit.

Nicky Morgan: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) who asked the Prime Minister a very good question earlier. I have said publicly and will say again that the Government should be giving confirmation to EU citizens who are currently here that they can stay and should have no fear of being asked to leave. My constituents have emailed me—some of whom are EU citizens who have come here to work; some of whom are married to or have other family members who are EU citizens—and I think it is wrong that we are leaving them with this uncertainty.

I very much hope that student numbers will be removed from the drive to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands, for the reason I have given about public opinion, as well as because it is the right thing to do for our economy. In the next couple of years, the Home Office has the opportunity to develop a new, post-Brexit immigration policy. I know that will be a challenge, but there is also an opportunity to remove student numbers from that drive to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands, as we develop a sensible immigration policy that works for this country, for businesses, for communities and for our higher education institutions. Again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East on bringing the debate to the Chamber.
[Paul Blomfield]

Our all-party parliamentary group draws support from both Government and Opposition Members in significant numbers. It was set up during this Parliament because of growing concern about the way in which we are at risk of undermining one of our most successful export industries: education. Clearly, we should not reduce the debate about international students to simple numbers—although some powerful numbers have been given.

International students enrich the learning environment of our campuses. In an ever smaller world in which we need to understand one another better, it is a huge advantage for British students to be learning in classrooms and laboratories alongside others from all over the world. International students add enormously to the local economies, as I know from talking to businesses in Sheffield that appreciate their contribution.

We can add to that the enormous benefits we get from the lasting relationships that are established through the experience of studying here. I was talking earlier this year to the high commissioner of one of our major trading partners and important allies, and he said to me, “Did you know that more than half our Cabinet went to university in the UK?” As the Higher Education Policy Institute points out, 55 world leaders from 51 countries studied in this country. That sort of soft power is the envy of countries around the world, with political influence and commercial contracts based on an affection that people feel for this country because they studied here. Of course, we also have to acknowledge the economic benefits, which the right hon. Member for Loughborough outlined.

Who would imagine that a Government would do anything other than celebrate that great British success? It has not been so. Throughout the last Parliament, to growing concern, the Government undermined our ability to recruit international students. I know that Ministers sometimes contest the claim about recruitment numbers—I anticipate that the Minister may do so today—by saying that they have broadly held level. With the exception of one blip in one year, that is true, but it is a growing market. Holding level is not good enough. It means we are reducing market share, to the benefit of our competitors.

In the last year for which figures are available, the number of international students was up 7% in the States and up 8% in Australia, and Canada plans to double its numbers. That is all at our expense, and it is because of the measures under the previous Parliament that made the UK a less attractive destination. Those measures were put in place by the Government to hit their net migration targets, and that is the problem; international students were viewed as part of the migration debate. That is not the way the public see them, as the right hon. Lady pointed out, and it is not the way that we in this place see them either. An unprecedented five Select Committees of the Commons and the Lords have called for change by taking students out of net migration targets and seeing them as valuable, not something to be restricted.

Instead, the Government are stepping up their action against international students. In her speech to the Conservative party conference last month, the Home Secretary put international students at the centre of her plans to cut migration. She introduced a new tool with which she plans to do that: linking visa approval to the quality of courses. It is perhaps no coincidence that the Government are introducing a teaching excellence framework for our universities, grading universities gold, silver or bronze. I hope that in his closing remarks, the Minister will confirm whether it is the Home Office’s intention to use that system of measuring quality to determine the new visa regime it has in mind. If not, will he confirm that the Home Office plans to introduce its own measurement of the quality of our universities? He will not be surprised to know that if he uses TEF, some surprising universities will lose out. University College London and the London School of Economics—both leading universities—would not necessarily get the gold measure.

These are challenging times for our country. Charting our place in the post-Brexit world presents real challenges. We need to win friends, not alienate them. Last week’s prime ministerial mission to India demonstrated that many of our friends will put access to universities at the heart of the discussion on our future relationship. Above all, we need to build on our successful sectors, to mitigate the economic damage of Brexit. In terms of export earnings, universities are a huge success, but that is put at risk by Brexit. It is not only the 185,000 EU students in the country but the 30% of non-EU students who said before the referendum on 23 June that they would find the UK a less attractive country if we voted to leave the European Union.

As the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East said, a sensible Government would look at those facts and say, “How can we strengthen our position in the world? How can we do better against our competitors? How can we up our game?” Instead, the Home Secretary is moving in the other direction. That is madness. There is no other sector in our economy to which the Government would be saying, “We want you to do less well.” I hope that the Minister will reflect on all the contributions today and all the concern outside this place and say that the Government are willing to think again, to up our game, to learn from our competitors and to celebrate winning more international students to this country as a policy objective.

3.6 pm

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) on starting this important debate. I begin with a declaration of interest: I have benefited from international students very directly in the past few months. A Mexican postgraduate engineer called Alfredo helped me to analyse the complex business cases that the Department for Transport uses, and he was extraordinarily helpful. I also had a Swiss postgrad on an LSE scheme help me to expose some of the limitations of the northern powerhouse project and provide the office with useful chocolate, including proper Toblerone.

Debates such as this follow a customary pattern. The proposer adopts a cloak of virtue and expects the Government to do something, and the Government then point out all the practicalities, financial limitations and reasons why they cannot do what the proposer suggests. The proposer is normally the hero, and the Government are normally the villain—the Minister has to, in effect, act that part. However, there is a real opportunity for him to be the hero.
There is a Conservative Government with a progressive policy to attract international students. They lambast in press publicity their socialist predecessor for not doing enough, have a 10-year plan for international students and are aggressively building the skills base by attracting the brightest international talent. That Government are in Australia. There is equally—this is not a good example, because I might be prejudiced—a Liberal Government in Canada that are doing something rather similar.

Being sensible about it, I think we all agree that universities gain from a clear international dimension, with bright people from other countries contributing enormously to our academic culture and to important research areas where we do not have the research expertise ourselves. The world gains enormously from having an involvement with British universities, at no cost to us. It is a good thing, and nobody around the table would say anything different.

There appear to be only two problems, and one of them is within the Minister’s grasp to solve. Student numbers are cited as a problem, in terms of how they feature in net migration and add to the anxiety about immigration. I think most sensible people see that as purely a presentational or cosmetic problem. It is quite clear, from the polling evidence produced by the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), that the public do not see it that way at all when it is properly explained to them. The second worry, which is the more pertinent one as far as the Minister is concerned, is that study is actually used as a device for securing permanent access to the country.

The first problem is soluble. It is a non-problem. I understand concerns about how the Office for National Statistics does stats and so on, but frankly, when previous Governments were troubled by how accurate a reflection of unemployment the employment statistics were, they changed them. Within recent memory, the Government changed the assessment on child poverty because it and they changed them. The way in which it was presented were wrong. The Government can change this.

The second problem, of study being used as a device to enter the country or stay permanently in the country, may not be a real problem—not if there is adequate quality control on HE. It looks from forthcoming legislation as if there may be less of that, but there was a clear clampdown on bogus colleges. I do not think we need to worry excessively about that. The issue may not be a problem because we have no good numbers on it. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East cited the IPPR report that refers to a secret report in the Home Office that says it is not a problem. Maybe the Minister will talk a little—of course he cannot—about this secret report. He is going to.

Mr James Gray (in the Chair): There is no rule against it.

John Pugh: Hence the conflict that rides through Government between the Home Office and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and between the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, who clearly has a different opinion. Hence we see the significance that higher education has for Brexit not only from the money point of view but because courses will fall over and research will simply not be done.

I am not going to volunteer an elegant solution to managing the position between admission for work and admission for study. It is a choice between whatever the Government want to do—summary rejection or complete inertia. However, I will make a simple point that most people would want to make. The Government can make life easy for themselves—they really can—by following business advice, public instinct and academic argument and publicly differentiate the student and the migrant.

3.11 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) on securing this debate. I apologise if I have to leave before the end—I will be a Teller at the end of the debate in the main Chamber—but hopefully that will not be necessary. I do not want to speak for long; I just want to make a few short remarks urging the Government to listen to our universities and to ensure that international students continue to feel welcome in the UK. Following the vote to leave the EU and the Government’s rhetoric on visa restrictions, there is a real and justifiable worry about the future of international students in the UK.

As a Manchester MP, I am proud that we have a university where one in five students is from overseas, many of whom live in my constituency. Ahead of this debate, the University of Manchester was keen to impress on me the great contribution that international students make to the wealth and cultural life of our city. The figures are varied, but I think we can all agree that international students generate more than £9 billion to our UK economy and at least 140,000 jobs. An international student who studies in Britain is an investment in the whole.

Mr Andrew Smith: Going back to the statistics that my hon. Friend mentioned, the proportion of overseas students at post-doctoral level in disciplines such as science and engineering exceeds 70%, so if the income
and the expertise they bring were to go, there would be a real risk that those departments, or parts of them, would close.

Jeff Smith: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point; that is a real risk. When we talk about immigration numbers, the public recognise the value of international students. They do not consider international students as immigrants. It is not often that I agree wholeheartedly with the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), but she was absolutely right to quote the Universities UK study. Clearly, the British public think that international students should be able to stay and work for a period after studying, so the Home Secretary’s comments about new restrictions on overseas students are a real worry, particularly at a time when there is already uncertainty as a result of the referendum.

Leaving the EU will pose a real threat to our universities and students. Although I welcome the short-term funding guarantees for EU students and staff, there needs to be a longer-term solution, and the Government have to prioritise the free arrangements for the academic community in the upcoming negotiations because the indecision is already causing problems. I was talking to an academic, an EU national, who works at the University of Manchester. He said to me, “I love living in Manchester. I love my job. I don’t want to move abroad, but I don’t know what the future holds.” He had been offered a job at a German university. He said, “For the first time in my life I am considering leaving the job I love in Manchester because I can be more certain of my future in Germany.” That is a real concern for the academic community and for us in the UK, because we cannot afford to lose talent.

Prioritising the post-Brexit study arrangements for EU students and academics has to be a vital first step. However, at a time when the Government need to reassure the higher education sector that the UK will remain outward-looking, they appear to be pulling up the drawbridge on international students. The focus on bringing net migration down to the tens of thousands may or may not be workable. I suspect it is unworkable, and it is certainly damaging our universities while students are included in that number.

The IPPR has argued that the Government are treating students as an easy target in their mission to bring net migration down. It has called the Government’s approach “deeply problematic”. We need only look at some of our international competitors to see what they are doing in contrast. I will give two examples. In April, Australia announced a new national strategy for expanding its international education sector and has streamlined its visa processes. Canada has recently expanded opportunities for international students to access post-study work and permanent residency. It is time the Government learnt the lessons from our competitors and welcomed international students instead of putting extra visa restrictions on them.

I want to close with three or four asks for what the Government should do immediately to reassure our higher education sector.

Mr James Gray (in the Chair): Quite quick ones.

Jeff Smith: I will be very quick; in fact, I will read the bullet points. First, the Government need to remove international students from the net migration target. Secondly, the Government need to reintroduce a key part of the post-study work visa for STEM and nursing graduates. Thirdly, they need to rethink proposals to introduce visa restrictions. Finally, the Government really need to publicly acknowledge that the ability of students and university staff from the EU to study and work freely in this country is integral to the world-beating university education system that we have.

International students make a huge contribution to our academic life and our society. The Government need to welcome them, not discourage them.

3.18 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It must be because you were at school in my constituency that you have selected me to speak, Mr Gray, so I appreciate that.

Mr James Gray (in the Chair): Order. I would like to have played some part in that, but sadly I was not consulted on the matter.

Carol Monaghan: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) for securing this debate. This week is a celebration of the richness and diversity that international students from Europe and further afield bring to our communities. Unfortunately, the current mood music when it comes to international students is wrong. More and more, the UK is being seen as unwelcoming or even hostile to those students. The reputational damage done by Brexit cannot be overestimated. If we add to that our restrictive visa regime, countries such as the US, Canada and Australia become far more attractive. It should not be a question of us allowing talented students to come here; the Government need to actively campaign to bring them here. If the UK is to remain a world leader in education, we need to recognise the effects of current Home Office policy and move towards a more workable solution. Professor Philip Nelson, the chair of Research Councils UK, told the Select Committee on Science and Technology recently that “all of those wonderful achievements that we can all cite about the UK are done by people from a range of nationalities in this country. UK science is not done by UK nationals. It is done by many people.”

The visa process itself should be straightforward, but I had a look at the Home Office website this morning and it gives an indication of the length of time a visa application should take. According to the site, a tier 4 visa application—the simplest student application—from India should take 15 days to process. Unfortunately, that is not a true reflection. I have had reports of applications taking months without a response. We need to be realistic about how long it takes. Visas for short research visits of, say, a few weeks or months—much like those that many UK-based students might make, such as a short spell at CERN—can take so long to process that the research opportunity is lost before the visa is approved. The Government must recognise that research is an international endeavour and a key part of it is getting worldwide access to facilities. There is a need for a workable mechanism that allows international students to come easily to the UK for those short visits.
The new post-study work visa pilot has been viewed with interest. However, in Scotland, where a previous version worked extremely well, our universities have been excluded. That is in a country with an ageing population and where our problem is emigration, not immigration. Post-study work visas could go a long way in tackling skills shortages, particularly in digital and STEM industries. Instead, our institutions are investing in training those students, only for them to return home, taking their newly acquired skills with them, benefiting their home countries but not, crucially, our communities. Scotland, as well as many excellent UK institutions, has been left out of the pilot. I and many of my colleagues have asked questions on the issue. Indeed, on 14 November I asked, at column 5, when we could expect the pilot to be widened to include Scotland. Perhaps the Minister can answer that question today.

We could argue that universities are still managing, but the Brexit process brings the issue of international students clearly into focus. Will the restrictive regimes currently operating be relaxed at all when French or indeed Irish students apply to study here? Section 2 of the Ireland Act 1949 states that Ireland is not a foreign country. Perhaps the Minister could tell me how Irish students will be considered following Brexit.

3.22 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) on securing the debate. There has been an enormous degree of unanimity, and the economic arguments have already been well articulated, so I will not try to repeat them. However, there is one element of the economic argument that I have not yet heard, but which is highly relevant to the debate. As a representative of a manufacturing area, I know that engineering and digital skills are crucial to our future manufacturing success.

Universities have great difficulty in recruiting enough students domestically to fill the available courses. A high proportion of international students take up those courses. To deter such students from coming here to take our world-class courses or working here after graduating makes no sense. That policy deprives manufacturing industry of much needed, crucial strategic skills for the future, which would enable our manufacturing to survive in a post-Brexit economy. It also undermines many university courses, because the funding from international students is crucial to maintaining them. They may not be able to get enough domestic students, and the courses are disproportionately expensive. That is a further reason to have a visa regime that continues to encourage students of STEM subjects.

In a previous incarnation I was the Chair of the Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills. We produced a report on this matter in September 2012, which other hon. Members have mentioned. It was unanimous, and was among several other Select Committee reports that, I believe, unanimously reached the same conclusion: that student visas should not be included in the migration statistics. During discussions with respective Ministers it became clear that the Home Office and BIS had conflicting views. I think I can paraphrase the Home Office approach by saying that it depended on the United Nations definition, under which a migrant is a person who moves for a period of at least one year to a country other than their country of origin. That is an international tool for comparing migration, but as a basis for public policy it is totally inadequate.

It is interesting that both the USA and Australia—countries that are very concerned about inward migration—have, as it were, finessed the same approach to accommodate an increase in the number of student visas. The US uses the Census Bureau to give numbers, but the Department of Homeland Security treats students as business visitors and tourists—non-immigrant admissions. There is a compelling logic for doing that in this country. Unfortunately, although the logic is evident in every other Department, across the parties and among the public—and public support for the policy has been commented on—that does not seem to be the case in the Home Office. The issue has enormous strategic significance for our post-Brexit experience and trade deals. I should like to elaborate, but in the interest of brevity I shall conclude my remarks there, Mr Gray.

3.27 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP):

I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Gray. I am changing the speech that I was going to make, as there have been such fine contributions from everyone. I shall just highlight issues from my personal experience.

In the early days of Namibian independence, I went along to do an assignment on capacity building. I went, as I was asked, to the office of the Prime Minister, where I was met by his senior adviser, who said to me—I think I can do his accent just about perfectly—“Roger, delighted to meet you. How are Glasgow Rangers getting on?” That came as a great shock to me, as an Ayr United supporter. He had spent eight years studying in Glasgow and had two degrees, and after independence he returned to his country.

A short time later, I was at the new University of Namibia, where I was to give some help. There I met the wonderful Professor Peter Katjivivi, who was here recently. He is now the Speaker of the Namibian Parliament.

Peter set up the first South West Africa People’s Organisation office in Europe—in London—and when he was here, for years, eventually completed his PhD at Oxford. Some time later, I met a man for whom eventually I would be the best man at his wedding. He is now the permanent secretary to the President of Namibia. His name is Samuel Goagoseb—I pronounce the forward click for the benefit of Hansard. Samuel was partly educated at Heriot-Watt University in Scotland. My experience was just a small personal example of the way we have exported such talent, to great benefit, throughout the world, but I fear that those people might not be able to get access today in an equivalent way, under the types of regimes that we operate.

I also have the pleasure of continuing as an honorary professor at the University of Stirling. I used to teach there on MBA and MSc programmes. These masters programmes at Stirling University benefited hugely, particularly from the many students from India. There has been an utter collapse in the number of students from India coming to our universities. That has led in some cases to the cancellation of previously very well regarded programmes.
I used to sit as the chair of an interdepartmental ethics committee—it took a long time and a lot of practice to say that—and I came across many researchers at Stirling University. I cannot remember a single research proposal that did not involve someone from beyond the UK. International students were fundamentally important to our research capability and to assisting us in having the diverse education from which everyone in the UK benefits.

I appeal to the Minister to listen to the facts and figures he has heard today and to consider the qualitative benefit that encouraging international students brings to our country.

3.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) on securing this debate. The issue affects many people in my constituency and certainly needs attention. Like other hon. Members here, I believe in education. I believe that those with a vocation should be facilitated to learn their trade or skill, that those who are desirous of learning should be enabled to do that and that those who can bring skills to our economy must be able to do so. I believe that our universities must be able to welcome foreign students, with the higher tuition they bring, and that they should be in a position to facilitate higher learning.

But in all of this, I believe we should not be taken advantage of. Something the Prime Minister said when she was Home Secretary sticks in my memory:

“We want the best international graduates to stay and contribute to the UK economy. However, the arrangements that we have been left with for students who graduate in the UK are far too generous. They are able to stay for two years, whether or not they find a job and regardless of the skill level of that job. In 2010, when one in 10 UK graduates were unemployed, 39,000 non-EU students with 8,000 dependants took advantage of that generosity.”

That does not seem to be unfair. It is our responsibility to provide the highest levels of our education to our own constituents and graduates who are unemployed. It is our privilege to offer the highest level of education to others who want to study in some of the best universities in the world but, with respect, it is not our responsibility to continue to cater for them to the detriment of our own economy.

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Shannon: I cannot give way because the Chairman was very clear about time.

Queen’s University Belfast is an example of some of the good work, student exchange participation, and research and investigation into new drugs that take place. The wealth of talent from overseas enables us to do that great work. Our medical staff are greatly enhanced by those junior doctors, or registrars, from other countries and they could not do without them. I am thankful that that work takes place, but it will not stop because things have been tightened up. It will merely stop our groaning system from being further burdened by responsibilities that are not ours to bear. I understand the need to tighten up some of the controls.

I welcome the fact that Brexit presents the opportunity to find terms of international study that suit students and the higher education institutions without impacting on the decision we need to ensure that we do not adversely affect our economy. I understand how the uncertainty of Brexit may impact on those who want to come here to live and to educate themselves, and I am sure that American universities are facing similar uncertainties, but this is not the end of international students. It is the beginning of teamwork to promote our universities and the benefits of coming here to work and study. Brexit does not signify the death knell, as I and others have said in recent days. It presents opportunities, and the universities can and must be part of this process. We must put in place agreements to promote our universities and allow visas for students, but the correct standards must apply.

I understand that India and other nations want a change to the system, and it is essential that we work with them as much as possible to provide an accessible system. It must never be forgotten that visas are a protection for us. During her visit to India, the Prime Minister indicated that she was looking at student visas for those from India, and that is important. Our universities want foreign students, foreign students want our universities and our Government want to facilitate this. We must find a balance between that and our security. There is a way and the Home Office must find it. The Home Secretary must outline how that balance will be struck and the Brexit team must deliver the negotiation of agreements to enhance and support European uptake.

3.35 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) on securing such an important and timely debate. What we have heard so far proves that students contribute not only to higher institutions, but to our economy. As my hon. Friend said, international students’ day tomorrow—17 November—is an opportunity for the Government to make students their priority. The economic benefits in research, employment and opportunities for trade and international alliances have been well versed by all my colleagues in the Chamber. Our institutions in Scotland and throughout the UK are world renowned and attract the brightest and the best. We should celebrate that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) highlighted how the unrealistic thresholds and the crude way in which we are seeking to reduce immigration figures simply do not serve our constituencies or local communities well. The reputational damage to institutions and the UK globally will not be forgotten for a long time, when the brightest and the best—those who could find a cure for cancer or any number of illnesses—are unable to secure places at Oxford, Cambridge, Glasgow, St Andrew’s and elsewhere because they cannot secure the visas they need to come to our best institutions.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My hon. Friend and I share campuses of the West of Scotland University, whose principal is Australian.
Does she agree with him, as I do, when he says the Government’s proposal to restrict universities from recruiting overseas students is an ill-considered and retrograde step that will damage our economy, our competitiveness and our cultural standing?

Angela Crawley: Indeed. I thank my hon. Friend for his comment. I will come to the West of Scotland University.

Our advantage is that we are a world-leading country and we have world-leading institutions. I call on the Government to make the necessary practical changes and to look at the pilot scheme, the tier 2 visa, the work study visa and so on, and to consider how much more there is to be gained from bringing the brightest and the best to our country and retaining them than there is from sending them elsewhere.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) has fascinating stories to tell. Unfortunately, my stories from Stirling University are slightly different, and I do not think the songs I learned are fit for Hansard, so I will move on.

International students matter, and we have heard about the direct impact that the Government’s policies can have on the prosperity of constituencies such as mine. My home town of Hamilton is rich in heritage and once had a thriving town centre. Only two weeks ago, I launched a joint consultation with my Scottish Parliament counterpart on the need to take action on town centre regeneration and to consider the importance of Hamilton being a university town, where Lanarkshire’s only university is located. However, like many communities across the U.K., there are challenges because town centres and institutions with a student population and employment generate the local economy, but that is dwindling. This is in no small part due to the Government’s policies.

One saving grace is that the student population of universities, and particularly the West of Scotland University, enhances the town and the environment. I studied as an undergraduate at Stirling University, which is a fine example of a thriving university town. I also went to a world-renowned Glasgow University—something I share with you, Mr Gray. As a group, students contribute to the local economy. It is clear that where there is a university institution, the local economy benefits. The financial contribution is huge, and we need more students, particularly those who live in or close to student accommodation and spend time in town centres. There is a direct benefit to the economy, and we must not forget that.

Every year, the University of the West of Scotland welcomes more than 1,000 international students from 65 different countries around the world. In Hamilton, students contribute £69 million to the local economy. Recently, when the university took the decision to move to a new campus, it was clear that this expansion was with a view to attracting more international investment. In a letter to me, the university’s principal, Craig Mahoney, said that the Government’s plan "would be significantly damaging the University of the West of Scotland and the wider Scottish and UK higher education system".

I therefore call on the Minister to please consider the concerns raised by hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber. In a world of uncertainty, all Governments must provide leadership. The proposal also sends a message of exclusion at a time when language must be about inclusion.

3.40 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) on securing this very important debate. It gives me great pleasure to place it on the record that Her Majesty’s Opposition believe that we should remove international students from Home Office migration statistics. The purpose of that policy, apart from making the stats more accurate in relation to people who are subject to immigration legislation, is to contribute to the detoxification of this area of British society and political life, beginning with the obvious benefit to our university sector. Of course, as hon. Members have said over and again, the truth about international students is that, far from being a burden, they make this country better off in innumerable economic, social and philosophical ways.

We have heard that there were 436,000 students from overseas in the UK in 2014-15 and that they comprised 19% of the total. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills—I bow to the Department for BIS, although I know that there are different figures—estimated that the economic value of the contribution from international students was £14 billion in 2014-15 and was set to rise to £26 billion in 2025. As the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) said, this is not just about what they pay in fees; it is their financial contribution and their contribution to growth and GDP in many of our great cities. The presence of overseas students creates more than 250,000 jobs here.

The Home Secretary and her predecessor have claimed, falsely, that very large numbers of international students overstay their visas and so contribute significantly to the breach of their immigration target. They have yet to validate that claim. The most recent legal case collapsed in the Appeal Court as the Home Office attempted to use hearsay evidence that students had fraudulently obtained English qualifications. It has to be stressed that the vast majority of students return home after study. In 2014-15, fewer than 6,000 students applied for a tier 2 visa, applicable to non-EU students who wish to study. In 2014-15, fewer than 6,000 students applied for a tier 2 visa, applicable to non-EU students who wish to stay here, and that 6,000 may actually be too few for the overall needs of the economy. As I think many hon. Members know, an unpublished report from the Home Office, drafted when the Prime Minister was Home Secretary, seemed to show that the number of student overstayers is tiny, just 1% of the total—approximately 1,500. Therefore, they make no significant impact on overall immigration numbers.

Keith Vaz: Ministers in the past have said that one problem has been the abuse that overseas students have been involved in, yet we have seen little evidence to support that. We heard about one student working on the checkout at Tesco from a previous Immigration Minister, who is now the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, but we have had no evidence. If there is evidence, it should be brought forward.

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to the distinguished former Chair of the Select Committee on Home Affairs for making that point.
Several stakeholders oppose what is happening. They include Universities UK, the teaching unions, the National Union of Students and many local authorities where education is a much-needed growth industry—cities such as Sheffield and Coventry. This is not just about the top 10 or Russell Group universities; our university sector benefits in so many ways from the contribution of international students.

If international student numbers are reduced in the way that Ministers seem to want, there will be a funding shortfall for universities and, as colleagues have said, courses for which international students make up a disproportionate number of the students may be imperilled. The Government’s policy on international students, with its financial implications, implies either further Government borrowing, which I do not find credible, or increased fees for UK-born students.

I understand that the Chancellor of the Exchequer recently floated the idea of excluding international students from the figures only to be slapped down by the Prime Minister. Despite that, the Conservative hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) has written that the “smart” thing to do is to exclude international students from the migration statistics. On this issue, it appears that the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary are on their own.

As we have heard, polls consistently show a majority in favour of excluding international students from the migration statistics; typically 60% are in favour and 30% against. As a follow-up, we should look at reforming the policy on tier 2 visa applications, to make it easier for non-EU graduates to work here in sectors that require them, whether they are doctors or IT specialists.

Let me say just a few words on India. As we have heard, the number of overseas students from India has plummeted as a consequence of both the rhetoric and the policies of this Government. The Prime Minister, I think to her surprise, on her recent visit to India, realised that there was great concern about the situation in relation to its students in the UK. That was at the heart of the negotiations. And what did the Prime Minister offer? Golden visas for the super-wealthy. There was no attempt to address the real concerns of Government and society in India about the way we are talking about and treating international students. It is an entirely self-defeating policy. Indian students do not want to stay on. They come here because it is one of the best education systems in the world and then they probably go to Silicon Valley. The Minister may be aware that the chief executive officer of Google is Indian; that is the path to fame and fortune for Indian students. We should be glad that they recognise the quality of our education and want to come here to study at least.

Earlier today, the Minister expressed concern that no one was leading on immigration for Her Majesty’s Opposition. I can tell him that we do have someone leading. It is the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, the shadow Home Secretary. The Minister seemed to wonder why I would bother my head with immigration. I do bother my head with immigration and I am happy and proud to lead on it. Over nearly 30 years, I have consistently been in the top 10 of MPs dealing with immigration casework. With the solitary exception of my good and right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), I have probably done more immigration casework, under both Labour and Conservative Ministers, than anyone in the Chamber today. I bother my head with immigration because I am the child of immigrants, and I am committed to a debate on immigration, on both sides of the House, that is based on fact, that puts the economy, society and British values first and that is not driven by short-term political concerns—I say that to all Members. It is a concern of mine; it is a concern of my constituents. Whether or not many millions of people up and down the country are frightened by the current tenor of the debate on immigration, both here and in the US, it is a concern of mine—it is a long-standing interest of mine—and I am proud to say that as shadow Home Secretary, I do indeed lead on immigration.

3.48 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) on securing the debate and I thank all hon. Members who participated in it for their worthwhile, considered and thoughtful contributions on such a wide-reaching and important topic. I think that we can all agree that it is in the best interests of the UK as a whole to ensure that the United Kingdom continues to attract the best and brightest international students to study here. High-quality international students make an important contribution to the UK. Our universities are strengthened by the presence of some of the finest minds from around the world, and the international students themselves benefit from the chance to receive an education at some of the world’s best educational institutions.

Much emphasis has been placed today on the desire for Scotland to re-establish a post-study work visa. Hon. Members may remember the Fresh Talent scheme that operated in Scotland between 2004 and 2008. That scheme placed few restrictions on those who wanted to stay in the UK to work post-study, and granted free access to the whole of the UK labour market. An evidence review published by Scottish Government Social Research in 2008 found that only 44% of applicants remained in Scotland at the end of their two years’ leave on the scheme, and a significant proportion were not in skilled work appropriate to the level of education.

Stuart C. McDonald: That is exactly the point I made during my speech and I suggested that it is made a condition of a post-study work visa that that person has to live and work in Scotland. That would absolutely solve the Minister’s concerns.

Mr Goodwill: It is very difficult to ensure that a person who gets a visa to work, potentially, in Scotland is stopped from travelling elsewhere in the UK. Certainly, the pull of the south-east and London is one we are all too well aware of.

In 2008, the tier 1 post-study work visa replaced the Fresh Talent scheme and was introduced country-wide. This route saw high levels of abuse, with evidence of large numbers of fraudulent applications and individuals deliberately using the student route solely as an avenue to work in the UK, with no intention to study and many in unskilled work. I am sure that hon. Members are not seriously suggesting that a return to a completely open
post-study work route that does not lead to skilled work would be advantageous for any part of the United Kingdom.

The UK already has an attractive offer for international graduates of UK universities. Those who can find a skilled job are free to do so. There is no limit to the number of tier 4 students who can move to a tier 2 general skilled worker route, nor do they count against the annual tier 2 cap. Around 6,000 tier 4 international students move to tier 2 annually, and that number has been rising year on year. However, that does not mean that the Government do not remain open to keeping our offer for international students under constant review, to ensure that we help our renowned institutions to attract talent from around the world. One such recent development was the launch of the tier 4 visa pilot with the universities of Bath, Cambridge, Oxford and Imperial College in July.

Roger Mullin: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Goodwill: I suspect I am going to answer the hon. Gentleman’s question before he raises it. May I take this opportunity to reassure hon. Members that those institutions were chosen because of their consistently low visa refusal rates, lest anyone imagines we might have a conspiracy against Scotland?

Roger Mullin: On the conspiracy the Minister has against Scotland, would he clarify which Scottish universities he thinks did not operate appropriately and reasonably regarding students? Name them, or apologise.

Mr Goodwill: I am not aware of any Scottish universities that are not operating within the rules, but the four chosen for the pilot were those with the best performance in terms of their visa refusal rates. Indeed, the whole point of the pilot is to find out the benefits and advantages so that it can be rolled out more generally. I know that a number of Scottish universities, such as the University of Glasgow, which has increased its overseas non-EU student numbers by 32% between 2012 and 2015, are just the sorts of institutions that have shown how successful they can be in attracting overseas students.

As part of this pilot, certain visa eligibility checks have been delegated to the universities, and the documentary requirements for students taking part are reduced. The students also have additional leave at the end of their course to enable them to take advantage of the UK’s current post-study work offer. Monitoring of the pilot is ongoing, and the results of that will be evaluated to inform any decision to roll the pilot out more widely. But, if it is a success, I hope that other high-quality institutions throughout the UK will be able to benefit, including those—I am sure the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East will be glad to hear—in Scotland, and, I hope, also in Yorkshire.

Any change for the best-performing institutions will build upon the excellent offer that the United Kingdom already has for international students, with the intention of allowing the UK to remain the second most popular destination in the world for international higher education students, behind only the United States of America.

Our approach to reform continues to strive towards two key goals: first, to ensure that our fantastic institutions can attract the very best and brightest students from around the world, and secondly, to protect the student migration route from abuse. I am sure that hon. Members here today can agree that this is a sound foundation on which to build.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Before the Minister moves on to his next chapter, I would like to go back to the intervention made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) about the possibility of attaching the condition that students could work only in Scotland. Is the Minister aware that Scotland has a distinctive tax code to reflect Holyrood’s tax powers, and that it is therefore very easy to keep track of whether or not somebody is working in Scotland?

Mr Goodwill: It is very important, throughout the whole immigration system, that people who have visas that allow limited work can be tracked. Certainly, using the tax system is one way of doing that. Another key point that I would like to draw to hon. Members’ attention, is that there remains no limit on the number of genuine international students who can come to the UK to study. We do not propose to cap or limit the number of overseas students who can come to study in the UK. As the Home Secretary recently announced, we will shortly be seeking views on study migration routes. I encourage all interested parties, which I am sure will include many institutions in the constituencies of hon. Members here today, to participate and ensure that every point of view is heard.

Paul Blomfield: The Minister is talking about the consultation and the Home Secretary’s statement and, in his earlier remarks, he talked about quality. Will he confirm or deny that the Home Office intends to use the teaching excellence framework as a measure for quality in relation to the visa regime?

Mr Goodwill: I think that the hon. Gentleman will understand from his time here that when one is in consultation, one listens to views and then comes to a conclusion. At this stage we are listening to points, including the ones that he has made. Indeed, one of the points that he made during his contribution was regarding the number of Indian students coming to the UK, and how we are going to prioritise recovering the number of Indian students entering the UK to study. May I point out that we issue more tier 4 visas to students from India than from any other country except China and the United States? The then Immigration Minister visited India in February 2016, and the Prime Minister herself has just returned, to ensure the message is clear that we welcome Indian students to our world-class institutions.

We have seen increases in the number of study visas granted elsewhere; China has gone up by 9% and Indonesia by 14% in the year ending March 2016, which shows that our immigration system allows for growth. The proportion of Indian students coming to study in the UK at a university increased from around 50% in 2010 to around 90% in 2015. This trend of smaller volumes of students with greater concentrations in higher education is likely to reflect the recent policy changes to clamp down on immigration abuse by non-genuine students and bogus colleges. In 2015, around 90% of Indian students who applied for a tier 4 visa were issued one; that is up from 86% in 2014, and 83% the year before
that. The Indian student grant rate is higher than in our competitor countries. Indeed, the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) asked about the time it may take for visas to be processed, and I confirm that 99% of Indian tier 4 students received a decision within the 15-day target.

Paul Blomfield: I apologise for pressing the Minister on this point, but it is important. Next week will be the last time that this House considers the Higher Education and Research Bill, of which the teaching excellence framework is a central proposal. Can he simply deny or confirm that the Home Office intends to use the teaching excellence framework as a measure for quality in relation to the visa regime?

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman is very tenacious, but I will repeat the point that I have already made. We are in the process of a consultation, are listening to views, including those made during this debate, and will come to a settled view in due course.

Including students in the net migration statistics is a point that has been made repeatedly during the debate. The Office for National Statistics, which is the UK’s independent statistical authority, has today published a report that states:

“The net migration figures are used by ONS to calculate the size of the UK population in any given year and they include international students since they contribute to population growth. These population figures are used by national and local government to inform their planning and removing any key group would have consequences for this.”

This has been a very spirited debate. I conclude both by thanking all hon. Members for their contributions, and by reiterating that genuine students will continue to be welcomed to the United Kingdom. This country is fortunate to have world-class educational institutions with formidable reputations, and this Government will continue to help them to ensure that they can continue to bring in the best and brightest students from across the globe.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered immigration rules for international students.

County Court Judgments

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH IN THE CHAIR]

4 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That this House has considered reform of county court judgments.

I know there is about to be a vote in the main Chamber, Sir Edward, so this might be the shortest speech on record in Westminster Hall. Even if it is not, I imagine I will be interrupted at some point.

This debate comes as the culmination of 20 years of frustration. Before I came to the House, I worked in the banking sector, in particular the personal banking sector. I was totally frustrated that people who had bank accounts and were very good customers of Lloyds Bank found themselves in all sorts of trouble because they had what I like to call “rogue” county court judgments against their name. Very often those judgments were born not out of large debts, but out of getting into a dispute with a mobile phone company or, worse still, a gymnasium of some type.

That is the problem with county court judgments: we imagine they are used for large debts when debtors simply refuse to repay their creditors. It makes sense that this mechanism for debt recovery must exist as a last resort. Without CCJs, it would be very difficult if not impossible for creditors to be repaid. However, there is evidence that CCJs are not being used in the correct manner by all sorts of companies. In some cases, they are used to demand payment of small debts, disproportionately affecting those subject to them.

A county court judgment is not something anyone wants on their credit record. Once a court makes a judgment against someone accused of having a debt, the record will remain linked to that person for six years on the register of judgments, orders and fines, whether or not the debt is paid off. The only exception to the rule is when the debt is paid off in under a month. There can be a devastating effect on a person’s credit rating, cutting off access to all but the most unfa vourable credit deals. A mortgage will become only a dream to someone with a CCJ against their name. That is why it is vital that the CCJ process is improved and, above all, reformed.

CCJs are the go-to option for many creditors, even before alternative means of resolving disputes have been explored or before attempts have been made to settle such disputes. They are simply not being used as a last resort. According to The Money Charity, 2,102 consumer county court judgments are issued every single day, with an average value of £2,030. [Interruption.] I think that is the bell.
The Daily Mail investigation raised the poignant case of a young couple from Northern Ireland who were told that they could not take out a mortgage on a new home because one of them parked for 20 minutes in a restricted airport carpark. The CCJ claim was sent to an old address, so the couple were completely unaware of it. Ultimately, the couple had to pay £200 to satisfy the CCJ and get the mortgage. I hardly think parking in the wrong parking bay is sufficient cause to turn someone down for a mortgage on a home. It is clearly important and in the interest of justice that those who are accused of owing money are given the best possible chance to defend themselves and respond to the claim. It is simply not acceptable that the courts are unable in some cases properly to inform those accused of owing a debt of the accusation and, more importantly, of their rights.

The third major concern about CCJs is the huge and often disproportionate effect that they have on people’s access to finance. CCJs are recorded for six years on the register of judgments, orders and fines if they are not paid within one month. Credit rating agencies make significant use of that register when deciding whether to give credit in the form of loans, mortgages and other finance. A person subject to a CCJ, by default or otherwise, has several options. If they can pay within one month, the debt will not appear on the register or harm their credit rating. If they can pay in full but not within one month, the CCJ will be listed for six years and be marked “satisfied”. Ignored CCJs can result in charging orders, attachment of earnings orders and warrants of execution that allow bailiffs to seize property to the value of the debt. There are processes for setting aside CCJs or making counter-claims if the claimant owes money.

Those who need access to credit but have a bad credit rating due to a CCJ against their name sometimes turn to credit repair companies in search of quick fixes. That is usually a mistake, because there are no quick fixes, as the director general of the Office of Fair Trading made clear: “County court judgments cannot be removed from credit files unless they have been discharged (within a month) or were incorrectly granted.”

Sometimes the only credit available to those with CCJs offers extremely unfavourable terms to the borrower, such as high-interest payday loans. Those issues paint a very negative picture of the effectiveness of CCJs, and of how they are used in general, the way they are issued and the disproportionate way they affect people.

Reform is clearly needed. Although it is perfectly legal and within creditors’ rights to make claims against debtors for even the smallest of debts—it is correct that debts must be repaid—can the fact that so many people are taken to court over small debts be justified? There is a case for creating a new mechanism that creditors can use to seek redress for debts owed to them below a set value, similar to that in Scotland, with small claims for debts of less than £3,000, summary cause actions for debts of £3,000 to £5,000, and ordinary actions for debts of more than £5,000. That would allow credit rating agencies to draw a more accurate and reliable distinction between serious debts that may demonstrate genuine inability or unwillingness to repay loans and mortgages, and minor debts that do not.

More emphasis must be placed on mediation between companies and debtors in advance of CCJ claims being submitted. CCJs should be a last resort for creditors.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on alternative lending. One issue that has been raised with me is credit scoring, on which getting a CCJ has a negative impact. CCJs are an outdated method. Does he agree that, combined with reform of CCJs, we should consider reforms to allow real-time credit scoring and encourage greater information sharing?

Chris Evans: Absolutely. As a member of that all-party parliamentary group, I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman’s chairmanship. He knows my interest in real-time credit scoring and that I think the situation is in desperate need of reform. I have always said that such reform would be a win-win situation: a win for the lenders because they would know to whom they were lending, and a win for the consumer because lenders would drive down their prices. I have been campaigning for real-time credit scoring since I came into Parliament, and I thank him for fully supporting the campaign, but that is for another day.

I recently had a lucky escape from a CCJ. In the past three years, I was involved in a minor collision outside my home in London with a vehicle owned by the taxi firm Addison Lee. When Addison Lee got into dispute with the insurance company, rather than negotiating with the insurance company, it went over the top of it and tried to issue me with county court proceedings. Had I not received the documents in time, a county court judgment would have been registered against me, even though it was my belief that the insurance company was dealing with the claim. Luckily, I was fortunate enough to be able to act straightforwardly and seek legal advice, which prevented the CCJ, but people with similar cases have not been so fortunate.

My second key concern is that some people served with CCJs do not receive any notification if they have moved house. The only legal requirement for the service of court documents to an individual is merely a last known residence. There is no legal requirement per se for the court documents to be delivered or received. Indeed, court documents are considered validly served even if they are returned to the court marked undelivered. The result is that some people are unaware that there is a CCJ against their name until they apply for credit, such as when buying a car or a house.

Duncan Bannatyne, writing in his book “Anyone Can Do It”, says that if a person does not honour their contract with his gymnasia, he will have no hesitation in taking them to county court. Again, I find that practice rather sharp. It is clear that civil court actions must have justice at their core, but can we really call it practice rather sharp? It is clear that civil court actions have made more than 60,000 county court claims against the company. Such a CCJ could influence a lender’s decision on whether to give that person a mortgage or loan.

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[Chris Evans]

Creditors should be able to demonstrate that they have made every possible effort to recover their debts amicably and by mutual agreement before heading to court. Those two measures, alongside other reforms, would help to reduce the rapidly increasing number of CCJs, which are issued daily.

The way that CCJs are issued must also be reformed. Those who face the threat of court action for debts must be given all the information they need to know their options. At this point, it would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to the important and useful advice provided by Citizens Advice on this matter. The first responsibility should be with the courts, which should make every effort to explain people’s rights and options fully if they are threatened with a CCJ.

Without those improvements, we must consider the 14-day period in which a CCJ can be challenged to be too short. The vast majority of people served with a CCJ are not legal experts and must be given time to decide how to proceed. As it stands, the threat of high fees and fines, and the complicated nature of CCJs, can force people to submit and accept a judgment, even if they had the chance and legal right to oppose it. In my experience with Addison Lee, had I not sought legal advice and made a challenge, I would have lost out financially. I was able to take on Addison Lee only because the insurance company was willing to meet the costs of my challenge. It is important that everyone who faces the threat of a CCJ is given the best possible chance and the support they need to make a challenge, as I was.

Crucially, the courts must always be satisfied that the person who is threatened with a CCJ is aware of the process. It is not fair, right or in the interest of justice that someone can have a CCJ recorded against their name by default just because they did not receive any notification of it—it could even have been sent to the incorrect address. Without a requirement that the courts must be satisfied that the accused debtor is aware that a claim is being made against them and has received the court documents, cases such as those uncovered by the Daily Mail will continue to emerge.

Lessons can be learned from the Scottish system for delivering court summons. Documents are first sent by recorded delivery. If that fails, court documents are sent out with sheriff officers. Such a system would address the problem of unknown CCJs in the rest of the UK. Reform must be made to address the disproportionate impact that a CCJ can have on a person’s ability to access finance. Credit rating agencies clearly make use of the register of judgments, orders and fines. Debts settled within one month are not placed on the register, but is that one-month limit arbitrary? All debts, once settled, should be removed from the register entirely once they have been cleared.

My suggestion of a new kind of CCJ for small debts might make a difference if credit rating agencies viewed them as less damaging. Of course, even a minor debt should be expected to harm a person’s credit rating, but the size of the debt and the size of the loss of credit rating should be proportionate to one another. It seems mad that people can be turned down for financial products simply because they are in dispute with a mobile phone company or a car parking company. This debate is fundamentally about whether county court judgments provide a sense of justice to creditors and to debtors. As it stands, they do not, as they appear to lean too heavily in favour of the claimants. Why else would their use by creditors be expanding so rapidly? That is a particular problem.

The Government are, I believe rightly, attempting to increase home ownership and access to finance, but the expansion of CCJs will surely hinder that effort. It is clear that some people with CCJs recorded against them are unaware of the fact until they get a nasty surprise when they check their credit rating. I am an Opposition MP, but I am happy to say that the Government have done good work in standing up to payday lenders and trying to increase access to finance by making sure banks access the right people. However, all that will be lost because of this abuse of the county court judgment system. As long as it is in play, that work will mean absolutely nothing.

Although it is not possible to know exactly how many people have CCJs made against them without their knowing or being able to provide a defence, the fact that the situation is possible is a problem in itself. For the people affected, having a CCJ on their record can mean the difference between being able and not able to own their own home. In some reported cases, it has even prevented access to finance for something as simple as a mobile phone contract. The Government have to introduce reforms to rebalance CCJs and allow debtors to defend themselves properly.

Debtors must have the best possible chance of understanding the legal action being taken against them. More effort should be made to resolve debt issues without heading to court, and if court action is the only available course a distinction must be made between high and low-value debts. Those subject to CCJs must be given more time and information so they have the best possible opportunity to make a challenge and defend themselves. The Government must also take action to mitigate the impact that CCJs can have on access to finance, which is already a problem for so many. I fear that if the Government do not reform CCJs and take action to address the issues I have raised, more people’s lives will be ruined.

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case. I am not sure whether he is aware that the French philosopher Voltaire said, “We look to Scotland for all our ideas of civilisation.” Although I will not say we need to go that far in respect of this matter, does the hon. Gentleman agree that when there is best practice, or better practice, in other nations on these islands, it is incumbent on the Government to look at that and learn from it?

Chris Evans: I did not think that Voltaire would be mentioned in a debate on county court judgments; I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on getting that quote in. In politics, we have to realise that if something works and works well, it does not matter if it is not our idea; if it is a good idea, it should be rolled out. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is here representing Scotland. He knows the system there, and it does work far better than the one we are discussing. It provides better justice for those who have CCJs against them and has a better system for ensuring that people receive the summons. That is something we should learn from.
I do not have much time, so I shall bring my remarks to a close. I welcome the Prime Minister’s comments last month about the ongoing investigation of the use of CCJs and the disproportionate effect they can have on the lives of the many people who have been caught out by them. I wait in anticipation to see what reforms are initiated to protect people from the predatory use of CCJs. I know the Minister well: he is a fair man with a strong sense of justice. I hope that today he finds a way to right the wrong done to so many people.

4.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, I congratulate the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) on securing this debate. He has for many years had a strong interest in consumer finance, to which this debate is allied.

I recognise that concern has been expressed about the number of county court judgments that are made against individuals and businesses, the majority of which are entered without a defence being provided by the debtor. Last year, 745,235 county court judgments were entered in default of a defence. That figure represented 85% of the total number of county court judgments entered. I was concerned to read the reports in the Daily Mail that money claim forms have been sent to out-of-date addresses, despite the fact that the individuals and businesses concerned had updated all their records. The paper said that the knock-on effect was that those individuals and businesses had been unable to obtain credit.

Although many default judgments will be made because defendants simply do not have a defence to the claim, the Ministry of Justice is investigating the number of default judgments that were made because the defendant did not receive the claim, and the reasons why that occurred. We will then consider whether any steps should be taken to ensure that the system is not open to abuse. That will include working across Government and with the authorities responsible for regulating the businesses that use the county court to recover debts.

Seeking a county court judgment should be a creditor’s last resort, when all other attempts to recover the debt have failed. Unfortunately, we know that debtors often fail to engage with creditors, for a variety of reasons. If the court system required debtors to acknowledge a claim, it would have serious repercussions for creditors, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, which would be unable to recover money that was owed to them.

Those who experience debt problems represent a broad spectrum of society, from people experiencing debt as a consequence of deprivation, poverty or other circumstances, through to those who have deliberately refused to pay for products and services used. Some of those facing court action are in difficult situations because they themselves are owed money that has not been repaid. In addition, the Daily Mail’s investigation highlighted instances in which individuals had county court judgments entered against them without being made aware that they owed the money in the first place.

The current rules on county court judgments seek to strike a balance between the needs of claimants—many of whom are individuals, small businesses and public bodies—who must have recourse to an effective legal process to regain money owed, against the rights of defendants to be informed of a claim against them. The court rules do not require the claimant to make sure or prove that a claim is received by the defendant. That would be very expensive for claimants and the system would be open to abuse by individuals and businesses that are seeking to avoid paying their debts. The court rules also do not require the court to verify that the defendant’s address is correct.

More than 1.1 million county court money claims are issued each year. It would be impossible for Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service to process claims quickly if they had to verify address details in every case. The onus is on the parties to provide the correct information. Claimants must sign a statement of truth confirming that the details in their claim, including the address of the defendant, are true. Anyone who deliberately provides false information to the courts faces prosecution. Individuals and businesses must update creditors such as utility companies, and public authorities such as the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, about any change of address.

Safeguards exist to protect defendants. If somebody discovers that they have had a county court judgment issued against them but they do not owe the claimant money, they can apply to the court to have the judgment set aside. If they are successful, the CCJ will be removed from the register of judgments and the individual’s credit rating should be restored.

I shall now respond specifically to some of the points made by the hon. Member for Islwyn. He asked about the disproportionate impact of CCJs on credit ratings and the difficulty of removing judgments from the register. As he said, the judgment will be removed from the register if it is paid in full within a month. If the judgment is paid after a month, the debtor can get the record marked as satisfied in the register. It will stay on the register for six years, but people will see that it has been paid.

The documents were obtained by the newspaper under the Freedom of Information Act, and showed that those county court judgments were made. We have discovered that the figures provided were the result of data entry error. Default judgments have not been issued for nominal sums, such as a penny. A money claim cannot be issued for less than £25. On top of the amount owed, a claim may also include issue and a claimant’s solicitor’s costs.

On the question about the 1p judgments for parking that were mentioned in the Daily Mail, I shall now respond specifically to some of the points made by the hon. Gentleman. He asked about the 1p judgments for parking that were mentioned in the Daily Mail. The documents were obtained by the newspaper under the Freedom of Information Act, and showed that those county court judgments were made. We have discovered that the figures provided were the result of data entry error. Default judgments have not been issued for nominal sums, such as a penny. A money claim cannot be issued for less than £25. On top of the amount owed, a claim may also include issue and a claimant’s solicitor’s costs.

On the question about action taken before the issuing of a claim, claimants are encouraged to contact defendants before taking action, which will always be the last resort. An existing protocol that encourages early engagement with a debtor is being revised, with the assistance of the credit and money advice sectors, to provide debtors with a further opportunity to engage with the claimant.

The vast majority of organisations responsible for bringing county court claims are large debt recovery agencies, utility companies or parking companies. It is important to balance the needs of businesses to recoup money owed to them with the need to give people a
chance to defend themselves against money claims. The Ministry of Justice is working with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Communities and Local Government to look at what more could be done to protect people from the potentially damaging effects of having a claim entered against them about which they knew nothing.

We hope that businesses will engage with the Government on what more can be done to ensure that claims are pursued only after the right checks have been carried out. The Ministry of Justice will continue to provide support and analysis on the court side of this issue, and will report back in due course. I thank the hon. Gentleman for the opportunity to discuss this subject.

Question put and agreed to.
James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): With those great figures, does my hon. Friend agree that one way to promote English wine would be to serve it in all our embassies around the world, and in Parliament and all our Government buildings? For example—to take one completely at random—Giffords Hall Rosé from Suffolk, or indeed Copdock Hall Rosé from Suffolk, would make a great addition to any of our fine embassies.

Neil Parish: Obviously there is great wine from Suffolk, as there is across all our counties of England and Wales, and it is right that we promote it in our embassies and in Parliament, in the restaurants and when we buy wine from Parliament, especially sparkling wine but also others.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend. I was made a snipe champion, so I rather think I have drawn the short straw, given that he was made a wine champion.

My hon. Friend makes an important point. Should we not put our wine together with all our other amazing produce, such as our cheese, our cream and our butter, to promote tourism in the UK, perhaps with the Great British Food Unit behind it, so that we sell our great food and drink much better—Staplecombe Vineyards produces some of that wine; it is in Taunton, so obviously it must be good—and really make it part of our sales pitch?

Neil Parish: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is right, and we are conducting an inquiry at the moment into rural tourism, so this is very much about the food, the drink, the wine—everything is there. We can compete with our continental cousins extremely well. Let us go out and actually do it.

There are as many as 50 wineries and vineyards in Devon alone, with UK vineyards appearing as far north as Yorkshire. From growers in East Anglia reporting higher yields to Camel Valley Vineyard in Cornwall having a “fourth good year in a row”, the English wine industry is going from strength to strength.

Let me turn to the reasons for that growth. Many parts of England have always had the same chalky limestone soils as the Champagne region, but now English wine makers are catching up because our climate is improving. In blind tastings, some English wines are now beating the great Champagne houses at their own game. Therefore, with climate changing, we have every chance to produce the very best sparkling wines; dare I say—I will probably be sued—almost champagnes?

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Not only are we beating them in competition, but the French are now admitting, “If you can’t beat them, join them,” because the houses of Taittinger and Pommery have both bought acreage and joined up with English vineyards in the United Kingdom to produce English sparkling wine that is better than French champagne.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend has obviously been looking at my speech, because I shall mention that in a minute. There is no doubt that they are buying up land. We have to be careful; we do not want to be entirely overrun by France, especially given the history. Seriously, though, what the French are bringing is the investment and the expertise, so if we can work together, I believe that English wine, in particular sparkling wine, has huge potential.

There is some more good news. Statistics produced by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs show that an additional 75,000 acres of land are suitable for producing English sparkling wine. That is equivalent in size to the whole of the Champagne region, which just shows how much potential there is for growth.

Only last year, the champagne producer Taittinger purchased some land in Kent to establish its first UK vineyard. Prime vineyard land in the UK is actually much cheaper than in France and many of our arable farmers are also beginning to see that attraction. Vineyards are quickly becoming part of farm diversification, and with the added bonus of shops, cafés, tours, weddings and wine tastings, vineyards and wineries can provide a much needed boost for agri-tourism and rural jobs.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Further to that point, will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating Sharpam Wine and Cheese, which does just that? It is producing not only fantastic wines but fantastic cheeses and is providing a welcome tourist centre for tours, sharing expertise and creating valuable local employment.

Neil Parish: I very much commend the Sharpham vineyard, because, once again, it is reaching out. It is producing a good wine, and then we can have good local food and bring more and more tourists down to the south-west, provided that we dual the A30 into Honiton while we are at it and along the A358 to Taunton—that was not part of my speech.

English wine is now of such a good standard that our Government and embassies are confident of promoting English sparkling wine across the world—I am sure we will hear much more about that from the Minister. I even heard on the grapevine—sorry about that—earlier this year that Chapel Down in Kent had become Downing Street’s official wine supplier. Unfortunately, however, less than 1% of wine drunk in the UK is from our shores, so for a start let us ensure that a variety of English and Welsh wines are sold in Parliament, Government buildings and our embassies, and are not just found in Downing Street.

Parliament’s bars and restaurants are selling French champagne and Italian prosecco, as well as wines from Chile to New Zealand. It is great to have these wines here, but we really must have our English wine here. Even worse, the House of Commons-branded wine is not actually from the UK. If we are going to promote English or Welsh wine globally, we really should get our own House in order first.

It is true that English wine is generally a little more expensive, so the Government must look at what can be done to create a level playing field. In the UK, as much as 60% of the cost of an average bottle of wine goes on tax—so I expect our great Minister here to reduce the tax on our wine immediately. That 60% in this country compares with about 21% in France. Excise duty is too high in this country and punishes domestic wine producers the most, who pay duty even before the wine is sold. At the last Budget in March, all other drink sectors received duty freezes, but the wine industry saw a duty rise. There is therefore a serious point to be made: our growers of
wine and grapes should be treated fairly. If wine continues to go unnoticed and unprotected by Government, there will be a growing impact on the industry right across the board, from small to large producers.

It is also vital that the UK rejoins the International Organisation of Vine and Wine, the OIV, which is the global organisation for science and technical standards in the wine trade. The British Government left the organisation in 2005, citing cost, but all the big wine producers are members, including most of Europe. OIV members account for some 80% of global production. We need a seat at the top table to help to construct the rules covering this global trade. Will the Minister commit to the UK rejoining the OIV? In addition, the English wine industry reports that there are not enough approved pesticides. The green book of UK-approved pesticides gets thinner every year. Any assistance or reassurance that the Minister can give us and the industry that the issue will be given close attention will be much appreciated. We need a level playing field with our European counterparts.

I want English wine to be a big Brexit success story. The Government are committed to boosting British exports to growing markets around the world. Where better to start than English wine, where many of the top export markets are in Asia? When negotiating a new trade deal with the EU, the Government should look to secure tariff-free access for wine produced in the UK. That should also be a priority for trade deals with other nations. We also need a national scheme equivalent to the EU’s protected geographical status. We must protect our names and the particular association of English sparkling wines as being a high-quality product. The protected geographical indications currently cover British products such as west country lamb and Exmoor Jersey blue cheese. I was pleased therefore to hear that the Government were considering registering the name “Sussex” as a kitemark brand for sparkling wine. What progress has been made on that registration? Where does Brexit leave the opportunity to have protected regional brands? We also need to focus on training and skills. Vineyards must get the necessary labour post-Brexit to realise their full potential.

Finally, if we allow our producers equal competition against subsidised wine industries in other countries, we will definitely need a new farming support regime. We must help and encourage those who produce and export the very best English wine. Minister, there are a lot of them. There is so much more we can do to encourage this growing industry, whether through promotion, name recognition or making tax changes to help exports. English wine can be an even better success story, so let us uncork its great potential.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): We have five Members wishing to speak. I want to get everyone in. I will start with Nick Herbert, but I want every speech to be a brief sip and not a long swill, please.

5.2 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, in this important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing it. I am particularly pleased to be speaking in it because my constituency, which I am proud to represent, has more wine producers than any other. We have 17 producers that I am aware of, including award-winning producers such as Stopham, whose wine was served on the Queen’s barge in the diamond jubilee celebrations; Wiston; Nutbourne; and, perhaps most notably—arguably it is the finest English wine—Nyetimber, which is a premium brand that is increasingly exported globally.

First, I want to add to what my hon. Friend said about the importance of the Government getting behind this industry. It would be relatively easy for them to do that. It seems to me absolutely obvious that the Government should showcase English sparkling wine at its major events. I am glad that Downing Street is serving English sparkling wine. I hope that the Foreign Office is also doing so at appropriate events, and I hope our embassies will be encouraged to do the same. I recognise that English sparkling wine is relatively more expensive, but it says something about our country and this emerging industry if we can serve the wines. It would be a talking point.

I make a plea to the Minister to look at the normal procurement rules and to perhaps give a say and an opportunity to the variety of English sparkling wines that are produced. The Government should not just land on one or two, which I understand is the case in Downing Street at the moment. These are all emerging brands, and there are some particularly fine ones among them that win blind tastings. I understand that Clarence House adopts a slightly different approach in how it serves English wine. It has blind tastings and has arrived at serving rather more English wines as a consequence. The opportunity should be shared around more, and the Government should approach the issue in that way so that other areas of the country and other wines can benefit. Indeed, the Government may need to do that if they are to serve such wines more, which seems to me to be a relatively cheap way in which they could help the industry.

Secondly, I endorse what my hon. Friend said about wine duty. At the moment, wine duty applies across the board because we are in the European Union. It is not clear whether that will continue in the future. There is a case anyway for reducing wine duty in the same way as has happened for beer duty. It has been shown that that has a beneficial impact, and wine has rather lost out in the argument in recent years. Wine duty was frozen at one point, but generally it has increased, and that has a negative effect that could be addressed. I hope that the Minister will join us in making representations to the Chancellor to support the industry by lowering wine duty.

Thirdly, I endorse what my hon. Friend may have said—I am not sure whether he did, but I will say it anyway—on the Government’s producing a welcome roundtable. The then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, now Lord Chancellor, held a roundtable on how English wine is promoted, bringing together the various interests in the country. It would be welcome if the Government continued with that initiative and held another roundtable. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about that.

English wine is a potential success story. It is no longer a joke. People are talking about it. It is a potential source of alternative rural employment and a good, environmentally friendly land use. It seems to me far
better to grow vines than to grow ugly things on agricultural land that might have been farmed in other ways in the past. It is a great opportunity for the country. At a time when many may be utterly miserable due to global events, I can think of no better way to drown one's sorrows than for those who drink—sadly, I am no longer one of them—to raise a glass of English wine and toast its success.

I do not hold with those who say that we need Brexit for English wine to be a success story. Nor is it necessarily the case that tariff-free access for wine will be an answer in itself, because tariff-free access would imply a reciprocal arrangement and tariff-free access for wine that we import. As so often, the glib solutions are not necessarily the most straightforward. There are ways that the Government can get behind the industry, and I hope that they will, because it is an important and exciting one for this country.

5.8 pm

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I will briefly break into this commercial break for English wine and produce to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing this debate on an important success story. It is already a success story.

I declare an interest as the chairman of the all-party group on wine and spirits—it is an arduous task that I am delighted to carry on my shoulders—and as someone who spent his youth working at the English Wine Centre in Sussex in the 1980s. In those days, the English wine industry was not such a quality industry. Having been rejuvenated in the 1950s by the great pioneer of English wine, Guy Salisbury-Jones at his Hambledon vineyard, English wine in the 1980s was not an easy sell. We had to invent the “Great English Wine Run”, taking English wine bottles to Paris in a reverse of the Beaujolais wine race to try to promote that rather questionable project and product, but things have completely and utterly changed. English wine is now a quality product recognised as a premium brand around the world. It is part of the great British contribution to quality food and drink. We must not underestimate it.

If I could correct my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), this is not British wine. British wine is a filthy product made of imported wine concentrates from abroad. It has nothing British about it. The correct terminology for what we are talking about is English and Welsh wine.

**Calum Kerr** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): And Scottish?

**Tim Loughton:** There are not yet any Scottish vineyards that I am aware of—but if climate change continues, the way that the new President of the United States may wish, we may be having Château Edinburgh before the decade is out.

The success story of English wine is huge. We are now producing some 5 million bottles of English wine per year and that will at least double by 2020, to 10 million bottles, with half a dozen vineyards each producing 1 million bottles of English sparkling wine, who out of three quarters of English wine production. That is a huge growth success story, and it is not just the wine production—there is also the cottage industry and tourism aspects to it, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton said. Most of the vineyards are open to the public, have restaurants attached and have vineyard tours.

English wine is a quality product, so much so that it has now won no fewer than 175 awards in prestigious international wine competitions, constantly winning blind tastings, in particular up against some of the best French champagnes. I absolutely echo my hon. Friend’s words that we need to have protective marks. The Sussex kitemark in my area would be great progress towards that.

Alas, I do not have any vineyards in my constituency, but my constituents certainly drink a lot of wine. Around me we have vineyards such as Ridgeview and Bolney, as well as Plumpton College, which now has the only wine department in the whole of the country, where a Frenchman is teaching English students how to produce wine. My favourite local vineyard, and one of the oldest in the country, is Breaky Bottom, which is marketed as probably the best bottom in the world. That vineyard now produces a very fine product.

The Government need to take account of some points. We need to encourage investment. Setting up a winery in the UK is an expensive business, much more expensive than on the continent where they have a better climate for it. There are no real tax advantages and there is a particular tax disincentive—because of their size, most vineyards will send their grapes somewhere else to be made into wine and so they are not counted as agricultural premises. The tax treatment of the English wine production chain needs to be looked at and restrictions on planting vineyards need to be relaxed.

Only 2,000 hectares of land are under wine production in this country; there are 35,000 in the champagne region in France alone. Up to now, under the EU, we have been restricted from planting new vineyards. Those restrictions have been relaxed until 2030 but technically we are allowed to plant only an additional 1% of vineyards a year—another good reason why we are coming out of Europe as early as possible. That was a very protectionist measure from the days of wine lakes on the continent. We certainly do not have any surplus wine in the UK because it is lapped up as soon as it is produced.

We need some help on planning. We also need some help on duty. This year, wine was the only alcoholic product to receive a duty rise. Duty on wine has gone up considerably over the last 10 years. The duty per average bottle of wine was £1.33 in 2007; it is now £2.08. English wine producers have to pay tax at the same rate as continental wine producers, who can produce it much more cheaply.

I agree with all my hon. Friends’ comments, and we need to lead by example. Every embassy around the world should be serving, as the normal staple, English wine and sparkling wine. Many enlightened ambassadors do that already, and the Foreign Office should make the supply chain for that much easier. It is crazy that the House of Commons bars on a regular basis, as already happens with British guest beers. We should be putting our money where our mouth is in this place and supporting a fantastic quality English and Welsh product.
that is going to be the envy of the world. I am very proud to have been there in the early days, when it was actually not much cop—but it is now.

5.14 pm

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir Edward, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing today’s debate.

We are here to discuss and highlight the merits of the English fine wine industry. I have two fantastic examples in my constituency of North Cornwall. I thank the Camel Valley vineyard near Bodmin and Trevibban Mill vineyard in St Issey near Padstow for sending me their feedback ahead of today’s debate, to highlight the challenges for and successes of the industry.

Trevibban Mill started in 2008 on an organic farm and its first wines were produced in 2011. It opened its doors to the public in 2015 and now produces 20,000 bottles a year, including some excellent, award-winning wine. Its Black Ewe organic red recently won a silver medal in the International Wine Challenge.

Camel Valley, an internationally renowned vineyard on the banks of the River Camel, was established in 1989 and continues to produce some fabulous wine. In 2009, Sam Lindo from Camel Valley won the trophy and gold medal at the International Wine Challenge for the Camel Valley Bacchus, also winning the gold medal in the December World Wine Awards for his sparkling Cornwall Pinot Noir. Camel Valley finished second in the Sparkling Wine Championships, behind Bollinger, which is a fantastic achievement for a Cornish business.

The vineyard produces around 120,000 bottles a year and has managed to tap into American markets, with its wine being exported to 14 US states.

I am delighted that so many amazing success stories are coming out of North Cornwall’s food and drink sector and Camel Valley and Trevibban Mill are two excellent examples. The wine industry in the south-west is definitely the bowler hat to the food and drink sector.

Some concerns have been communicated to me by the vineyards and I would be grateful if the Minister addressed them. The first concern is the difference between British wine and English wine, a point also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). Will the Minister tell me why wineries can import concentrate from abroad and call it British wine? Vineyards in England that grow their own grapes have to label their wine as English. Both vineyards said that the difference between British and English wine is not clearly explained to the public, which means that consumers will sometimes buy British wine under the assumption that the grapes are grown in Britain. British wine is also cheaper than English wine, so consumers will often opt for British wine rather than English without understanding the difference.

**Julian Knight:** On that point, the quality of British wine is often so poor in comparison with that of English wine that it damages the reputation of English wine almost by osmosis—as well as damaging your guts.

**Scott Mann:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Of course, the sector would welcome a cut to duty. A suggestion communicated to me is the possibility of a duty to fund promotion of the wine industry. If 1p per litre of wine duty could be diverted to the wine associations, they would have a huge boost to their ability to support and promote the wine industry in the future. That would also make the Treasury very happy, because it would mean increased revenue through sales.

I would also like to put forward the idea of a more staggered system along the lines of income tax, where wine producers do not pay any duty on their first 7,000 bottles—the cider industry already has a similar proposal on the table. That would be a huge help to some of our smaller wine producers, which struggle to expand and have very high overhead costs, which have already been mentioned.

Our wine industry in England is going from strength to strength. We should continue to support these fine businesses, as we have done today with this debate.

5.19 pm

**Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward.

I am proud to have one of the most northerly English vineyards in my constituency: the Holmforth vineyard, which is on the outskirts of the town that used to host the long-running BBC TV series “Last of the Summer Wine”. Last year it was the busiest and most visited vineyard in the north of England, with 37,778 visitors—an average of 103 per day—on vineyard tours with wine tasting. It employed 18 full-time staff, with up to six part-time summer staff at any one time. It has quality apprentices, highly trained and qualified staff, an on-site winery, a 40-seater restaurant, seven self-catering apartments and seven acres of vines—all of which help to promote the English wine industry. It plans not only to expand the Holmforth site next year but to plant 30,000 vines at its new site at Robin Hood’s Bay in North Yorkshire. It makes wine out of Solaris, Regent and Rondo grapes; its white and rosé wines have both won awards. Like other vineyards mentioned by hon. Members today, its biggest problem is that wine duty and VAT are too high: the wine duty is around £2.70 per litre and VAT is at 20%. That makes its wine uncompetitive against wine shipped in by supermarkets.

Hon. Members have made some excellent points today. I will not go on any longer, but I emphasise that Holmforth vineyard is the ultimate in farm diversification. It has gone from being a failing farm to a popular tourist attraction that brings in much-needed tourists and revenue into my part of West Yorkshire and is part of a vibrant and expanding English wine industry.

5.21 pm

**Craig Mackinlay** (South Thanet) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing this debate.

We may be the fifth largest economy in the world, but sadly we are only the sixth biggest wine-consuming country, so there is some making up to be done. Let me cite some figures that I have found on the English Wine Producers website: there are 502 vineyards over 4,500 acres throughout the UK and production is growing—it is now at 5 million bottles a year, but that is really just a drop in the vat,
because 1.6 billion bottles per year are consumed in the UK. The average size of our vineyards is just 10 acres—they are very small and very niche, which may prove to be a weakness rather than a strength. However, we are seeing stratospheric growth: in 1975 there were just 600 acres under vine, but we are now at 4,500 acres, and the figure has doubled in the last eight years alone.

As we have heard already, competitions repeatedly rate English sparkling wine as a world-class product. Despite what we have heard about vineyards in the north of the country, much of the production is around Kent and Sussex, which share the soil and chalk characteristics of the Champagne region. We have a long way to go to reach the production levels of France, but let us aim to get there.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): My hon. Friend mentions vineyards in the north. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney), I represent a northern constituency—probably the most northerly English constituency that is represented in this Chamber today. I am happy to represent Ryedale Vineyards, which produced the fantastic Strickland Estate 2013—an award-winning vintage. I join other hon. Members in asking for a small producers scheme like the one we have seen in the beer industry, because that could turbo-charge the wine industry and accelerate the fantastic growth in wine production in England.

Craig Mackinlay: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. There are a lot of tax proposals that could be introduced, such as small producers schemes, which would get a lot of small producers off the ground.

I want to mention the experience of Phillip and Sally Watts, who took over Barnsole vineyard, which is situated in the village of Ash, between Sandwich and Canterbury. They are new producers; they have invested heavily and are now producing a significant premium product. They produce just 10,000 bottles of still wine a year, both red and white—the industry has to recognise that still wine is a problem for UK producers generally. It is the sparkling wine market that is growing: production in Phillip and Sally’s small vineyard is now up to 12,500 bottles per year and they hope to get to 20,000 in a year or two.

When I spoke to Phillip this afternoon, he highlighted the problem in competing with bigger producers. At the heart of that problem, as we have heard from many hon. Members, is the duty rate. The duty rate since 20 March this year—not including VAT, which is added to it—is £2.08 per 75 cl for still wine and a staggering £2.67 per 75 cl for sparkling wine. We have to recognise how much duty is lost to the Exchequer because of legal importation by consumers from the EU, as well as the illicit market, which I have been concentrating on lately for tobacco. Too often, after bonding their products and paying lower duty rates in EU countries, larger producers in the UK and the rest of the world are then selling to UK customers. For instance, the duty rate in France is just a few euro cents per bottle, and my understanding is that in Portugal and Spain there is no duty. Small producers cannot take advantage of that cross-border circular trade arrangement, which frankly I think we must recognise as daft. It is certainly to the detriment of our small niche producers.

In summary, English wine has a great future. It has the opportunity to enhance UK agriculture, away from the increasing threat of monoculture, of which we are seeing far too much. It also has the opportunity to create employment and to bring business to rural areas, which often need that support, and we should salute those investing in it. I pay particular tribute to Phillip and Sally of Barnsole vineyard and I wish them well in the future.

5.26 pm

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. If I may be so bold, you are the occasional ray of light on your party’s Benches among the madness. It is nice to have you in the Chair.

One of the delights of being a Scottish MP is getting to come down and have a debate about English wine. I must admit that I have enjoyed it. It has brought Members out in force. I congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish)—I want to call him the right hon. Member; he seems like a right hon. Member because of all his work on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. He gave an excellent introduction.

The most important thing in a debate such as this is to voice constructive ideas about how the Government can help what could be a significant and important industry. The right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) made an excellent contribution and raised some interesting points about tariffs—I saw a few ears prick up at that point in his speech.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) mentioned Scottish wine. I googled Scottish wine, which I confess I have never tried, and found a headline that said:

“Scotland’s first wine branded ‘undrinkable’ by critics”,

but that was in the Telegraph, so I would take it with a pinch of salt—the report, not the wine. He also mentioned the tourism perspective. I will go on to make a few comments about whisky and our experience with it, because I think there are lessons to be learned about taking an industry and making it global. We have found that tourism is a huge factor: as you build a brand and gain global recognition for it, you get as many, if not more, jobs through tourism as through production.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) raised an issue close to my heart: labelling. It is really important that consumers can buy with confidence. The hon. Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) mentioned farm diversification, which is another particularly important subject. The hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) raised some interesting points about small producers. With industries that are starting to go mainstream but are still in their early days, it is important that small producers are given as much help as possible.

When I first heard that I would have to sum up in this debate, which I was delighted about, I had hoped to be able to talk about the football and sour grapes. However, given the way that went, I will move on swiftly. Instead, I will tell Members something they may not know: claret was once the national drink of Scotland. In 1295, in an effort to fight against English expansionism, we signed what is known as the Auld Alliance with their French friends and neighbours. As part of the deal, we got access to the finest wines of Bordeaux, and so some of the oldest vaults in the UK are in Leith in Edinburgh.
Another consequence, of which hon. Members may or may not be aware, was that while we consumed the finest wines of the continent, and down here people supped on beer and mead, we started to ship the barrels back to France. We put what was then the poor man’s drink, whisky, into the barrels, and so discovered that ageing whisky changes its characteristics. We therefore developed the foundation of a global success story, which is Scotch whisky. So I thank England for indirectly helping Scotland to start on its whisky journey.

Food and drink in Scotland was worth £14 billion last year. It is the largest manufacturing sector in Scotland, employing 34,000 people, and whisky is the anchor and a huge part of that. We have been able to build on whisky and expand into other areas. Our advantage, of course, is that whisky is a product of the environment, of the water and the landscape that we live in, and it has a provenance of centuries. It has desirability.

I then considered English wine more carefully and looked at the challenges faced by that industry. One challenge is climate, which shapes the kind of grapes that can be grown, and that creates another challenge, because some of the grapes that are suited to the climate and soils of the region are in fact less desirable and less well known. That may change over time, with global warming—let us hope not—but it is a challenge. So the grape types are less fashionable or desirable, and climate is a problem, but there is also the scale of production. When I speak to the people at Villeneuve, the wine shop in Peebles that I frequent on occasion, they tell me that one of the challenges is not so much the quality, but the quantity. Anyone who wants to sell wine on a large scale needs to get the quantity up as well.

The big opportunity and success have been with sparkling wine. The three grapes that make a classic sparkling lend themselves well to the chalkier soils that we heard about and to the cooler climate. As hon. Members know, the key to sparkling is not to over-ripen the grapes, but to have a high acidity level. The climate therefore plays to advantage in that regard and so, with the chalky soil, England has a product that is winning awards, as has been said. The challenge now is for the Government to take that potential and to look at how to support and scale it.

Traditionally, the Government are reluctant to support individual industries, preferring nationwide schemes for business as a whole. There is, however, a strong case for taking something with so much potential, in particular in the current environment. The Scottish Government have led the way in many regards by taking food and drink as an entirety and looking at how to complement products. I have met food production companies with the Scotch whisky industry to look at how we can leverage the success of whisky into selling complementary products off the back of it. That is the kind of thing that we should look at.

Since 2007, the Scottish Government have collaborated extensively with the food and drink industry. The Overton report was commissioned and it produced more than 30 recommendations, which involved skills, innovation, supply chains and the whole support landscape, including the creation of a national food and drink campus in Scotland to host all the key industry and public sector bodies. That is the kind of thing we need to look at. To go off at a complete tangent, Google chooses to continue putting jobs into London not only because of the people and the skills there, but because of the ecosystem that exists in London, the complementary businesses in place. We should consider the same best practice for food and drink.

One last point to echo is the importance of geographical indication, or GI status. A lot of our existing protections are through the European Union and EU trade deals. If we consider that 90% of Scotch whisky is sold outside the UK—I am sure the aspiration of the wine trade is to be as big—if it is critical for us to have protection as we do global trade deals. We must ensure that when we have a quality product and have built a brand and a reputation, it must be able to be bought with confidence not only in the UK, but the world over.

5.34 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish)—my friend and, his new title, the wine champion—with whom I served on the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in the previous Parliament.

We started and continued the debate with some history lessons, which showed how important wine is in this country and worldwide. It is something to be enjoyed, as well as being an important industrial product. From the excellent speech made by the hon. Gentleman, I picked out the importance of skills and how we hone and grow them, as well as the tourism on top of the wine trade.

Many hon. Members spoke about this good news story and, indeed, it is nothing but a good news story: a growing industry that makes high-quality products for national and international markets, exporting to countries around the world, including those with their own wine production. We can be proud of our wine industry and of the fact that it has achieved international accolades, including those that show English wines to have a quality that can be enjoyed worldwide. We are fortunate, but the industry is growing because it is being developed by people with skills and talent. As has been emphasised in the debate, we need to foster that and to hone the skills. As was asked for in the symposium earlier this year, the Government need to support the increase in skills and the colleges that want to provide the opportunity for people to develop them.

Hitherto, I have had little knowledge of English wine, like many other people I know, but I can say to the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) that my only experience has been drinking Nyetimber. It was two or perhaps three glasses—it was so enjoyable that I cannot remember—but I had a very nice afternoon in the wine bar in Selfridges. That was an experience that I will always remember—I managed to get back down the stairs though, which is a good thing.

I was also ignorant of the difference between British wine and English wine, which was highlighted in particular by the hon. Members for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and for North Cornwall (Scott Mann). That is clearly a particular issue for our wine producers, who rightly believe in the need for a clear distinction to be made between the quality of British wine, which is industrially fermented from imported grapes, and their
own home-grown, high-quality produce. That distinction must be made clear not only in this country, but abroad, where it can be equally confusing for wine drinkers. I hope that the Minister will discuss how that confusion can be cleared up, considering that the reputation of our home-grown produce and our home-grown wines depends on their excellence and quality.

 According to the British Beer and Pub Association, wine accounts for a third of all alcohol consumption in the UK, with 12.8 million hectolitres of wine being consumed last year alone. As pointed out by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, only 0.1% of that was produced in the UK. Although well-known retailers such as Waitrose and Marks & Spencer stock English wines, and the Co-op is beginning to do so, in my area in the north-east—in North Tyneside—I have not noticed any promotion of English wines in the aisles of the stores. That might be due to the fact that there are no vineyards north of Yorkshire, because one important factor in the retail world seems to be the sustainability of locally produced wine. It is a big hit with consumers when they know it is a local product.

 With the hectarage of planted vines set to increase and production of wine due to double by 2020, I hope that we see a commensurate rise in wine sales in the domestic market. Members have referred to the roundtable event hosted earlier this year by the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss). That proved very positive, especially as she committed to helping the wine industry to meet its expansion and export goals via the Government’s Great British Food unit and facilitating access to data on soil types, water resources and infrastructure networks to ensure sustainability. I expect the recently appointed Secretary of State to continue that commitment and go even further with some of the things that have been asked for today.

 Good weather conditions have ensured good vintages in recent years, but there is little that the Government can do to ensure good weather in future years, although reference was made to what the American President-elect may do to influence that. However, the Government can help the industry in other ways, as many Members have stated. UKVA representatives and UK wine producers want the Government to commit to rejoining the International Organisation of Vine and Wine, which, as has already been stated, the Government left in—

 Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. Mrs Glindon, will you please leave time for the Minister? You have been going for six minutes.

 Mary Glindon: Sorry, I will jump ahead. It is really important for the Government to rejoin the OIV, as Members have asked, and to promote the sale of wine in shops here, in embassies and in the House. In promoting English wines, will the Minister bear in mind everything that Members have asked for today?

 5.41 pm

 The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing this popular debate. I studied commercial horticulture at college, and one thing I learned was how to spur-prune vines. I remember people saying in the early ‘90s that English wine could become a great, world-beating industry. At that time, although we were starting to win awards and break through, that still felt a long way off, and a little far-fetched, but in the past two decades English wine has been a fabulous success story. It has become one of the most entrepreneurial areas of our food and farming industry. As many Members have said, there are lots of fantastic niche products out there.

 My hon. Friend said that he thought there were some 500 vineyards. I am reliably informed that there are now 640 registered vineyards and 133 wineries, which shows how fast the industry is growing. I thought at one point that we were going to hear them all listed. Many of them were, and it is clear that hon. Members have a lot of pride in the vineyards in their constituencies.

 English wines have picked up around 28 awards, including one gold award at the 2016 International Wine Challenge and three silver awards at the Effervescents du Monde. In August, a container bound for the USA left Southampton with more than 5,000 bottles of English sparkling wine from key producers across the country, including Digby Fine English, Hush Heath Estate, Bolney Wine Estate and Camel Valley. That is the beginning of a great export business, which we hope will grow.

 Earlier this year, the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), held a roundtable event at which the industry committed to and said that it expected a tenfold increase in wine exports—an increase from 250,000 bottles to 2.5 million, or from £3.2 million to more than £30 million in value terms—by 2020. English producers also have an ambition to grow the area planted from 2,000 hectares to 3,000 hectares. This industry is growing in leaps and bounds.

 As my hon. Friend said, the industry is growing. I thought at one point the Minister was improving. DEFRA committed at that event to make available 3D LIDAR data to help the industry pinpoint the best areas for production. That was announced in October 2015. We are also compiling data on soil moisture content. Following the event and at the industry’s request, DEFRA appointed a single Government contact point for the industry to discuss funding matters, which several hon. Members raised.

 We are working with the UK Vineyards Association in two key areas: simplifying and streamlining vineyard and production data collection with the Food Standards Agency, and providing a forum with the Health and Safety Executive to allow the sector to discuss concerns about pesticide availability, which was also raised by several hon. Members. Perhaps the most notable response at that event was the industry’s confident commitment to a tenfold increase in exports and a dramatic increase in hectares grown.

 The sector’s growth and the outstanding quality of our wines have not gone unnoticed by the international wine production community. Earlier this year, I was given the honour of opening the International Cool Climate Wine Symposium in Brighton. That was the first time that the UK had been chosen to host that major international event, and only the second time that it had been hosted by an EU country. I am pleased to say it was an outstanding success, attracting more than 30 international speakers and experts from some of the
most innovative and forward-thinking wine producing regions, and more than 500 visitors from across the globe, all wanting to learn and share their knowledge and experience.

The Government have played a big part in promoting our wines. A number of hon. Members asked what we are doing, and we are trying to ensure that all our embassies stock English wines. I take on board what my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said about ensuring that we spread it around and do not choose just a single brand, but celebrate all the great brands that we have. Our Great British Food unit has designated 2016 the year of Great British food. While I was in Japan at the G7 Agriculture Ministers meeting earlier this year, I took the opportunity to promote our sparkling wines at the British embassy, and we have hosted similar events in the USA and Paris, and indeed at No. 10, to raise awareness of our excellent wines and top-quality British produce.

I want to move on to some other issues that hon. Members raised. Many hon. Members invited me to get involved in the issue of duty on wine. They will all know that that is a matter for the Chancellor. A number of hon. Members mentioned the idea of a small producers’ scheme. I understand that if we were to do something similar to what pertains for beer and cider, there may be some state aid rules involved, but, given that many hon. Members raised that, I am sure Treasury officials will study the debate and look at some of the representations made.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Tim Loughton) also mentioned the International Organisation of Vine and Wine—the OIV. One of the issues with that is, under the duty of loyal co-operation, which was a requirement while being in the EU, even if the UK had been on the OIV it would have been required by EU law to do what the European Commission told it to do. That, for a number of years, meant that the benefits of rejoining were questionable. However, obviously as we leave the EU, regain our seat on many international forums and are able to speak freely again, that is something we will look at again.

A number of hon. Members mentioned protected food names. English and Welsh wines are protected. I believe that, as we leave the EU, third countries can continue to use protected food names, and this will be one area of all those we have to discuss where it will be relatively straightforward to roll forward some kind of geographic recognition similar to what we have now. We are also exploring the possibility of using trademark regulations and the Intellectual Property Office to protect certain brands and certain specific recipes.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) mentioned Plumpton College. I commend the work it does in training, which is important. He also mentioned some of the restrictions on growing, which he put down to the EU. I am told that, actually, the EU restrictions on planting do not apply to the UK. I have to say that, like him, I was on the leave side and normally I would not pass up the opportunity to blame the EU for things, but, in the spirit of all being nice to one another in future, I feel I should point out that those restrictions do not apply here.

Finally, a number of hon. Members mentioned the issue with British wine, including my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann). The practice of introducing vines dates back to Roman times—right back to the beginning—but, as well as a provision in EU law for British wine to be recognised with imported grapes, there are also horizontal regulations in UK law that require it to be clearly labelled for what it is and for the ingredients to be labelled. I am however conscious that there has been increasing conflict and pressure given the advent of English wine and Welsh wine and, as we leave the EU, there may be opportunities to introduce clarity there.

We have had a fantastic debate in which we have covered many different issues. I am out of time, but I hope that I picked up many of the issues raised by hon. Members.

5.50 pm

Neil Parish: I thank all hon. Members, the shadow Minister and the Minister for their contributions. This is a very good news story. We have some of the best sparkling wines in the world and we can produce good white and red wine. Like I said at the beginning, I look forward to us, in a few years’ time, producing more than France. Hon. Members and the Government can help by making sure that our wines are in our embassies and here in the House of Commons and promoting them wherever possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the English wine industry.

5.51 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Soil Health

1.30 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the First Report of the Environmental Audit Committee, Soil Health, HC 180, and the Government response, HC 650.

I begin by thanking my Committee colleagues for their work and all the other hon. Members across the House who have a long-standing, informed interest in protecting the environment. One of the first findings of our report is that soil is a Cinderella environmental issue. I warmly welcome the Minister to her post—I know we will have a good discussion today—and my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who is the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson on this issue. I am grateful to Mr Speaker and to the House for this first ever debate, which is on the Environmental Audit Committee’s report into soil health.

I begin by thanking my Committee colleagues for their work and all the other hon. Members across the House who have a long-standing, informed interest in protecting the environment. One of the first findings of our report is that soil is a Cinderella environmental issue. It is an earthy subject; it is not clear like water, and it receives a lot less attention than air pollution, water quality and climate change. Yet whether we realise it or not, society relies on healthy soil for the food that we eat, for flood prevention and for storing carbon. The UK’s soils are only about 10,000 years old, which is one of the fascinating facts we learnt as we went through our inquiry. Soil supports 95% of the world’s food production—the other 5% is probably fish and perhaps stuff from trees, although trees grow in soil as well—so if soils start going down, human life will follow soon after.

The Government say they want our soil to be sustainably managed by 2030, but we found no evidence that they are putting in place the policies to make that happen. Although healthy soil is a vital tool in the fight against climate change, degraded soils harm the environment and can even contribute to climate change by emitting carbon into the atmosphere, so it is vital that robust mechanisms are put in place to promote soil health and reverse soil degradation. We welcome the Government’s aspiration for UK soils to be managed sustainably, but we need ambitious targets, effective policy and strong enforcement mechanisms to make sure that happens, and we did not see that action.

Let me turn first to the vexatious issue of contaminated land. This is absolutely vital if we are to have a resource-efficient country that uses everything well. That includes brownfield land, rather than taking more land from our beloved greenbelt, which, as we all know as constituency MPs, is a deeply controversial issue.

A key area of concern was the fact that 300,000 hectares of UK soil are contaminated with toxins, including lead, nickel, tar, asbestos and radioactive substances. Those contaminated sites can be a public health risk and can even pollute our water supplies. The contamination is the result of the UK’s proud industrial heritage in areas such as mine and that of the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk). That is not a problem in areas with very high land values, where sites are mostly dealt with through the planning system, so that developers can see what the cost of remediating and cleaning the soil—washing it, which is what actually happens—will be, and they are happy to do that. That happened, for example, at London’s Olympic park: the soil was actually lifted up and washed before the development began. I am sure we are exporting that amazing technology all round the world.

In areas where land values are low, where the local authority owns the land or where rogue developers have failed to clean up before construction, local councils have a statutory duty under part 2A of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 to clean up contaminated land. However, the Government have withdrawn capital grant funding, which enables councils to do that.

Let me give an example from Wakefield of a housing estate in Ossett. It was built in the 1970s on the site of an old paintworks, where environmental regulations were much less stringent than they are today. In 2012, the council discovered that people’s back gardens were contaminated with asbestos, lead, arsenic and a derivative of coal tar, which can cause cancer. Cleaning up that toxic legacy would have cost residents £20,000 to £30,000 each, leaving their homes blighted and unsellable. Thankfully, Wakefield Council secured more than £300,000 from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in contaminated land grants to clean up the toxic mess.

However, our inquiry heard that the cut to the capital grant has severely undermined local councils’ ability to tackle the problem. It means that sites such as Sand Hill Park in Gunnislake in Cornwall, Upton Court Park in Slough and McCormack Avenue in St Helens will be left untreated. Many councils simply do not have the resources to investigate contaminated sites, and we heard that councils would be reluctant to investigate a site rightly—knowing that they could not secure funding for remediation.

There is a real danger that contaminated sites are being left unidentified, with potential harm to public health. Ministers have been clear that relying on the planning regime alone does not solve the contaminated land problem and could exacerbate regional inequalities. There is a risk of no remediation being done, and in some cases the houses were built in Victorian times, so there is no developer to pursue. The Government have not produced an impact assessment that we have seen—I am happy if the Minister wants to correct me—on the cessation of the capital grant scheme, but it is wrong to state, as Ministers have, that contamination can be addressed through the revenue support grant. Correspondence published by my Committee from December 2013 shows the then DEFRA Minister, Lord de Mauley, saying that the Government never intended the revenue support grant to take the place of capital grant funding.

The Government have cut £17 million of funding since 2009-10, leaving just half a million pounds, with the funding essentially being phased out in 2016-17.
Capital support grants, not revenue support grants, have financed 80% of the cost of cleaning up contaminated sites. Fewer than 2% of cases have been remediated through other public funding, suggesting that the revenue support grant has rarely been used to meet councils’ statutory responsibilities under part 2A.

Revenue support grant—the clue is in the name, is it not? It is there to help councils with their revenue needs, not these sorts of big capital needs. Some councils facing the biggest problems with contaminated sites are coping with the most severe budget cuts. Wakefield Council is cutting £27 million of spending this year. We believe it is essential that DEFRA provides a dedicated funding stream to decontaminate sites, to use brownfield properly and to have a resource-efficient approach to the planning system. It should be set at the level of the previous scheme—around £19.5 million in today’s prices.

I was concerned to learn that since the publication of our report both DEFRA and the Department for Communities and Local Government have proposed amendments to planning regulations in the Neighbourhood Planning Bill that will curtail the right of local planning authorities to attach pre-commencement planning conditions to brownfield development approvals. The requirement for these conditions to be agreed with developers in advance or be subject to appeal will prevent local authorities from ensuring that site investigation, risk assessment and clean-up works take place before development begins. Furthermore, the CL:AIRE national quality mark scheme, which aims to speed up approval for development on brownfield sites, risks negating or potentially replacing the independent, rigorous and accountable role of the local authority’s contaminated land officer. It is wrong for DEFRA to be relying on local authorities to remediate contaminated land while cutting their funding and introducing new legislative measures that reduce their ability to act effectively.

Let me turn to soil degradation, peat lands and climate change. I was unaware before this inquiry that soil is a massive natural carbon capture and storage system. We hear a lot about CCS, but we do not actually understand that the soil around us is capturing and storing carbon all the time. It stores three times as much carbon as the atmosphere, and we want it to stay there. The UK’s arable soils have seen a widespread and ongoing decline in peat soil carbon levels since the ’70s. Soil degradation increases carbon emissions and contributes to climate change. Each tonne of carbon retained in soil helps us to meet our carbon budgets and slows climate change.

At the Paris conference on climate change last year, the Government pledged to increase soil carbon levels by 0.4% a year. That is a great pledge, and we welcome the Government’s commitment to publish their report on the carbon and greenhouse gas balance of low-lying peat lands in England and Wales before the end of the year. That research will fill an important knowledge gap, and the Government should use the report to accelerate and improve their peat land restoration programme.

The upcoming 25-year environment plan—we are keen to hear the latest timings for that from the Minister—should set out measurable and time-bound actions that will halt, then reverse, peat land degradation while minimising the impact on farmers. DEFRA’s single departmental plan contains £100 million for the natural environment. Will the Minister tell us how much of that money will be spent on improving soil health? I am concerned that a majority of the projects are based in upland peat land areas, whereas our report highlighted that the problem is in the lowland peat areas. They are the emissions hotspots, and that is where the Government should target their efforts.

I mentioned the need for a proper soil monitoring system. Again, because soil is earthy and dark, we do not tend to see it as something that is important to us as an ecosystem. DEFRA’s ad hoc approach to soil health surveys is inadequate. We would like the Government to introduce a rolling national monitoring scheme, very similar to the one in Wales that we heard about, to ensure that we get a rich picture of our nation’s soils. Data collection is a cornerstone of effective policy, because what gets measured gets done. Without a national soil monitoring scheme, we do not know whether our soils are getting healthier or sicker. Ad hoc studies are just not enough; one survey in eight years is not enough.

A proposal to undertake a repeat of the soil sampling carried out in 2007, which would cost just £156,000 a year, has been submitted to DEFRA since the release of our report. Is the Minister aware of that and does she have any comments about that proposal? Compared with the costs of monitoring air and water quality, this is very small beer, but it is a crucial platform for knowledge building. Soils receive nowhere near equal status with water, biodiversity and air.

The Government have suggested that we could use farmers’ own soil analysis to monitor soil health. That is fine. That approach may provide useful additional data, but it is not a solution because it would be an unrepresentative sample. I know the Minister has a degree in these—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Therese Coffey): In chemistry.

Mary Creagh: Yes, the Minister has a degree in chemistry, so she will know about the importance of representative sampling. Such an analysis would only deal with agricultural soil, but would neglect conservation land, urban and coastal land, forests and most peat lands.

Let me turn to the cross-compliance regime. The Government’s reliance on cross-compliance rules with farm payments to regulate agricultural soil health is not sufficient to meet their ambition to manage our soil sustainably by 2050. The regime is too weak. The rules are too loosely enforced and they rely only on preventing further damage to soil, rather than on promoting activity to encourage the restoration and improvement of our soils.
Soil Health

17 NOVEMBER 2016

Crucial elements of soil health, such as soil structure and biology, are not assessed at all in the cross-compliance regime, and there is a minimal inspection regime. Two figures really illustrate the changes in the past couple of years. In 2014 there were 478 discovered breaches of the cross-compliance soil regime, but in 2015, under the new common agricultural policy rules, there were just two discovered breaches of the new conditions, both on the same farm. I am pretty certain that the only reason those breaches were discovered was because there was soil run-off, which probably went into a watercourse. It was not Government inspectors, but the Environment Agency, that saw a polluting incident in a river, allowing the breach to be discovered. In theory, an outcome-based approach is fine, but we need adequate inspection and monitoring. Rules with greater scope, force and ambition are required to meet the Government’s goal to manage soil sustainably by 2030.

I turn briefly to subsidies for maize production and anaerobic digestion. We heard that maize production, when managed incorrectly, also damages soil. This is not just a question for fans of “The Archers”, in which Adam is trying to restore the soil structure in the face of opposition from evil Rob Titchener, who is evil not just because of what he did to Helen, but because of his approach to soil monitoring and restoration. We send Adam every good wish in his low-till approach to improving the land.

Maize production can increase flood risk and contribute to soil erosion. My Committee heard evidence that up to three quarters of a field could be sealed to—or become impervious to—rainfall in maize stubble fields over the winter, which results in the soil run-off that, as I said earlier, damages rivers. There is a very simple method to avoid that, which is roughly ploughing back in the maize stubble. If the Government could think of ways to incentivise farmers to do that, we would be only too happy to hear about them. We need effective regulation of high-risk practices.

Maize produced for anaerobic digestion receives a double subsidy: first through the CAP and then from the UK’s own renewable energy incentives. That is counterproductive and has contributed to an increase in the land used for maize production. The Government’s plan to restrict the subsidy for energy generated using crop-based feedstock is a move in the right direction, but it fails to prevent maize from being grown on the land used for maize production. The Government’s counterproductive and has contributed to an increase in double subsidy: first through the CAP and then from the subsidy for energy generated using the land used for maize production. The Environment Agency researches trends in European member states, including the UK, working towards the 0.4% target to manage remedial work is underway on contaminated sites. It is important that we are able to meet our 0.4% target to improve soil carbon capture, as we have agreed to do in the Paris agreement. As we leave the EU, it is vital that the Government maintain that target and ensure that UK agencies take over the European Environment Agency’s vital work in this area.

Other Members wish to speak, so I will conclude by saying that soil is crucial to life on Earth. Neglecting soil health will damage our food security, increase climate change and damage public health. DEFRA’s upcoming 25-year environment plan gives us a unique opportunity to place soil protection at the heart of our environmental policy. We must stop seeing soil just as a growth medium and treat it as a precious, fragile ecosystem in its own right—it is the Cinderella of all ecosystems.

We need a joined-up soil policy between DEFRA and the Department for Communities and Local Government in relation to planning. We are pleased that the Government have acknowledged those issues, but now we await action. We want to see specific, measurable and time-limited action to protect our soil. I commend our report to the House, and I look forward to the debate and to the Minister’s response.

1.50 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I, too, am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I am also delighted to follow my Committee colleague, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), who so ably chaired our inquiry on soil. I was one of the people who persuaded her to hold the inquiry. To many people it might seem a rather odd subject to consider, but I hope that we are demonstrating that we neglect soil at our peril. Soil may not be on your top-10 list of important issues, Mr Bone, but I hope you might change your mind after hearing what we have to say this afternoon and agree that we should all give soil a much higher profile.

The hon. Lady talked about soil and soil contamination, but I will talk about soil in the wider landscape. I hope that some of the ideas in our report will gradually filter into policy, and I am confident that the Minister is listening to some of those views. I am a gardener, I grow fruits and vegetables at home, I was brought up on a mixed farm—such farms treat soil the best—and I have reported on such subjects for many years as a journalist, so I am pleased to be involved in this debate.

Soil is the stuff of life. It is as important as the water we drink and the air we breathe—they are all inextricably linked. Without healthy soils, we cannot produce healthy, sustainable food. Soil is also an important sequester of carbon, as we have already heard, and it plays an important role in climate mitigation. Until we produced our report, many people, even on our Committee, were unaware of that. Soil stores three times as much carbon as is held in the atmosphere, with peat being especially significant. Soil has an important water-cleaning function, as it helps to filter and clean the water as it drains through. Soil also holds water and slows the flow, so it also provides flood resilience. We heard all those things in our inquiry.

I am also a member of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which recently reported on flood resilience. Soil was highlighted in that
report. Treating our soil well and increasing the amount of organic matter contained in it will help to hold water and slow the flow into our rivers, which will ultimately help the nation. Taking more care of the land around us would have a cost effect on the economy, because it would save us money if we did not have to react to massive flooding.

I said at the beginning that soil is the stuff of life. Soil is our lifeblood, and it is alive—many people think soil is inert, but it is not. There are more organisms in 1 gram of soil than there are human beings on the planet. Each gram of soil contains: 1 billion bacteria belonging to 10,000 different species; up to 100 invertebrates; and up to 1 km of fungal threads. A square metre of soil can contain between 30 and 300 earthworms.

Mary Creagh: The hon. Lady is showing what a brilliant member of the Environmental Audit Committee she has been. I slightly regret that we did not call her as a witness, instead of just as a member of the Committee, because I am learning new things, particularly about fungal threads and water filtration. This is a subject to which Parliament must return.

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Lady so much for that intervention. I have talked to many organisations. I literally love soil. It is a fantastic subject in which we all need to get more involved. Darwin described earthworms as nature’s little ploughs. We would not survive without earthworms, because they create the passageways that aerate the soil and allow it to breathe, and be healthy, and that allow all the other creatures to go to and fro doing their jobs.

All those creatures are working in the topsoil, directly influencing the food we grow—there is a direct link—yet we understand only 1% of those organisms, which is unbelievable. It is an untapped area. People are getting into it, but it is still so unknown. The hon. Lady mentioned fungi. Trees could not properly uptake nutrients or water without the fungi in the soil, and we would not survive without the trees, because they have such an effect on the recycling of the air and all the gases, which is even more reason to look after our soil. That brings me neatly to something I must mention—ancient trees. I am chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on ancient woodland and veteran trees. Ancient woodland is our most biodiverse habitat, but only 2% remains. Ancient woodlands are like our rain forests, and they are a wonderful microcosm of biodiversity, but with the trees we have to include the soil underneath. We should treat it all as one holistic whole.

The soil and those trees should be protected as we protect our national monuments. They are that significant. I am sure that the Minister is listening, and her predecessor was terribly interested in ancient trees. All the diverse little connections are all the more reason to protect our soil.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I reassure my hon. Friend that I am listening. She came to meet me not long ago for a full half-hour discussion on soil health.

Rebecca Pow: I am coming to that. There is a major section in my speech about our meeting, but I thank the Minister for drawing attention to it.

It is a sad scenario that brings us here today and that caused us to hold our inquiry. Soil is a finite and deteriorating resource. Soil takes a very long time to develop, as we have heard—1 cm of topsoil can take 1,000 years to form, but can be lost in a moment. Topsoil can be washed away into our waterways if the incorrect crops are grown and it is left open to water, and the carbon in the soil can evaporate into the atmosphere.

According to a UK Government report, the UK is losing 2.2 million tonnes of crucial topsoil each year, which costs the economy some £1.2 billion. That is why we must seriously consider the issue. As we have heard, some calculations say that we have only 100 harvests left in certain arable areas of the south-east of England before we cannot grow anything in the soil. We have to do something to reverse that decline.

I do not want to be completely negative. I applaud the Government in some respects, and I particularly welcome their progress on preventing the degradation of the peatlands—we have already heard about that, so I will not talk about it in great detail. I also applaud the Government on their ambition to manage soil sustainably by 2030. That was highlighted in the 2011 natural environment White Paper, but I urge the Minister to speed up the process. The situation is so serious that we need to address it now, rather than thinking, “2030 is a long time way. Let’s not worry about it now.”

As we have heard, the Government signed an agreement at COP 21 to increase soil carbon by 0.4% a year. I am pleased that that is on the agenda, which I applaud. That is great, but please can we hear from the Minister about how we are pushing it forward? It is serious.

It is not all about carbon and climate change; it is really about changing how we think about soil, which is partly what this debate is about. This is the first ever UK debate on soil, and I hope that it will influence how we think about it. Let us start by treating soil as an ecosystem, not as a medium for growing stuff, because we have used and abused it—not everyone has, but it has often been treated that way—and the ethos of EU policies has been about preventing damage rather than restoring and improving the soil. Brexit provides us with an excellent opportunity to change how we approach the issue and think about how to encourage those who work the land to help restore and improve it. The Soil Association calls for organic matter to be increased on arable land by 20% in 20 years. That is quite a challenge, but we should perhaps consider it.

I come now to the issue of monitoring schemes. One of our report’s main findings was that we needed a decent monitoring scheme. After all, if we do not know what is in the soil, how can we tell people what they ought to do about it? Lord Krebs led the way on climate change by means of a proper monitoring scheme, which is what triggered all the work that we have been able to do on climate change. I was delighted to discuss a soil monitoring scheme with our previous Environment Minister, who was keen on trying to get the idea into the 25-year plan. Again, I applaud the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for doing so.

I am also delighted that our new Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal, who has taken over the mantle, has shown so much interest in the subject that she has already met me for half an hour to discuss it, bringing with her lots more of the brains on her team. I was pleased—it was early in her tenure as
the new Environment Minister—and I am absolutely sure that she was listening. I would like to hear a little about where those ideas might have gone.

I remind everybody that a royal commission on environmental pollution 20 years ago recommended a monitoring scheme, so we have not come very far since then. In fairness, there is an EU soil monitoring programme, but it is done only once every eight or 10 years, and it is quite cursory. A lot of farmers will tell you that they monitor the soil, but they are monitoring mainly the chemicals in the soil—NPK, or nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium—and that needs to be broadened.

We have so much environmental expertise in this country, as we heard at our inquiry. We have got the brains, and much of the work is already being done. The Centre for Ecology and Hydrology has a scheme that it reckons it could roll out tomorrow, with not too much funding, so that we could monitor our soil as an ecosystem and look not only at the chemical content but the organic and carbon content, and all the organisms—thrips, nematodes, earthworms and all the things that I learned about at university years and years ago—that are mentioned much less than they ought to be. We could make a difference quickly.

I do not think that there should be a blame game against farmers. Many of the ways that farmers have been forced to farm have been directed by our policies of low-cost food. That is why many farmers have gone down the route of monoculture and least-cost production, and our European Community policies have encouraged that. In fairness, lots of farmers are already doing exceptionally good work.

One farmer in my constituency, Tom Morris, is a great friend. He is an organic dairy farmer who has always farmed for the soil. At the Dairy UK breakfast this week, I met a fascinating chap called Lyndon Edwards, who is also an organic farmer, from Severndale farm in Chepstow. He goes around giving workshops showcasing his good practice to other farmers, and has just been to my constituency. We should encourage a lot more of that; I think that people would be receptive to it. One suggestion is that perhaps the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, the levy board, might be able to put some emphasis on research into soil health, and build up our policy framework.

More green cover and grass—I am a great advocate of grass—in growing rotations, more deep-rooted crops and many other simple things can be done to address the situation. We should be getting on with it. I reiterate the calls for more joined-up thinking across Departments, particularly between DEFRA and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, so that when we form our policies on crops grown for energy production, we choose crops that will not destroy the environment. Maize needs serious consideration. We could make a difference quickly.

There is a massive link with well-being and the health of our soil, which links the issue to the Department of Health as well. It is important to have healthy soil and a healthy ecosystem, which basically means a healthy us. That is a no-brainer. I am heartened by the groundswell of interest in the issue. It is not just our Committee here in London; I meet many people who talk about soil, including farmers. I held an environment forum in Taunton last week on flood resilience, but the subject of soil and how better to look after it to control flooding kept coming up.

Soil should not be a Cinderella story. I will end with a final thought that might concentrate our minds. Research in the US has just discovered the first potential in 10 years for a new antibiotic. Guess where? In the soil. That should give us all plenty of food for thought. I know that the Minister, with her scientific mind, will realise how important it is. We neglect soil at our peril.

2.6 pm

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. It is also a delight to follow the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who made an excellent speech. She certainly educated me on a range of issues. I welcome the Environmental Audit Committee’s recent report on soil health across the UK, and I commend the work by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), who secured this important debate.

DEFRA funding for contaminated land has been vital for towns such as Rochdale. The removal of such funding seriously impairs my local council’s ability to tackle this environmental problem. My community’s rich industrial history has had a lasting legacy, not all of which has been positive. The former Turner Brothers Asbestos site in Spodden valley spans 30 hectares. It was the world’s largest asbestos textile factory until it ceased production in the 1990s. Asbestos scourged the lives of many of the men and women who worked in the textile factory. My predecessor, Cyril Smith, who owned shares in the business, did much to protect and promote the industry even when he would have known that it was killing his constituents.

Today, Spodden valley lies barren, depriving the people of Rochdale space for recreation, services or even homes. My ideal is for the site to become an urban park, a green lung in memory of all those killed by asbestos. Whether that is possible, I am unsure; what I do know is that the site is a ticking time bomb. There are strong suggestions that asbestos was tipped on the site and still sits there in the soil. We know for a fact that many of the derelict buildings on the site contain asbestos.

Therefore, for the people of Rochdale, it is imperative that the Government take soil protection seriously and commit to properly funding the investigation and clean-up of contaminated land. The Environment Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and Public Health England also need to do more, particularly in relation to Spodden valley. Such challenges are too great for local authorities to face on their own.

In the past, Rochdale has benefited enormously from the contaminated land capital grants scheme for carrying out work required by the part 2A regime of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, which my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield mentioned. Among other sites, four former landfills in Rochdale were inspected using such funding, resulting in three determinations of contaminated land and remediation. Once again, Government funding was vital.

Now Rochdale relies on site owners to undertake voluntary inspections. We are fortunate in the case of Spodden valley that the intrusive site work inspection is being undertaken by the site owners themselves. However, we fear that that may not be the case for future sites in Rochdale, which could be left blighted for the foreseeable future as potential developers see investment as unviable.
The council’s estimated costs for the work on the former Turner Brothers Asbestos site are astronomical. Because of the size, history and potential complexity of the site, further investigations are needed to fill the information gaps. The council will continue to work hard to support the site owner, but we know that it simply could not afford to undertake such a monumental task by itself. Rochdale Council, like many other local authorities throughout the country, believes that councils will struggle to meet their statutory obligations for contaminated land now that funding under part 2A of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 is being phased out. Councils are rightly expected to uphold good environmental standards but will no longer be given adequate financial support by central Government. Such requirements will become burdensome. Intrusive site investigations and comprehensive risk assessments—not to mention clean-up charges—are incredibly costly.

In this matter, as in so many things, the Government are shirking their responsibilities and punishing local authorities by demanding that they do more and more with less and less every year. In Rochdale, an area with high levels of deprivation, cuts to local government have hit hard. Services that local people depend on have been cut to the bone. The local authority simply does not have spare cash lying around. We need central Government support. Throughout the 20th century, factories in Rochdale and throughout the north-west pumped money into the Exchequer, as did their employees. Now that those industries have gone, the Government appear to be turning a blind eye to their environmental legacy and to families who live with threats from land, such as at Spodden valley.

Local authorities are having an incredibly tough time. With their shrinking budgets, it is simply impossible to expect them to pick up the extortionate bill for investigating and cleaning up contaminated land. I therefore urge the Minister to take seriously the recommendations made in the Environmental Audit Committee report.

2.11 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): As ever, Mr Bone, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair. I am pleased that today we have the opportunity to discuss the importance of soil health, which is something of a Cinderella issue in environmental policy, as other hon. Members have said: it has been neglected for too long. I hope that the Environmental Audit Committee’s report and today’s debate will help to lift it from obscurity and give it the attention it deserves.

Some of our most productive agricultural land could become unprofitable within a generation because of soil erosion and loss of organic carbon. Soil degradation in England and Wales costs an estimated £1.2 billion per year in lost productivity, flood damage, reduced water quality and other costs. Our approach to managing our soil has to change to address those risks and as part of our strategy for tackling climate change and flooding. Any Members who visited flood-hit areas in the north of the country over Christmas will have heard from people there about the impact of soil erosion on flooding—I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) will have something to say on that point. It is one important reason why we need to address the quality of soil and to protect our soil.

I commend the Environmental Audit Committee for its excellent report. The passion with which two of its members—my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) and the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow)—have spoken today speaks volumes about how seriously they take the issue. I am now a member of the Committee; I am sorry that I was not a member when it conducted the inquiry. It is niche, perhaps, but it does really important work on fascinating topics. As a former chair of the all-party group on agroecology and a current vice-chair of the all-party group on agriculture and food for development, I am particularly interested in this topic. I commend the agroecology group’s soil inquiry, which slightly preceded the work of the Environmental Audit Committee and which came to very similar conclusions.

It has to be said that the Government’s response to the Committee’s recommendations has been pretty weak. As well as taking them to task for that today, I know Members of both Houses will be keen to keep up the pressure on the Government after the debate. I will focus my comments on three areas: how we can better protect our best agricultural soils through the planning system and planning policy; contaminated land, which other Members have already addressed; and the need for a proper plan of action to meet the Government’s laudable aim of ensuring that all soils are sustainably managed by 2030.

First, on planning, there has been a steady loss of our most fertile soils to development. The issue first came to my attention with the proposals to build a bus-only junction on prime agricultural land in and on the edges of my constituency. The site, known as the Blue Finger, consists of highly fertile food-growing soil, which is predominantly grade 1, although some peripheral areas are grade 2 and 3. Those three grades are collectively known as best and most versatile—BMV—soil. At the moment, the site is home to exemplary community food-growing projects, such as “Feed Bristol”, and to allotments. Unfortunately, the construction work is now going ahead, but I campaigned against it with my community because my view is that BMV land ought to be used for growing food, not concreted over.

The protection given to BMV land has been slowly weakened, most recently as a result of changes to the national planning policy framework in March 2012. Although planning practice guidance supports space for growing food, the national planning policy framework does not specifically include local food growing, which tends to mean that local plans do not include it either. When I raised that issue in a Westminster Hall debate that I secured in March last year, the then Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), assured me that she would look at changes to planning regulations to see how we could better protect high-quality food-growing land. I understand that the NPPF is likely to be amended in the next few months; I would be grateful if the Minister spoke to her colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government and tried to persuade them of the need to include protection of our best soil in planning policy. It is too often overlooked.

Secondly, on contaminated land, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) on highlighting how important the issue is to his
constituency. I was genuinely disappointed that the Government’s response to the Committee did not even acknowledge, let alone accept responsibility for, the compelling evidence about the impact of withdrawing the capital grant scheme for carrying out remediation work to contaminated land. That means that local authorities will be less likely to identify contaminated sites so they are not burdened with the costs of remediation, especially since, as the report strongly makes clear, 81% of part 2A remediation has depended on funding from the capital grant scheme, and less than 2% is remediated through other public funding. It is simply not credible for the Government to claim that support for part 2A work “remains in the form of the Revenue Support Grant”, when in reality that grant has rarely been made available for such work.

In the Westminster Hall debate on driven grouse shooting a couple of weeks ago, I raised the fact that grouse moors are the only places in England with Natural England’s permission to burn blanket bog on special areas of conservation, even though they receive EU environmental stewardship money for restoring those important sites. Sadly, in responding to that debate, the Minister did not provide much reassurance, other than to unnecessarily clarify that the payments are not paid to support shooting activities, which was not the point I was making, and to say that the Government “will continue to work with moor owners and stakeholders to further improve management practices and peat condition.”—[Official Report, 31 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 276WH.]

I hope that we see much tougher action by the Government to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions targeted at lowland peat areas will be included in the 25-year plans?

After visiting Avalon marshes in Somerset fairly recently, I tabled some written questions to the Department about peat works in the UK and their licences. My first question was to ask “how many peat works the Government has bought out in each of the last five years; and how much the Government spent on buying out peat works in each of the last five years.”

The Minister’s response was that one licence had been bought out, which rather surprised me because, when he gave evidence to the Select Committee, the former Environment Minister, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), said:

“We have spent considerable sums of money buying out peat works”,

which I thought implied that there might have been more than one.

As understand it, there are currently 29 valid peat extraction licences, all of which expire by 2042, which clearly is some way off in the distance. Are there any plans to try to buy out any more of the licences so that we can protect the peatland in the intervening years?

**Rebecca Pow:** I wanted to ask not about licensing but about the Avalon marshes. They are managed by the Somerset Wildlife Trust, which does some excellent work on peatland restoration. Will the hon. Lady comment on how valuable that is and how we ought to showcase more of it? As a vice-president of the Somerset Wildlife Trust, I really feel it deserves some credit.

**Kerry McCarthy:** I am happy to join the hon. Lady in congratulating the trust on that work. I visited the marshes with the Heritage Lottery Fund, which is working to discover what has been preserved by the peat going back many centuries. That aspect of my trip was fascinating, as was looking at the biodiversity associated with peatland. As I was travelling there, I spotted peat works in the area, which led me to ask how much peat is still being extracted. Several years ago, I was visited by Natural England’s permission to burn blanket bog on special areas of conservation, even though they receive EU environmental stewardship money for restoring those important sites. Sadly, in responding to that debate, the Minister did not provide much reassurance, other than to unnecessarily clarify that the payments are not paid to support shooting activities, which was not the point I was making, and to say that the Government “will continue to work with moor owners and stakeholders to further improve management practices and peat condition.”—[Official Report, 31 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 276WH.]

I hope that we see much tougher action by the Government to tackle land use practices that degrade peat.

The Government’s response was also notably weak on action to address loss of carbon from lowland, drained peat, which, as the Soil Association says, is equivalent to the emissions from all buses in the UK. I hope the Minister will reassure us that she considers lowland peat used for agriculture to be as much of a priority as upland peat. Will she ensure that measures to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions targeted at lowland peat areas will be included in the 25-year plans?

**Kerry McCarthy:** I agreed. Action is being taken, but although I could not get a firm answer from the Department, which said that data on peat extraction licences are not held centrally, Natural England estimates that there are currently 29 valid peat extraction licences. Five of those licences will expire before 2020; six more will expire by 2030; another four will expire by 2040; and the remaining 14 will expire in 2042. That is quite a lot of peat extraction between now and 2040. I obviously do not have the data on what areas of land are covered; it is all a little vague, which is why I would like the
Minister to look into it. The way to tackle the issue is to try to buy out the licences so that the commercial activities do not go ahead. It should be on the record that I would like to see that done.

On the broader issue of carbon in the soil, there is already evidence out there. As Peter Melchett from the Soil Association said to the Select Committee: “how you get carbon back into the soil is fairly settled science”. We need a commitment that shows that the Government have fully embraced the need to act on that science. It is welcome that at an event last month the Secretary of State spoke of her own personal commitment to implementing the global “4 per 1000” soil carbon initiative. It is also welcome that the Government have confirmed that measures to increase soil organic matter will be reflected in the 25-year environment plan, but I hope there will be more than just a token reference to soil, and that the plan will set out the “specific, measurable and time-limited actions” to increase soil carbon levels by 0.4% per year that the Select Committee recommended.

The protection of agricultural soils should also, of course, be in the other 25-year plan—the food and farming plan. In fact, this illustrates the absurdity of the Government’s decision to have two completely separate plans. It is not possible to separate farming from the natural environment on which it depends and the rural communities that sustain it. It is unwise to look at food and farming purely from an economic, money-making viewpoint and nothing more, particularly if the focus in the food and farming plan on growing more, buying more and selling more British food ends up promoting further intensification, which would lead to more pressure on soils, not to mention more pressure on water and biodiversity, and increased greenhouse gas emissions. We will all end up paying the costs. The Minister will probably say that efforts are being made to cross-reference the two 25-year plans, but I stick by my original views that the issues ought to be incorporated into one report.

The Committee on Climate Change has said that, for the UK to meet the targets in the Climate Change Act 2008, a 15% reduction in agricultural emissions is needed by 2032. That will be achieved in part by action to prevent the degradation of our carbon-rich soils, about which we have already heard from other Members. Will the Minister say whether emissions from agriculture will be included in the Government’s emissions reduction plans? Will the food and farming plan set out how agriculture will deliver its sectoral share of responsibility for reducing carbon emissions?

Other Members have touched on reform to the common agricultural policy. I hope we will also hear today about the Government’s priorities for our agricultural policy framework once we leave the EU, to ensure that in future farm payments are better invested in public goods, from soil health to wildlife and water quality. In drawing up their plans, I hope the Government look to some of the great examples of best practice and forward thinking by UK farmers and growers on restoring our soils, including agroecological approaches.

As we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield, there is currently quite a debate going on in “The Archers”. People will know of Adam’s struggles in trying to improve the long-term fertility of his soil, with his plans looking increasingly likely to be overturned by his land managers, on the advice of the evil Rob Titchener, who has been mentioned already. The previous Environment Minister, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border, told the Select Committee that the primary incentive for farmers to protect their soils is that it is good for their farm business, as healthy soils are the bedrock of future production—indeed, we heard from the hon. Member for Taunton Deane that we will reach a point where there will be no more harvests, at least in some parts of the country, if we do not protect soil.

As the report says, the benefits of soil health are not always felt by those maintaining it, and the costs of soil degradation are mostly borne by others, from water companies to those living downstream at greater risk of flooding. Adam’s new farming methods are making Borchester Land uneasy. It has been too easy for Rob to paint Adam’s methods as a bit faddish, hippy-ish and self-indulgent, as opposed to his facing the hard-headed economic realities of farming. I hope that, as well as in the other 25-year plan, the Government really seize the chance in the food and farming plan and say that it is not unfriendly towards business to look at agroecological approaches. We need to be protecting soil as one of our most precious resources. It is that that will protect the future productivity of farming, as well as protecting our countryside.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Before I call Mike Weir to speak for the Scottish National party, I am not sure: are we sub judice on some of the events in Borchester, or has that case passed?

Kerry McCarthy: Events involving the evil Rob Titchener?

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Yes.

Kerry McCarthy: I think Helen was acquitted at the trial, so his evilness is in no doubt and we can put it on the record.

2.29 pm

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): I am very happy to appear under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Bone, and to learn so much about what is happening in “The Archers”.

I should perhaps start by declaring an interest, because, like the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), I am a keen gardener. I am an organic gardener and from that I understand the necessity for healthy soil; it is only with a healthy soil that it is possible to have healthy plants, particularly fruit and vegetables. However, healthy soil is not only the growing medium, as she rightly said, but extends the biodiversity and the species in a garden. I have many species of birds in my garden. In fact, at times I think that the entire species of Spuggies and Brechin lives in my garden, because there are so many of them there; for the non-Scots, that is house sparrows.

It is important that we get this right, because if we do not have healthy soil there will be an impact on food production and on species. Later, I will say something about the carbon in the soil.
In introducing the very good report by the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) made the valuable point that the report is not just about soil as such, as a growing medium, but about soil that has been contaminated as a result of things that have happened in the past, which was a point made very powerfully by the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) in referring to the Turner Brothers factory. However, it is not just in post-industrial landscapes that such contamination is a problem. Even in my area, there are old buildings that have had industrial or farming uses and that are full of asbestos and various other contaminants.

There are also problems with former Ministry of Defence facilities, because in many periods, specifically in the immediate post-war period, old aircraft were dismantled and waste was put into pits and similar things. For example, Dalgety Bay in Fife has had an ongoing and serious problem with radioactivity from some of the machinery that was dumped just off the coast. Also, much machinery was buried on old military bases throughout the country.

One of the problems is a lack of record-keeping. It is sometimes very difficult to know what contaminants are actually on these sites, which makes it extremely difficult to clean them up for agricultural or development purposes. There is no easy answer to that problem, and I appreciate that it is not the current Government’s fault that in the 1940s and early 1950s records were not necessarily kept, or that records from that time have since been lost. Also, sometimes the difficulties in this regard were not fully appreciated. Nevertheless, we have to deal with that situation now, because soil is so important; indeed, it is increasingly important to us.

The hon. Member for Taunton Deane made a very powerful speech about the necessity for good soil. I specifically liked one point she made, namely, that soil is not an innate substance. I do not know if she has read the excellent book, “The Running Hare: The secret life of farmland”, which I understand recently topped the bestselling list. It is a fascinating book about someone who is trying to regenerate a piece of farmland—a couple of acres—with natural resources, in order to bring back hares, which have disappeared from many parts of modern farmland.

One of the things that the author does first is to dig a square metre in a field to discover how many earthworms are within it and to compare the number with that of neighbour farmland. Of course, because the land has been chemically farmed, there are very few earthworms. One of the things that happens in the book is that earthworms come back. In turn, that leads to hares coming back; without giving away too much of the plot, they do come back. However, other animals are also brought in, including smaller animals and birds, and birds of prey, and the farmland is regenerated as a result. Throughout the book, the author compares his farmland to the neighbouring farmland, which he refers to, perhaps unkindly, as the land of “the Chemical Brothers”, who are not doing what he does. The book is interesting in showing how relatively simple changes can bring about a substantial difference to farmland.

Rebecca Pow: I am so pleased that the hon. Gentleman is highlighting this point. I have not read that book, but I know about it and will now read it. It makes the case for the call for the monitoring scheme to include much more than just chemicals; we should even count the earthworms in a quadrat of soil. He is making a very powerful point.

Mike Weir: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. It is a very good point and what she has suggested should be done.

Mary Creagh: I wanted to ask the hon. Gentleman about hares, which are one of our most iconic native species. I have just seen that there is a close season on hunting hares in Scotland, but I am not aware that we have a close season for hares in England and Wales. That is problematic, because we had a target to restore the hare population to 1990 levels, and that target has consistently been missed. So will he join me in calling on the Minister to consider the need for a close season on hares in England and Wales?

Mike Weir: The hon. Lady has made her point. I think the Minister might object to a Scottish MP calling for a close season on hares in England when we have one in Scotland already. Nevertheless, I am sure the Minister has heard her point.

Much of this issue in Scotland is a devolved matter, but, as has been mentioned, the UK Government have signed up to a scheme, COP 21, to increase soil carbon levels by 0.4% per year. Obviously, there will have to be work with the devolved Administrations to achieve that, since all of them have their own separate schemes.

In Scotland, we recognise that soil is a valuable but vulnerable national asset that requires sustainable and effective management. Although we have talked a lot today about farming, this issues goes much further. In Scotland, as well as farming and food production we have forestry and tourism, which are important and rely on a good natural environment, including a good soil structure. So, throughout the economy, soil is important and we should not just look at it as a purely farming matter; we must expand the areas that we are considering.

I think that it was the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) who mentioned flooding, saying how soil management also plays an important role in sustainable flood management. Within the common agricultural policy schemes that are currently operating, at least in Scotland, there is an attempt to persuade farmers to take flooding into account in their farming methods, particularly by leaving flood plains in the areas immediately next to rivers and by not building on those flood plains. Often, when flood plains are built on, there is a problem as floodwater is pushed further down the river. In my area, we have probably expended millions of pounds on flood defences to deal with that problem, because when there are changes in farming practices, sometimes the floodwater is pushed further down the river, causing problems that then have to be dealt with by other methods.

Mention was also made of peatlands. Peatlands constitute a third of Scotland’s soil and they provide many economic, environmental and cultural ecosystems, as well as being important habitats for our wildlife. As far as carbon is concerned, it has been estimated that in Scotland’s peatlands the soil contains 3,000 megatonnes of carbon, which is equivalent to nearly 200 times the net annual
greenhouse gas emissions. That shows the importance of soil for climate change and, in particular, the importance of peatlands.

The Scottish Government are seeking to maintain soil carbon in place, but we have to bear it in mind that there is always a conflict about some of these things. For example, renewable energy infrastructure—wind farms, for instance—is often built in areas that are less accessible, and often that is peatland or similar land. There is an offset if we have these renewable energies and clearly we are saving carbon, but at the same time there is a cost to them and we should not lose sight of that cost. The Committee’s report says:

“Current policy aims to minimise losses while facilitating development which delivers economic growth that does not entail disproportionate carbon costs.”

I reiterate that there is a cost and we must find ways of offsetting it.

Also, earlier I made the point about species. One of the things that is being done to support peatland restoration is to provide funding through the rural priorities scheme of the Scottish Rural Development Programme. Some landowners, such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, have carried out restoration on their land, which, in the case of the RSPB, is mostly to do with wildlife but none the less has an important effect on greenhouse gas emissions and on ensuring that carbon is maintained in the soil. Restoration also has side effects. For example, it leads to other species growing. In many cases there is a regrowth of sphagnum moss and the resumption of carbon sequestration.

To sum up, this issue is not just about farming; there is an economic impact on all our rural areas. One thing that worries me—I am sure the Minister will not say too much about it—is farming payments. In Scotland at least, we have been trying to push much of the farming subsidy towards more environmental means to try to ensure the future. If it should come to pass that we leave the European Union, there will have to be a major realignment of farming payments. I urge the Minister and the devolved Administrations to look at the environmental benefits and how they will be maintained in a post-EU world, should that unfortunate calamity come to pass.

2.41 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Bone. I start by thanking the Environmental Audit Committee for the rigour with which it has conducted its inquiry. It has produced an excellent, evidence-based report. The Government should take heed of its warnings and embrace its solutions. The qualities and properties of our soils are so finely balanced, as we have heard this afternoon. Our understanding of that has led in the past to the degradation of soil and peat bog erosion in the lowlands and the highlands, and it has had a wider impact on biodiversity, natural habitats, and flooding and water management. It now presents issues around public health, climate change and food security. The call for an effective plan with clear targets, which my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) made at the last Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions and again in her speech today, is the issue of today’s debate.

Before I move on, I must mention the fascinating speech of the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). It reminded me of David Bellamy in my youth talking about soil, and the interest he created in me. She was right, as were other speakers, to talk about the enthusiasm with which farmers talk about this agenda. They are changing their practices to see better quality soil.

The Paris agreement has set the pace for the world on how we need to address the matter. The cap on temperature rises—it is frightening to see a 1.5 °C rise in global temperatures—will determine how we farm our land. With a 1 °C rise in temperature, we could see a 30% loss in peat. Without action, we could see half of our peat depleted. Likewise, we are losing 2.2 million tonnes of soil each year in the UK, but it takes 100 years to grow back just 1 cm of top soil. Action is needed now to ensure that we have sustainable soils by 2030. I have heard that with current farming techniques, much of our land has only 30 harvests left due to the depletion in soil quality. That puts our food security back under the spotlight. We have not seen the action that we would expect since the signing by Sir David King at COP 21 of the agreement to move forward on this issue. We have had a wasted year.

I have read the Government’s response to the Environmental Audit Committee’s work, and it is worrying. There is too much dependency on voluntary codes that are not delivering the required change for carbon sequestration back into our soils, particularly in the lowland peatlands. We are told that the answers will be found in plans yet to see the light of day. My concern is that we need a framework now. That will ensure that we restore soil health in a comprehensive, managed way. How will the Government monitor soils comprehensively? What will the drivers be to re-carbonise soils? What year-on-year targets will the Government set to ensure that they fulfil their obligations? Even the Committee on Climate Change is worried about the Government’s dependency on a narrow agenda to reach anywhere near what is needed.

Members have mentioned many good examples of farming practices, including changing crop mixes, planting grasses, using green manures, investing in agro-forestation schemes, moving to organic farming and using winter cover crops to secure the soil. There have been good examples of re-wetting peatland in the lowlands. That is so important in the fens, where peats are rapidly drying. We have to look at the agenda, but we also have to question why any form of burning or draining soils continues. We heard about that in the grouse moor shooting debate a couple of weeks back. Surely it is time for action to be taken.

We also need a proper analysis of the state of our soil. We have heard how Wales has put a progressive, systematic process in place. The Committee’s report has drawn that out as best practice. We would be wise to follow the actions of Labour’s initiative, which uses a tiny proportion of rural payments to undertake the work.

I was struck by what Professor Chris Collins said in the report. He talked about the need to define what we mean by “soil health”. He said:

“There needs to be clear policy direction, evidence based, that defines what soil health is, and critically the measure to be used to evaluate it.”

It is so important that we put those things in place.
The report also draws out the need to link monitoring to other important biodiversity measures, such as fauna, micro-diversity and soil structure. While ad hoc data gathering from farmers’ soil testing regimes could add to data, its methodology is not scientific enough to provide the necessary data, so I hope the Government will look again at that. Accurate auditing leads to effective mitigation planning and interventions. That leads me to ask the Minister, how will her Government implement a programme to see a 0.4% annual increase in soil carbon levels? How will she help farmers to achieve that? How will she assist some farmers to go even further? What interventions will the Government make to ensure that that happens? Specific timelines are needed now, not just warm words.

When will we be able to see the UK peatland strategy? I know that we have seen delay with the 25-year plans that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) says should be co-joined. When will the strategy come to light? What measures will be in the peatland plan in particular to ensure that lowland peat is restored and is performing its vital role in carbon retention?

The report was published before the referendum, so I want to ask the Minister about the steps the Government will take on leaving the EU to assist farmers in making the transition to improved soil management, perhaps by converting to organic farming. Will they have access to the five-year conversion and maintenance payments, in the light of the fact that we could have left the EU by 2019? If there is no certainty over the next couple of years, the Government are unlikely to see many applications for transition. What future support will they provide for those in transition now? What sticks and carrots will they make available to make the necessary changes in the future? Answers are needed, because farmers are making choices for their futures now.

The three good statutory management requirements used for cross-compliance have failed to provide the necessary incentive to drive soil quality improvement. It is clear that the scheme has failed to properly audit farms, and there are loopholes in the system. What will the Minister’s priorities be in replacing that part of the rural development programme? As we have heard, we also need to explore the impact of anaerobic digestion. I will not go further into that debate due to the time, but I want to mention the issue of offsetting floods. Soil has so many important qualities in achieving that, so it is important that we also examine it as part of flood management.

I also want to touch on the issue of contaminated land, not least because my constituency was drawn out in the plan and because the funding is inadequate in the light of the contaminated land capital grants being removed. There are a number of contaminated sites in my constituency. They are some of the biggest development sites in the whole of Europe. We heard from the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) how important that is, and I was enlightened by what the hon. Member for Angus (Mike Weir) said about Ministry of Defence sites, particularly as my local barracks has also been listed for closure and may not be suitable for development. It is so important that we support local authorities in their objectives to ensure that they deal with contamination, and put the proper funding in place.

I have asked a number of questions today but we know how important soil is and how important it is to put funding behind that. Most important of all, we are living through an environmental crisis. Soil is a precious element and therefore it is incumbent on Parliament to make sure that we get the right soil health strategy in place now.

2.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for this debate. Mr Bone, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), the chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, on securing this debate through the Liaison Committee. We have heard some eloquent and passionate speeches, some particularly well informed, such as that from my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebeca Pow). I hope that I will be able to cover most of the questions, if not all of them, during my contribution.

Soil is a finite resource and it must be protected. The Government recognise that good soil health is essential, not least for the range of benefits it provides, including food production, biodiversity, carbon storage and flood protection. The benefits derived from healthy soil are many and they have a very important role to play. It is for those reasons that the protection and sustainable management of our soils is integral to our thinking in the 25-year environment plan and the 25-year food, farming and fisheries plan.

We have already begun to engage with key soil experts to develop best practice for managing and monitoring our soils, and that will increase as part of our engagement for the 25-year environment plan. We hope to publish the framework for that before the end of this year, and the full plan in 2017.

A hare has been set running, and I am pleased to say to the hon. Member for Wakefield that, according to Professor McDonald’s report, the hare population is recovering in England. It is admittedly not at historic levels, but the recovery is nevertheless under way. One of the reasons for not having a close season in England is that breeding happens throughout the year and is highly variable across the country. In the east of England, there tend to be seen as a pest because there are so many. In the west, there are hardly any to be seen. So that is part of the answer.

The hare that is running is that there are only 100 harvests left. I have asked my officials to look at that claim before. The research did not look at how many harvests soil could support. The statement is believed to have come from a PR firm looking at the work from the research group that showed that there are about 100 to 350 years of mineable rock phosphate left. That shows how sometimes a good statistic does not necessarily have all the evidence behind it.

As has been discussed extensively, the Government did recognise in their response to the Committee’s inquiry that the planning process is the main driver for dealing with land contamination issues. I recognise that some lion. Members do not feel that that is enough. I want to point out that local enterprise partnership funding is helping the clean-up of a contaminated tar works on the Tyne and in Merseyside, and that 120 acres of contaminated land is being reclaimed as part of a LEP-funded development. The UK’s risk-based approach ensures that the protection of health and the environment...
is balanced with the need to enable development and we also promote the use for development of brownfield sites over agricultural land. I will follow up with the Department for Communities and Local Government on the points raised by the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy).

We recognise that there will be sites that will not be developed that may still pose some level of risk. In those instances, it is clear that the responsibility is with the local authorities, which identify contaminated land in their areas and ensure that risk to human health and the environment is dealt with. They must also identify who is liable for the cost of clean-up and rigorously pursue those deemed responsible. In response to the point made by the hon. Member for Angus (Mike Weir), if the Ministry of Defence is still in charge of the land to which he referred, I am sure that the Scottish Government, to which of course this issue is devolved, know whom to pursue.

Local authorities have the responsibility of deciding the priority given to contaminated land. I would like to commend Wakefield Council, which has committed £750,000 over five years to the investigation and clean-up of contaminated land. In our reply to the report, we committed to determining whether any local authorities were unable to respond to the two most recent surveys. My officials have found that 14 did not do so and we will be investigating the reasons why. No impact assessment has been undertaken.

The hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) spoke passionately about a particular site. I understand that he met my predecessor to discuss the issue and it was agreed that he would speak to Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs officials again, once a site report was available. That offer still stands, but I do not believe that the Department has been contacted.

On soil carbon and climate change, the Secretary of State reaffirmed this Government’s support for the Paris initiative at a climate friendly landscape meeting hosted by the Prince of Wales’s International Sustainability Unit on 26 October. Of course, we must use methods appropriate to our local environmental conditions. Opportunities are limited for most UK soil types to increase carbon stores, except for peatland, of which the United Kingdom has a high proportion. Our focus is therefore their restoration, both through Government funding such as in the Dark Peak nature improvement area and Humberhead peatlands restoration, and through supporting private sector initiatives, such as the Peatland Code, to provide businesses with tools and opportunities to invest in nature. We are also supporting the horticulture sector to work towards the removal of peat use in horticulture.

On upland peat, we are committed to continuing to work with moor owners and stakeholders to further improve management practices and peat condition. The Blanket Bog restoration strategy uses an outcome-focused approach and is working to ensure that we have site restoration plans on a site-by-site basis. I think we all agree that dry, degraded peat is not in anyone’s interest and that is why we have been working with the International Union for Conservation of Nature to develop a UK peatland strategy. I am pleased to say that that went out for consultation yesterday. We will provide more detail in due course on how we plan to implement that strategy in England; officials are already working on it.

Some £100 million of capital funding is being invested directly in projects to support the natural environment, including the restoration of peatlands. That figure has not been split up and I do not have a figure for soil health—I am not aware that it has been identified in that sort of way—but it is fair to say that, when we finally have the 25-year environment plan, that will help us to target the resource to the right places.

There has been one peatland buyout. It is not considered to be part of our strategy going forward, but lowland peat will also be considered in the England peatland strategy in due course.

We agree that it is important to monitor soil trends, but we need to ensure that we use available public funds cost-effectively. Most soil properties change very slowly over time and soil monitoring is expensive; monitoring is not justified over periods of less than five years. That is why we are looking to innovative methods of gathering the data needed to obtain a strategic picture of soil health, including remote sensing photography using drones and caesium-137 radionuclide as a tracer of non-visible soil erosion.

In the Government’s response, we referred to the potential for using farmer data. I recognise what the hon. Member for Wakefield said about whether that is representative and the need to mention peat and the coastal land. People do farm on the coast of course, but I will reflect on what she said.

Traditionally, soil monitoring has been carried out by expensive one-off monitoring events. The last countryside survey cost around £10 million. An alternative option would be to have a rolling programme of monitoring, where a subset of sites are monitored each year. The approach in Wales was mentioned. The agri-land in Wales is considerably smaller than that of England and extrapolating that would cost a very high sum indeed, but we do have an ambitious research programme that is exploring how we can improve our understanding of soil condition resilience, in collaboration with the research councils, and we are looking to review our knowledge gaps. The review is still being looked at to assess its findings, but we have set up the Sustainable Intensification Platform, which will study what can be done to improve both the productivity and sustainability of the farming system.

On the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology’s proposal that will cost around £150,000 a year, my understanding is that that is only the cost for chemical properties and does not include the cost for measuring earthworms, which my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane thought we should do.

On cross-compliance and future agricultural policy, we introduced new standards in the 2015 to 2020 cap and it is too early to assess whether they are having the intended impact. It is critical to say that any future agricultural policy framework will absolutely have the environment at its heart. It is not just about not compromising soil health; we must look to enhance it.

It would be difficult to publish our plan by the end of the year, but I assure hon. Members that the intention of this Government is to have a smooth Brexit. Operability is the key focus of my officials at the moment. With regards to the emissions reduction plan, DEFRA officials
are running scenarios, including on peatland and salt marsh, to see how that can be part of the plan. I am due to meet the Minister for Climate Change and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), to discuss that this month.

I could say more about protecting water quality. There are some new rules that we have consulted on and we are considering those responses carefully. We may well be drawing up secondary legislation to bring that into effect. I assure hon. Members that a series of measures are happening through the countryside stewardship scheme, which I hope will help farmers to do their bit to improve the soil health that they have.

On maize subsidies, the hon. Member for Wakefield will be aware that we are not the lead Department, but the proposed feedstock restrictions will help to deliver our objectives of waste management and low-carbon energy, and we are discouraging new anaerobic digestion plants that intend to use a high proportion of feed or feed crops. That is why we are looking to restrict or eliminate payments for biogas derived from crops.

In conclusion, the benefits derived from healthy soil are many. Farmers work hard to maximise their production and we do want to ensure that that is not at the expense of soil health.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No.10(6)).
Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I concur with everything the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) said. Many communities across the country—particularly rural communities—are suffering bank closures and financial seclusion in addition to the closure of Crown offices, which are the backbone of the Post Office. We need expansion, and we need it now.

Kelvin Hopkins: I agree. It is vital that rural communities, in particular, have public services, sometimes on a smaller scale, to ensure that people living in more dispersed communities have proper access to those services.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is being extremely generous in giving way so early in his speech. I want to follow up the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) made about financial services. The post office in France set up La Banque Postale, which has made £1 billion of profit, and the CWU is campaigning for our Post Office to emulate it. It should look at expanding into financial services as a means of increasing value.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend, too, has anticipated something I am going to say in my speech. That just reinforces what I am going to say, so I am pleased about that.

The Government, bending to pressure and concerns from inside and outside Parliament, have just launched a consultation document, but it must lead to genuine action. It must not simply be a token exercise that does not change thinking in the Government and the Post Office. We need effective action to promote a long-term and successful future for the Post Office.

The Post Office’s current funding package runs out in March 2018 and must be replaced by an effective strategy and support for the future. The negotiations between the Government and the Post Office must not be simply a ritual seeking in reality just to manage decline. For customers, the most significant measures taken this year are the two announced branches of Crown office closures and franchises, which followed an earlier programme affecting 50 Crown post offices in 2014-15.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) mentioned franchising. Independent research carried out in the past five years found that franchises left to WHSmith in 2007 and 2008 perform poorly—worse than Crown post offices in queue times, service times, customer service and advice, disabled access and the number of counter positions. That brings to mind the customer service and advice, disabled access and the than Crown post offices in queue times, service times, left to WHSmith in 2007 and 2008 perform poorly—worse affecting 50 Crown post offices in 2014-15.

For employees, good jobs have been replaced by insecure employment. In 2014-15, only 10 out of 400 staff from former Crown offices were TUPE-ed over to new retailers. Public money was used to pay off long-term staff so the franchisees could employ more low-paid, less experienced staff with less job security—effectively, a taxpayer subsidy to the private franchises. All that amounts to a failed strategy for the Post Office.

Mary Creagh: On that point, if a member of staff is TUPE-ed over, they could end up managed by somebody on the minimum wage in a WHSmith, even if they are on a significantly higher salary. That creates difficulties and tensions in the workforce in the new environment.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The union and I support the idea of having proper pay for all staff so that sort of discrimination and inequality does not occur. All staff should be TUPE-ed over as they wish. They should not just be bought off with public money to enable WHSmith to make more profit.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. This is a big issue in my constituency, in which Blackfriars Road and Walworth Road Crown post offices are set to be franchised. Does he think that the fact that the incomes and pensions of the current staff are being put at risk completely undermines the commitment that the Prime Minister made at the Conservative conference to a more responsible capitalism?

Kelvin Hopkins: I will come on to talk about the fact that the Post Office is abandoning its defined-benefit pension scheme. That should be resisted and opposed.

The Government said that they would keep the Post Office in public ownership when they privatised the profitable Royal Mail, but franchising to private retailers is not public ownership. The public interest has been put at risk while Royal Mail is paying out more than £220 million a year in dividends. The Post Office’s revenues are falling, the “Front Office for Government” plan never actually got off the ground and Government funding is reducing.

I have a number of suggestions for the way forward. First, discussions about the Post Office’s future must be subject to parliamentary scrutiny and approval. Secondly, the Post Office must commit to making no threats of compulsory redundancy. Thirdly, the Government must deliver on their pledge to make the Post Office a “Front Office for Government” and set up a UK Post Office bank. Fourthly, the Government should stop using public money to subsidise the outsourcing of Post Office services to retailers. Fifthly, the plan to close the defined-benefit pension scheme should be abandoned; the scheme has a surplus of £130 million at the moment. Sixthly, the Post Office must be required to use the remaining Crown post offices to drive the growth of the new services and to give a secure future for the whole post office network.
The Post Office must remain as a vital public service and a community resource for the long term, with secure jobs and good terms and conditions for all its employees. My own preference is that a future Labour Government should bring Royal Mail back into public ownership and create a comprehensive integrated postal industry using internal cross-subsidies where necessary and appropriate. I imagine that may be expecting too much of the present Tory Government, but it would undoubtedly be massively popular with the public and serve us all well for the long term.

3.10 pm

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am delighted to catch your eye, Mr Wilson, in this very important debate. I pay great tribute to the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), who secured the debate today. News of any organisation looking at the closure or franchising of 59 Crown post offices with a projected loss of 2,000 jobs should rightly be met with horror, as the hon. Gentleman described. This reduction in operations can only mean a worse service for customers, longer queues, fewer staff, worse disabled access and the loss of a crucial community asset. I am sure many hon. Members are here today because of a threatened closure in their own constituency and, sadly, I am no different.

As the MP for one of the largest rural constituencies in the country, having easy access to the services that a post office provides is an utter necessity. Since 2000, the number of rural post offices has decreased by about 3,000. Likewise, the number of Crown post offices—the larger branches that have more services—has dropped by 1,200 in the past 25 years.

The largest town and principal economic and commercial hub in my constituency is Cirencester. Its branch is one of the 59 proposed closures. It operates from a leasehold property and offers a wide range of services, including access to pensions and benefits, tax payments, driving licence and passport renewals, lottery terminals and foreign exchange. The four counter positions and two self-service kiosks are often subject to long queues and high demand. For such a valuable service to continue to exist, we must look at ways for Crown post offices to diversify their services and grow their dwindling customer base. As I said in my speech on the Post Office’s future way back in 2010:

“The message that the Government need to give to the Post Office is not ‘closure, closure, closure’ but ‘opportunity, opportunity, opportunity’.”—[Official Report, 2 November 2010; Vol. 517, c. 213WH.]

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is aware, but there are rumours that a third round of franchise announcements and therefore closures of Crown post offices is due at any moment, with a potential loss of 190 jobs. Does he not think this debate might be an opportunity for the Minister to put some pressure on the Post Office to think again about that third round of potential franchises?

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing that to the attention of the House. I have not heard those rumours; I will simply respond with a line from later in my speech. If the Post Office were Tesco, it would be thinking not about closing profitable branches but about how to make those branches more profitable by providing a more attractive service for the customer. That is what I would like my hon. Friend the Minister to take away from this debate today. Let us see how we can make the Post Office work better for its customers.

What the Post Office needs is a proper business model for the future, which, above all, needs to consider how much of the business should be commercially profitable and which bits of it the Government, through the taxpayer, are prepared to subsidise. Although I do not agree with the hon. Member for Luton North that it should be wholly brought back into public ownership, there is no doubt, given the number of small suburban and rural branches, that it will inevitably need some form of public subsidy in future. That public subsidy should be clearly defined. The bits that can be profitable, such as the Crown post offices, should be made to operate as efficiently as possible.

Kelvin Hopkins: An internal cross-subsidy is appropriate where there is a public service component. When we had the Royal Mail and post offices effectively in one industry, cross-subsidy was possible. I think we should return to that principle of cross-subsidy.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The hon. Gentleman and I are largely in agreement. I have clearly said that there will continue to be a need for an element of taxpayer-funded subsidy for areas that can never be profitable, such as some of the smaller rural and suburban branches, so there will inevitably be a mixture of the commercial, which needs to be exploited to the maximum, and an element of public subsidy.

The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) mentioned the issue of banks closing. I have two important branches closing in small rural towns: Lloyds in Fairford and HSBC in Moreton-in-Marsh. Many of the services that those banks currently provide, such as depositing cheques and drawing benefits, pensions and so on, will be provided in future by the post office. If the post office then closes in those communities, my constituents in those communities will be left with a severe disadvantage.

Albert Owen: In addition to the banks closing and poor post office coverage, there is a lack of broadband and mobile coverage. So when people are asked to go online because they cannot physically get to these buildings, that is not available either.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I need to make progress now or I shall be reprimanded by the Chair for taking too long. There is so much to discuss in this debate and I have a little section in my speech about some of the innovative services that have been mentioned.

People view post office premises as dingy and out-of-date places that they do not want to visit. Clearly, the Post Office as a commercial organisation needs to do something about that. Branches need to be attractive places that the public want to visit. The franchise model is not the nirvana that everybody thinks it is. Pizza Express, for example—I say this to my hon. Friend the Minister—was at one point 100% franchised, but the offering was so variable that the franchises were brought back into central management and it is now a highly profitable...
enterprise. If the likes of Pizza Express take the view that they do not want franchisees and they want to manage it themselves, I am surprised that the Post Office is not going down that path.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown**

I will give way one more time to the hon. Gentleman.

**Kelvin Hopkins**

I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; I will try to be brief. In many parts of industry now, insourcing is the buzzword rather than outsourcing. There may be a strong case for that across public services as well as in the private sector.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown**

I think it comes back to the Post Office maximising the opportunities that it has got. I want to come on to that a little later in my speech, but the hon. Gentleman is right. The Post Office needs to consider very carefully how it operates in today’s world.

When the Post Office decoupled from the profitable Royal Mail business in 2012, little was done to create a coherent strategy for the future. Now, in 2016, with the change in retail banking behaviour and the closure of more than 1,700 branches across the UK in five years, small businesses need a post office bank even more. Currently, the Post Office provides access to business accounts for some of the bigger high street banks rather than its own service. However, this is limited, slower and inconsistent in terms of provisions across the network.

**Mr Winnick**

Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown**

I have given way an awful lot. I might give way a little later in my speech, if I may say that gently to the hon. Gentleman.

For the estimated 1.5 million adults in the UK without a bank account, an affordable service, such as a post office bank account that offered responsible deals on personal loans, would help to tackle the problem of payday lenders that charge huge annualised sums. It would be of great benefit to some of the poorer people in our society. After all, if Tesco opened a wholly owned bank eight years ago, notwithstanding its recent hacking problems, why cannot the Post Office do the same? Tesco has innovatively expanded a range of financial services. As has been mentioned, across the channel, La Banque Postale has a mandate to increase access to financial services and offer microcredit loans to those who have previously been financially excluded.

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** Order. May I respectfully remind the hon. Gentleman that he has been on his feet for nine minutes, and quite a few other Members want to get into the debate? If he is nearing the end of his speech, I think that everyone will appreciate that.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown**

I am grateful, Mr Wilson; I have taken rather too many interventions, so my speech has become rather too long.

The Post Office ought to look at innovative ways to improve its services. Its post offices are dull and dingy places, but perhaps it could spruce them up and think about such improvements. There are all sorts of ways it could improve what it offers, such as internet hubs and internet cafés, business hubs and collection points for local authorities, and subletting if the premises are too large, as has been done in Penge.

I pay tribute to postmasters and postmistresses and their staff throughout the land, who do an incredible job. Often they go way beyond what their employers require, to help their communities. The post office is the glue that holds this country together. I appeal through the Minister for the Post Office to reconsider, among other things, its decision to close the Crown post office in Cirencester. It must be highly profitable, so why is it being closed? The Minister needs to look carefully at the closure process, to see whether it is the right thing for the country.

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** As quite a few hon. Members want to take part in the debate, I ask them to restrict their comments. I do not want to introduce a time limit, but it might come to that, so hon. Members need to be careful about interventions.

3.21 pm

**Danny Kinahan** (South Antrim) (UUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) on raising this matter.

I apologise for being slightly parochial, but in Northern Ireland there are some 500 post offices, and we are going through exactly the same problems. A recent report commissioned by the Government and carried out by YouGov and London Economics looked at the social value of the Post Office. From the survey, they found that 95% of individuals and nearly 90% of small and medium-sized enterprises used post offices at least once a year; but there is much more to it. The people who use them like using them. In the street as I was walking here, I met two people from the west country, and we discussed the fact that I would be speaking in the debate. They were senior citizens—elderly; they said they did not want to go digital. They like the community hub that works around the post office, and said please would I stand up for that.

I have twice spoken on this subject at Stormont. I was there only five years, and as a new boy it was almost the first thing I spoke about. There was a document about the six steps to save the post office; they included banking, broadband and working with everyone. It was a fantastic idea and everyone supported it, but it seemed to be ignored. At the end of my time there, it came up again. The point I was trying to make, which has already been made by others, was that as well as thinking of every post office as a centre of the community we should also look at the losses to villages, towns and parts of cities where the library, pub and bank have gone and the school has closed. We should start to work with councils, parish councils and whatever community bodies are there, to identify the places that we must save, which are the community hub and the post office. Rather than let decisions about those things be made without talking to others, let us work through them and try to hold everything together. If subsidies are needed—I think that was an excellent idea—let us try to get that to happen.

We can all learn from each other, including Members from Northern Ireland and Scotland—all the devolved Governments. Let us try to find policies that will pull
things together, so that the Post Office must talk to us before it starts closures and we can work out how to save a town’s post office. My post office in Antrim has been having a battle to find a place to go. The chemist and the local retail shop turned it down. By the time a decision was made, everyone thought the post office was closing, and the figures had gone down; so those concerned did not want it, because it was not going to bring anything. We need to talk before the news gets out and causes such a reaction.

Albert Owen: That is absolutely right. Llangefni in my constituency put a petition before Parliament. We won the argument; those concerned agreed with us then. However, the Post Office has come back with the same proposal to close the same Crown post offices. It is not listening.

Danny Kinahan: That is exactly the point; the Post Office is not listening, but it needs to. At least it has put a consultation out, in our case; but it should listen before decisions are made. I make my plea—let us all talk to each other, consider towns and the centres of communities, and work together.

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): If hon. Members keep their remarks as brief as that, we may get everyone in.

3.25 pm

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Members who have spoken already.

I want to support the millions of customers all over the land who rely on the Post Office service in many remote areas as well as in towns. A post office recently closed in my village, East Coker, so I understand how important that is to a community; but it is true even in big towns such as Crewkerne, where the town centre post office recently closed.

3.26 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.41 pm

On resuming—

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Because we donated 15 minutes to the Division, we will now finish at 4.45 pm. I want to bring in the Front Benchers at a quarter past 4. I reiterate that if people limit the time that they take, everyone should get in. I call Marcus Fysh to continue his speech.

Marcus Fysh: Thank you, Mr Wilson. I was saying that it is often only when a community faces the loss of its post office that it realises what a wonderful service the post office system provides. I speak in support of not just the customers but the postmasters who provide that service.

Post offices are often owned by hard-working families who constantly look for ways to improve their flagging profitability and get more footfall. Postmasters run 97% of the country’s 11,500 post office branches, but they lack any meaningful union membership or collective voice. They are represented only by the National Federation of SubPostmasters, a trade association that is funded in part by Post Office Ltd. NFSP chief executive George Thomson recently said that “without serious changes” to the Post Office Ltd business, “there may not be a network to fight for in the future.”

Successive Governments have spent billions subsidising Post Office Ltd. Some £2 billion of taxpayers’ money has been used on the latest network transformation programme, which has not yet proved able to make the network sustainable and profitable. The Post Office has halved its losses in the last financial year, but that seems to have been done at the expense of postmasters’ pay and increasing branch closures and redundancies. The front-line service has suffered: the queues remain and extended opening hours are sometimes inconsistent and quite unpredictable. We must ask why. In many cases, postmasters are struggling to staff and operate their branches on the money that the Post Office now pays. The reduced revenues from core services simply make many things that post offices do unprofitable, and I know from speaking to postmasters up and down my constituency that they are genuinely concerned about whether they will be able to keep going with those things.

Hon. Members have made several useful proposals during the debate, and I urge the Government to consider them carefully, because Post Office Ltd itself does not seem to have any obvious plans to introduce new services or increase revenue in a way that could help. A growing number of post office branches are up for sale—there are currently more than 730 advertised on the Daltons Business website alone.

One of the key issues with the franchise model that we need to look at is that the computer system on which the whole network relies is well and truly overdue for replacement. It is, in fact, at the centre of an ongoing High Court action. Thousands of postmasters have been blamed for losses that may in fact have been caused by the use of that computer system. Some of those postmasters have been convicted and some have been made bankrupt by the Post Office, and losing that court action may pose a major solvency problem for the Post Office itself. I call on the Government to look into that with some urgency.

In that context, it should not be a major surprise that the unions are taking action, although the Post Office’s move away from a defined-benefit pension scheme is possibly not the right point to complain about, given that there has been a major move away from such schemes in almost every other walk of life in recent years. We need to look at the Post Office; it is in danger of running out of control and its governance issues require serious work and attention. I urge the Government to take an active role in that, because postmasters and their customers up and down the land really depend on the Post Office.

3.45 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) on securing this important debate.

There are two affected Crown post offices in my constituency. Local people have pointed out to me that that is particularly bad news for disabled people and there will be a reduction in post office services in the area. Tens of thousands of pounds have recently been spent on refurbishing the Crouch End post office. There seems to be a distinct lack of logic in ploughing a whole
lot of public money into doing up a post office and promptly closing it. In the case of the closure of Muswell Hill Crown post office, there is a further risk to local jobs, because there are another 60 jobs at the Royal Mail sorting office behind the post office. In the London property market, once the doors of a facility like that close, a real estate agent will pop up and sell it either for some sort of housing development or more coffee shops. If there is one thing that Crouch End does not need, it is more coffee shops. We need proper services for local people.

In the various parts of my constituency that have become more populous in a short time, with denser housing developments, we desperately need services such as post offices. A petition has been signed by hundreds of thousands of local people. Will the Minister say whether that petition has been taken into account? I have not met anyone locally who wants to see the doors of the Crown post offices close.

On parliamentary scrutiny, I have been asking for months for some sort of debate. I am pleased that my hon. Friend succeeded in securing this debate, but there has been a lack of debate. I requested a meeting with the Minister, but I was not successful. I also requested a meeting with her predecessor, who sits in the House of Lords, and was again unsuccessful. Will the Minister pledge today to meet those of us who are affected so we can each have a few more minutes to go into detail about this urgent issue?

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I refer Members to the fact that I received tremendous support from the Communication Workers Union during my 2015 general election campaign. Does my hon. Friend agree that as we approach Christmas, the importance of the post offices at the centre of communities is heightened? Although I understand that her constituency is densely populated, that is particularly important in constituencies with rural areas.

Catherine West: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Regardless of whether they are in rural areas or urban areas, post offices are places where people can meet friendly faces, so they do not necessarily have to do everything over the internet. We all treasure that kind of community service.

Will the Minister also tell us whether the Government’s consultation is genuine? Time and again, we have had an announcement by the Post Office, a rather anodyne meeting and then a sense of resignation—a sense that “We’re just going to close them anyway.” If the consultation were real, we would have a genuine dialogue and a genuine sense that what we as Members of Parliament said was actually going to make a difference. Sadly, there is a fog of resignation over this issue. I fear that that is why many people tell us that they feel disconnected from national politics. They spend hours lining up to see us at surgeries to tell us something and then we do not get a result. It is not through lack of trying. Thousands of petitioners stand outside in the snow, hail and rain, collecting signatures that their MP cannot even get a response to. I am sounding a bit frustrated because that is how we feel—that of us stood outside the post office, Saturday after Saturday, getting signatures for petitions but not getting a response. I want an assurance from the Minister that the voices of Members of Parliament will be heard and that the consultation is not just a sham.

I always want to be a positive Member of Parliament, so I want to give the Minister some ideas. Suggestions were put forward in “Securing the Post Office Network in the Digital Age” in November 2010 to make it the front office for Government and to grow financial services. We know there is a crisis in the general high street banks. After all the banking scandals, people cannot trust whether the bank is on their side, but people do trust the Post Office as an emblem, a community symbol and a friend.

I hope the Government will look again and genuinely consider what we have to say. We are here not because we want to spend more time with each other, but because people want our voices to be heard. Will the Minister give us a reassurance—as a new Minister, there is a new opportunity—that she will listen to us genuinely and give us a positive hearing? People want their Crown post offices, so listen to our voices and think again rather than implementing these foolish and unpopular proposals.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), with whom, unusually, I found myself agreeing quite a lot. It is a pleasure to be here in the interests of the community I have the privilege to represent. Just over a month ago, the Post Office told me it was opening a short consultation on the proposed closure of a Crown post office in Tonbridge. That is a post office that many people rely on. I wrote to the Post Office on 14 October asking for details and the reasons for the closure. I wanted to know exactly which services it was to discontinue and which it was to carry on providing in a nearby stationer’s. After a month, they had not responded, and when I finally did get a response it did not answer the questions I had asked.

That was particularly disappointing because the Tonbridge Crown post office, like many around the country, as we have heard—indeed, as far afield as Northern Ireland and the Cotswolds—is essential to the community, just as post offices are across our land. They are, of course, the very beginning of our true national identity, when the Post Office really did tie the nation together, with the penny post, linking it through the train network and creating one truly United Kingdom.

For too many, that idea has gone. That is wrong, because the post office sits as an important part of our newly refurbished high street in Tonbridge. It is not just important for the elderly; it is particularly important for those with accessibility needs. My community is privileged to have a post office that is near to disabled parking bays and which has good accessibility, appropriate seating and wide enough aisles. It is therefore suitable for people with accessibility issues. In the proposal, such services would not be offered and the narrower corridors and seating would cause problems.

Kelvin Hopkins: I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman. The survey I mentioned in my speech about WHSmith franchises said that they do not provide for people with disabilities in the same way as Crown post offices.
Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman is right, and that is what we may see in Tonbridge if the decision is not reversed. I will ask the Minister to raise her voice in support of the petition.

I would like to quote Gordon Lawrence, a resident of Tonbridge who wrote to me last night. He said:

“As you have rightly said, the town is undergoing a transformation, certainly since I arrived here in 1984, almost unrecognisable in the way the character has changed. The building programmes that have been initiated over recent years, with those still to come, have increased and continue to increase the local population”.

In the context of a growing town with an increasing population, it baffles me that the Post Office feels that a site that it only recently spent an awful lot of money redeveloping to make more accessible and approachable should now close when it is clearly being heavily used. Indeed, when I go to the post office, as we and many of our constituents do, to send large numbers of letters, I notice clearly how many people are using it at many times of the day.

Having failed to get satisfactory assurances from the Post Office to address the concerns I first raised at the start of the consultation, it has become clear that this move is not in the best interests of the people. That is why I launched a petition just over a week ago calling for the Post Office to change its decision, and already 1,500 people have signed it. From Tonbridge, a town of 30,000-odd people, 1,500 is a significant number—it is 5%. As we all know from petitions in our communities, that is a hell of a return. Indeed, 99% of the people I spoke to indicated that they were unhappy with the closure.

The proposed location is another WHSmith, as the hon. Member for Luton North identified, with narrow corridors and without seating or accessibility. The point the Post Office seems to make is that that will lead to longer opening hours. Well, opening hours are not everything, especially for those who cannot get inside or get the services they want. Opening hours are certainly not everything if the services needed, whether biometrics or parcel post, are not available.

Sadly, I have seen that not only in Tonbridge—I know many people are talking about the same in other communities—but in another area I have the privilege to represent: the village of Hadlow. The community has benefited from a local post office, but again that is being squeezed. The term “local” has a specific meaning in the Post Office business model that I would like to explore a little more. According to the Post Office, a local post office is one with extended opening hours. That sounds good, but the House of Commons Library tells us that a local post office does not have all the services of a traditional Crown post office. That is why I am campaigning in my community, as I know many others are in theirs, to have stand-alone Crown post offices defended, because for so many of us they offer that essential link not only to keep the nation together, but to keep people in touch with their families and enable all the wonderful trade that we have seen grow—in internet packages and all the rest of it—to develop even further.

In villages from Cowden to Mereworth, which have lost post offices over the last century, it is essential that we reinforce the need for the stand-alone Crown post office. I will lodge a petition on that with the House this evening, and I would welcome the Minister’s support in changing the Post Office’s decision.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) for bringing the debate forward. I really wanted to speak in the debate because I recall the round of post office closures in 2008 and 2009. I remember going door to door with others gathering hundreds and thousands of signatures on a petition to save local Crown post offices in towns around what came to be my constituency.

That was done in response to the anger and despair so many felt about the closure of the local Crown post offices. I remember speaking at public meetings when I encountered at first hand the sense of resignation felt by too many people that what they wanted and their community felt it needed was simply not valued—it did not matter to the powers that be. In the event, five vital and much-beloved post offices were closed.

We often hear politicians talking about community—how it is important, how matters and how it should be valued. It should also matter when a community comes together to express its concern about a valued asset, the local Crown post office, which in so many ways is the beating heart of a community, if not one of its ventricles.

Post offices provide a lifeline: they are the lifeblood, even, of our communities. That is even more true of our rural communities. For such communities, post offices boost their diversity and resilience as well as protecting jobs and customer service.

The decline of the Crown post office is a matter of great sadness. Over the years, this trusted institution on our high street—perhaps it is the most trusted institution on our high street—has been stripped of too many of its functions. That is despite its highly trained staff and its perfect position to provide banking and other services. Post offices provide a lifeline: they are the lifeblood, even, of our communities. That is even more true of our rural communities. For such communities, post offices boost their diversity and resilience as well as protecting jobs and customer service.

The Scottish National party firmly opposed the privatisation of Royal Mail. However, at the time it was privatised the UK Government said that the Post Office would be kept wholly in the public sector. Instead, a new 10-year deal with WHSmith to relocate yet more post office branches into those stores was announced.

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Franchising is quite rightly viewed as soft privatisation, and the Minister needs to address that point to reassure Members. We need to know that our post offices have a future, and that the franchise is in the public sector as promised. We need a plan for our post offices, and we could do worse than explore the measures France undertook for its post offices when it established La Banque Postale—
[Patricia Gibson]

excuse my pronunciation. Alongside those problems, we have seen high street banks gradually withdrawing and retreating from our high streets, so that must be a reasonable option.

Like in France, our post offices could make a plan to grow revenues in areas such as financial services, with which France has had huge success. Our post offices need not be in managed decline, and I am very interested to hear the Minister's response and how she views the future of what remains of our post offices, which are community assets held in deep affection, and how they can be secured.

4.1 pm

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): There are five questions that the Minister should answer. Before raising them, I join other Members in praising my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), and I echo his declaration of interest.

First, it would be helpful to hear from the Minister why she thinks Post Office income from financial services have grown so slowly? It was heralded as part of the great future for the Post Office by Vince Cable when he launched a report in May 2010. Second, why has Government business going through the Post Office been allowed to plummet? Ministers promised the reverse, again back in 2010.

It is not only the French who seem to be able to run postal services better than the current Government. The Italians have also made a huge success of getting a post office bank up and running. Similarly, New Zealand has a highly successful post office bank, which was established in the past 15 years. There are successful models involving financial services. What is striking about the debate is the cross-party concern about the crisis in the Post Office at the moment.

Thirdly—I ask this as a Co-operative Member as well as a Labour Member—whatever happened to the idea of the Post Office becoming a mutual, with a more involved workforce and local community involvement to help to plot a more co-operative future for the Post Office? The last ministerial mention of that vision from November 2010 that I can find was in November 2013. It would be helpful to know whether the Minister still adheres to that possibility. Fourthly, is the Post Office’s 2016-19 funding package, which I understand is being negotiated in Whitehall at the moment, going to lead to more closures and to more full-time employees being pushed out of the door, or is it going to be a genuine opportunity for serious investment in new services?

Fifthly, and lastly, as I understand it, the 10-year contract that the Post Office has with Royal Mail can be reviewed from January next year. It would be good to hear reassurance from the Minister that Royal Mail intends to stick absolutely to the terms of its contract with the Post Office going forward.

Post Office revenues from Government services have fallen by almost 40% since 2010, as no new Government services are using the Post Office. Of those that still are, many Departments are promoting online alternatives. Again, it would be useful to hear from the Minister what discussions she has had with other Government Departments to encourage them to use the Post Office.

I ask that question because the Post Office being the front office for the Government was the first part of the great vision that Vince Cable set out in November 2010. If revenues from Government services have declined by 40%, it raises some fairly alarming questions. There are rumours that Government insiders themselves accept that that option for the Post Office’s future has largely been a failure.

The second objective that Vince Cable set out was the expansion of financial services. The Post Office’s revenue from financial services has grown by just 2% over the past six years. Why does it still not offer a business account? In one of the district centres in north Harrow in my constituency, there is no bank, and there has not been for some time. The Post Office is the only financial services player still in existence there. The option of a business account would be hugely beneficial to small businesses in that one district alone.

I am told that the Post Office is trialling a current account. Indeed, we are apparently four and a half years into the trial; it was supposed to launch in 2014. Why has it taken so long before that product could possibly be launched? There is no dedicated children’s product either. I am aware of the junior individual savings account, but £500 has to be put into that account up front to get it up and running, and that money cannot be accessed until the child turns 18. Given that many people stick with the financial services provider that they start with, it would surely make good economic sense for the Minister to insist that the Post Office quickly gets its act together on a dedicated children’s product.

All of those problems suggest a business that is not taking seriously the ambition of substantial revenue growth from financial services, as Vince Cable once promised. The hon. Member for Yeovil (Marcus Fysh) rightly praised the contribution of postmasters and postmistresses—particularly those who are members of the Federation of Small Businesses. The FSB published a report in October called “Locked Out”, which said:

“Business banking services provided at some Post Office branches and franchises are too limited. Some services, such as cash and cheque clearing facilities, also appear to be processed more slowly than in bank branches. Other services, such as inter-account transfers and currency exchange, are not available. As the future of the network moves away from full-service post offices to franchises there is concern about the impact on small business access.”

It is not just the Communication Workers Union and staff that want change in terms of financial services; it is small business that have genuine concerns. I hope that the Minister will act.

4.8 pm

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I will be very quick. In many ways, I will reiterate many of the messages that we have heard in the Chamber this afternoon. I will reflect specifically on the position of the Crown post office in Aberystwyth in my constituency.

Many Members have talked about the inadequacy of the consultation process and the complete inability of the Post Office to listen to the many representations that have been made. That is certainly the case with the campaigning that we undertook in my constituency. We were not surprised that WHSmith emerged as the franchisee in Aberystwyth. Of the 28 branches where franchise
partners have been announced this year, 27 have been with WHSmith. I have to say that, since the announcement of a consultation in March, nothing more than lip service has been paid to that word.

Neil Coyle: It is very difficult for Post Office representatives to listen to local communities when they do not even attend a meeting. The Walworth Society in my constituency set up a public meeting with councillors and myself, and the Post Office did not even turn up.

Mr Williams: I have had exactly the same experience in my constituency. We had two public meetings. The Post Office came to the second one, but not the first. We had petitions and demonstrations. We made representations to everybody, with four political parties working together on the streets of Aberystwyth. It was a very good experience, but it has had absolutely no effect on WHSmith whatsoever. Individual managers have been courteous and polite, and have occasionally answered the phone and come to see me but, on the substance of the case, we have been well and truly ignored.

The Post Office still has not addressed the fundamental concerns we have raised. The research undertaken on the record of WHSmith by Consumer Focus—a very good organisation that existed at the time—concluded that queue times, services times and customer advice are all worse under WHSmith than they were under the Crown post office regime. There are also genuine concerns about disabled access, the number of counter positions open and congestion in the shop. Of course, there is also the impact of losing good, hard-working staff who have years of experience.

The CWU has said—that is wisdom noting, and I hope the Minister will convey the concerns about the consultation process to the Post Office—that it is unaware of a single case where public consultation has overturned the Post Office’s proposals in recent years. My constituents in Aberystwyth are convinced, as I am, that the whole process is an utter sham.

I want to talk a little about the staff and how they have been treated. They were given three options, which seems clinical and very kind to be given three options. They were given the opportunity to take redundancy. In peripheral parts of Wales, if we go as far as we can to the west, the opportunities for good, well-paid jobs are few and far between. Secondly, staff were given the opportunity to redeploy—this is the option that really got to the emotions of many staff—to the nearest Crown post office. If we picture Aberystwyth on the weather map on the news, it is in the middle of the west coast of Wales. The nearest Crown post offices that my constituents could relocate to were in Port Talbot or in Shrewsbury across the border in England. That is not an option for my constituents at all. The third option was for my constituents to go down the route of TUPE agreements, which we have heard many concerns about. I am genuinely concerned. We might seem to have lost the battle, but like the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), I appeal to the Minister at this late stage to get involved in this case and to do what she can to influence things.

I am conscious that my friend, the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), wants to speak, so I will finish by saying this. We have lost post office after post office in rural communities. We can wax lyrical about the emotions of it and the effect on rural communities, but they are very real. We are talking about some of the most scattered, remote rural communities. When the post office, the church and the school have been taken out, the final blow is when that community loses its post office, which has a galvanising role. That has been the record of successive Governments, including coalition ones in which Liberals were involved, the current Government and preceding ones. We have to reverse that trend. We have to look at a sensible level of subsidy to sustain the network in rural areas, because once it is gone, it will not come back.

4.13 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson, I too will be brief, because I am conscious of time. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) on securing this important debate.

Post offices provide an essential service to communities right across the UK. It is important that, through any potential future changes, that service remains rooted in our communities and that we keep the public at the heart of the services provided. The Post Office has been described as a national institution that is at the heart of society. Many post offices, like the ones in my constituency, are more than just a post office; they are a hub for the community. Most are also shops or a place to buy confectionery or stationery. In my constituency, there are many isolated communities, and many people who go to the post office to post letters or collect pensions also benefit from the social interaction there.

We know that lifestyles have changed. I am sure we all understand that, although in the past post offices were used for a multitude of services, many of those services are now available elsewhere or indeed online, so it has become increasingly difficult for post offices to remain viable without diversifying. However, changes to the delivery of post office services need to be carried out in consultation with and with the support of local residents, who are, after all, the customer.

I have particular concerns about the process of making major changes to the delivery of post office services. Following an extensive consultation process, the Post Office recently announced that it is proceeding with the relocation of a post office at Ellots Town in my constituency under the modernisation and transformation programme. Those proposals are bitterly opposed by the local community. In this case, the consultation process involved two public meetings attended by more than 100 local residents on each occasion; representations from local councillors, myself and the Assembly Member; and a petition signed by more than 1,000 local people, who raised common issues of concern about the suitability of the proposed new location in terms of access, privacy, parking and so on.

In addition, proposals were put forward without the support of the current post office operators, who wish to maintain the current location and are likely to lose their jobs as a result of the post office being franchised. I am deeply concerned that many of my constituents in that area feel that the Post Office has not listened to their concerns. Many feel that the current popular post office meets their needs and they do not understand the
need for change at this time. A large number of local residents have threatened not to use the post office in future if proposals are implemented.

For post offices to remain a viable part of community life, the Post Office needs to be responsive to and understanding of the concerns of its customers. Will the Minister comment on the general principle of the Post Office’s response to public consultation? Does she agree that the Post Office must ensure that consultation is meaningful and that any decisions it takes about the future of post offices should be in line with what its customers want and expect?

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Before I call the Front Benchers, I remind Members that I would like to leave a couple of minutes for the mover of the motion to sum up at the end.

4.16 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I commend the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) for bringing this debate to the forefront today.

As we have heard, post offices clearly provide a lifeline for so many communities. Sometimes, that is easy to forget in the age of texting and emails, but the fact remains. Paisley has a population of 76,000 people. It is the fifth largest place in Scotland. I know that some Members have spoken about post offices far out in rural areas, but I want to talk a wee bit about urban post offices like one in my constituency. The post office is located in the Piazza, which is one of Scotland’s most successful shopping centres in terms of occupancy levels. Most, if not all, of its units are in use. It has its own security guard service. People feel safe and appreciate the fact that vulnerable customers feel at ease when they go to collect important documents, their money, pension or whatever else. The location is absolutely perfect. It is located straight on the high street, which is right beside the bus stops. The doors and lifts from the car park are literally right beside the post office.

Andy Furey from the CWU, who is here today, told me that Paisley was the golden standard of post offices. It provided a specialist service. It had staff with 20 or 30 years’ experience behind them. It was accessible, and it was spacious. That post office has shut today. As we debate this right now, that post office has closed its doors. That will have devastating consequences for Paisley as a town.

Currently, we are endeavouring and bidding to become the city of culture for 2021, and we are trying to shine a light on the culture and level of community that we have in Paisley. Despite all we have to offer, most would agree that Paisley is not without its problems. We are desperately trying to get the high street reinvigorated and re-energised and to boost the local economy a wee bit, yet at no point was there any consideration of the wider impacts for my constituents. As Members may be aware, quite a few refugees and asylum seekers have been located to Paisley. The post office in the Piazza was the only place where they could realistically have access to the Home Office’s digital application services. Now that it is losing that service, those people will be expected to travel to West Nile Street, nine miles away in Glasgow, with no money or means of travel.

The worst thing about the closure is how little sense it makes. The plan was to make this first-class post office into the wholly inadequate WHSmith—right to the back. There is no clear route from the shop’s front door to the back, which immediately restricts people with mobility problems. It is now situated on a hill, which may not seem like a big deal, but for someone aged 80 it is a considerable challenge. It is located in a pedestrian zone, so you cannot even drop someone off at the door.

At the public meeting that I mentioned, the Post Office admitted that it had not considered the economic impact of the post office’s closure. Most concerning are the wider impacts for my constituents. As Members may be aware, quite a few refugees and asylum seekers have been located to Paisley. The post office in the Piazza was the only place where they could realistically have access to the Home Office’s digital application services. Now that it is losing that service, those people will be expected to travel to West Nile Street, nine miles away in Glasgow, with no money or means of travel.

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At the public meeting, I blessed the folk from the Post Office who had to come along to argue for the change because they were eaten alive. Their figures were wrong and they could not tell us basic facts for ridiculous reasons. They could not tell us whether the post office was making a profit or a loss, or how big the loss was. They could not tell us what the footfall was. It was embarrassing, if I am honest.

We were told that there would be a consultation. Consultations can be a good thing—I am doing one now for my private Member’s Bill—but to be good they have to be genuine. This one seemed to be total lip service. At the end of it, despite the fact that I have genuinely yet to meet anyone in favour of the proposed change, as with so many others we have heard about, the Post Office said that the change would happen anyway.

I know that many healthy suggestions were made—I know because I made many of them—such as that the post office currently has three units in the Piazza, so why not close one or two if they were costing money. The CWU rightly pointed out that, if the Post Office is seeking a franchise partner, the most obvious candidate is surely Royal Mail. It was almost as though it did not matter a jot what suggestions were made because the move was happening. Lo and behold, I then discovered that WHSmith was advertising jobs for the new post office two weeks before the consultation finished. The whole thing was a sham.
I tried repeatedly to have a meeting with the Post Office’s chief exec, but that was refused point blank. My request went backwards and forwards. Eventually, I said, “I will go anywhere at any time for a five-minute meeting. Just tell me when.” There was no reply. The lack of accountability during the process was incredible. The whole thing was a done deal from the start.

In the Chamber a couple of months ago, I asked the Minister how much money had been spent on refurbishing the post office in Paisley since 2010. He said that nearly £500,000 of public funds had been spent doing it up, only for it to be sold off to WHSmith. The reality is that this is privatisation through the back door.

What does WHSmith know about postal services? It is falling behind in terms of quality of service and the different things it sells in its shops. If it is already struggling, what is its motivation for taking on a post office that is apparently haemorrhaging money left, right and centre? Why would it want that post office if it is losing so much money? If the sale of Royal Mail did not result in the expected profit, how will the franchising of post offices be any different?

In June 2015, the Government sold the remaining 30% stake in Royal Mail. The fact is that taxpayers have been short-changed yet again. The Government sold the shares for far less than they were worth. The whole thing stinks and it is off the backs of my constituents. My request went backwards and forwards. Eventually, I tried repeatedly to have a meeting with the Post Office’s chief exec, but that was refused point blank. The Post Office’s own monitoring suggests there is no drop in the quality of services following franchising. However, as we have never seen its monitoring figures, I take that with a pinch of salt. The consumer organisation Which? is doing its own research on the matter, which it is hoping to publish in the next few weeks and which will no doubt make interesting reading for all of us.

When looking at what happens to jobs when branches are franchised, it is not hard to see why the quality of service drops.

Neil Coyle: Is there a question here not just about poorer service, but about taxpayer-funded poorer service? The lower pay usually offered by companies such as WHSmith is subsidised by taxpayers in tax credits and housing benefit. There have also been upfront subsidies, such as the £500,000 spent in Paisley and more than £100,000 being spent on Walworth Road. Other Members have referred to taxpayers’ money being used to tart up formerly dingy post offices before they were franchised.

Gill Furniss: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. This is not what taxpayers were expecting. We were looking at something for the future—a lot of taxpayers’ money to make this the gateway to a fully functioning Post Office service. We have heard representations in the Chamber today that that has not been the case.

Jobs with good terms and conditions are being replaced all too often with part-time, minimum wage roles. There is little to attract long-serving, experienced staff to transfer to a franchised branch. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North made the good point that last year just 10 staff out of 400 in Crown offices being franchised chose TUPE; the rest took compromise agreements to leave. Those agreements cost the Post Office £13 million. So much for the Government working for everyone. What a waste of public money. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) also mentioned that experienced staff are leaving in droves. That means that the quality that the Post Office stands for is undermined and a community asset is hollowed out—and make no mistake: these are community assets.

Franchising is done in the face of public opposition. Consultations on individual branches are exercises in public relations rather than proper public engagement. The branches targeted for franchising tend to be in...
more urban areas, disproportionately affecting the services available to already disadvantaged groups and harming the general health of our high streets.

The Post Office is clearly facing a crisis. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) has an excellent article in the Daily Mirror laying all that out today. Since the Post Office was split from Royal Mail, it has struggled to keep its head above water. Traditional revenue streams are shrinking; plans to make it a “Front Office” for Government have disappeared into the ether; and an expansion of financial services has slipped off the agenda. One thousand jobs were lost last year, and another 2,000 are under threat this year.

The Government must take action now to halt the decline, and work with all those concerned to come up with a plan for a better future than the one currently on offer. Although I welcome the consultation document that has been published, I am concerned that it does not go far enough, and I urge the Minister to be bold in formulating a strategy for the future.

Will the Minister revisit the plans to make post offices the front office for Government that has been promised for so long? Post office revenues from Government services have fallen by 40% since 2010. Will she commit to expanding the financial services on offer? After all, the Post Office current account is not matched by either the children’s or business accounts. Surely that is an obvious starting point for expanding services. With the retreat of banks from the high street, the demand for a postal bank has never been greater. Will she explore how our post offices really can be the front office of Government and provide all the services that people require?

I ask the Minister with all sincerity whether she will call for a moratorium on any further franchising of Post Office branches until there has been proper engagement on what the future of the service will look like. This proud institution, its employees and the communities that it serves deserve better than a slow slide into oblivion.

4.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) on securing today’s very important debate on the future of the Post Office.

The Government recognise the crucial role that post offices play in communities across the country. I echo the numerous tributes that we heard in the debate to the sub-post offices and management and staff who work in the post office network, including our own excellent post offices here in the Palace of Westminster. They do a wonderful job.

Between 2010 and 2018, the Government will have provided nearly £2 billion to maintain, modernise and protect a network of at least 11,500 branches across the country. The Government set the direction for the Post Office. That means that we ask it to maintain a national network of post offices that is accessible to all, and to do so more sustainably, with less need for taxpayer subsidy over time. That includes the maintenance—this was a manifesto commitment of my party at the last election—of 3,000 rural and semi-rural branches, about which we have heard little this afternoon and which would otherwise be uneconomic to run. Post Office Ltd delivers that strategy as an independent business: we do not interfere in its day-to-day operations or decisions about the provision and location of branches.

Today, as I said, there are more than 11,600 branches in the UK and the network is at its most stable for decades—although people would not know that from the debate. That is because the Post Office is transforming and modernising its network, thanks to the investment that the Government have been willing to make. The Government support has enabled almost 7,000 branches across the UK—more than half the entire network—to be modernised, offering a better experience for customers and more sustainable retail propositions for postmasters.

Catherine West: Can the Minister explain the logic whereby a lot of public funds are put into a branch of the Crown Post Office and then it is promptly closed?

Margot James: The hon. Lady mentioned the Crouch End post office in her speech, and I made a mental note to look into that. I cannot comment on that particular branch. Occasionally in business, someone makes an investment, it does not work out and they have to cut their losses. That happens in any business. I cannot comment on the specific branch, but I will look into the matter.

Neil Coyle: Will the Minister give way?

Margot James: No, not for a few minutes. I have very little time and I am going to make some progress.

Customers benefit from an extra 200,000 opening hours every week and the largest Sunday retail network in the country. Indeed, the network in the constituency of the hon. Member for Luton North is in fine shape as a result of the modernisation programme. Across the 10 branches in his constituency, customers now have an additional 297 hours a week when post offices are open, with more than half his local branches open on Sundays.

The subsidy needed to sustain the network has dropped from a peak of £210 million in 2012 to just £80 million this year, and should continue to fall. The business continues to reduce its losses: it has gone from a loss of £120 million in 2012-13 to £24 million in 2015-16.

I would like to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Marcus Fysh), who is not in his place now, that the number of branches is almost unchanged since 2011. In that year, there were 11,820; there are now 11,643. That is a very small difference. In fact, I would like to make the point, because I have been quite outraged by some of the comments made in the debate, that during the last Labour Government, virtually half the entire post office operation in this country was closed. Conservative Members were always outside with petitions in those days, and this Government and the coalition Government before them have stabilised the network with minimal losses. I congratulate the board, management and staff of Post Office Ltd on all they have achieved.

All that has led, of course, to customer satisfaction remaining high, at 95%. Also, the Association of Convenience Stores produced its local shop report, completely independently of the Post Office, a couple of
months ago, and the post office was rated the No. 1 service on the high street. It was voted the most desired amenity by the public. People would not think that— [Interruption.]

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** Order.

**Margot James:** People would not think that from the tone and tenor of the debate this afternoon. [Interruption.]

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** Order.

**Margot James:** I will now answer a few of the points that were made. My hon. Friends the Members for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) understandably paid tribute to their Crown post offices, in Cirencester and Tonbridge respectively. I am very sorry that I am unable to join them in their campaign against franchising of their local Crown post offices, because both are currently running at a loss. For every pound that is spent in the post office in Cirencester in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds, £1.30 has to be spent on running it. We have to be mindful of that. I say to the hon. Member for—[Interruption.]

**Mkahiri Black:** Will the Minister give way?

**Margot James:** I am sorry, but I have to stop shortly to leave time for the hon. Member for Luton North.

As I said earlier, we cannot keep these Crown post offices open and losing money and stick to our commitment to keep post offices open in the rural and semi-rural areas, where often it is the only service left. Really, with some of these Crowns that are closing, walking a short distance away, sometimes to a more convenient location, to a WHSmith, is a small price for customers to pay to keep this network operating across the country, which has not proven to be economic.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Will the Minister give way?

**Margot James:** I am really sorry not to be able to give way again, but I have got to stop in two or three minutes’ time. I want to answer a couple of points made by the hon. Members for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) and for Harrow West (Mr Thomas).

Use of Government services at post offices is down by 40%, which is disappointing. I do not really foresee a huge improvement in that, because with so many Government services—for instance, on the motor vehicle front—so much is now done online that any operation in that sector would have experienced similar losses. I am much more hopeful about financial services. That sector has grown by 17% since 2012. It is steady, albeit slow, growth year on year. The Post Office has an arrangement with the Bank of Ireland and will be offering more services. Hon. Members have pointed out that bank branches around the country are closing at a swift rate, and that does create an opportunity for the Post Office. I will be lobbying, alongside Members, for the Post Office to embrace this opportunity even further, but I do think that it is doing a good job. I will sound a note of caution that unfortunately—well not unfortunately; it is just a development that we are all part of—more and more banking is now done online as well, but I do see some grounds for hope in that sector.

I want to talk a bit about WHSmith. A great many WHSmith branches are now either hosting or franchising post office services. Virtually all the services remain on offer to the public in convenient locations. I accept that some—a minority, I think, of 11 out of 61—post offices that operate in WHSmith branches are on the first floor. That does present issues for people with disabilities, but they are issues that the WHSmith branches have resolved in conjunction with local groups representing people with disabilities. They have managed to provide lifts and also, in case of lift breakdown, mobile tills so that people with disabilities can be welcomed into the branches.

**Mr Gareth Thomas:** What about the mutual option?

**Margot James:** On the mutualisation that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, yes, the Postal Services Act 2011 requires that the Post Office be maintained either in public hands—public ownership—or in a mutualised setting. At the moment, it continues in public ownership and we have no plans to change that. Indeed, for it to be mutualised the model would have to be based even greater financial sustainability than it is at the moment. Currently, the Post Office is making losses and we would not be able to mutualise it, but the plan is for it to become more and more financially sustainable over time.

The hon. Member for Luton North also made the point about Royal Mail, and various Members have called for Royal Mail and the Post Office to be reunited. I do not see that happening—Royal Mail is now an independent public company—but thanks to Government investment, the Post Office is now in a far stronger position for its impending negotiations with Royal Mail about its business arrangements. That is thanks to the huge investment that we have made in Royal Mail.

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** Order. Is the Minister going to leave any time?

**Margot James:** I am. Is it time for me to give way? Yes, I do apologise; I was looking at the wrong digit. I will give way now to the hon. Member for Luton North, and I apologise to him.

4.44 pm

**Kelvin Hopkins:** I thank the Minister for giving way. I have very little time, but thank you for chairing the debate this afternoon, Mr Wilson. I also thank all the hon. Members who made such fine, compelling and passionate speeches this afternoon. We are all speaking with one voice. There is a serious threat to the Post Office and to its future, and it has to be rescued now by stopping the cuts. May I ask the Minister that we have a meeting to discuss these things in more depth, with the Front-Bench representatives from each of the Opposition parties and myself, to try to iron out some approach for the future? I have to say that I am rather disappointed with the Minister’s response, because she constantly
[Kelvin Hopkins] talked about post offices as though they were businesses rather than public services and community assets. If they are to be made more commercially viable, the Government have got to make—

4.45 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Monday 21 November 2016

[PHILIP DAVIES in the Chair]

Free Childcare

[Relevant documents: Fourth Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Entitlement to free early years education and childcare, HC 224, and oral evidence taken on 20 April 2016 and written evidence reported to the House on 13 and 18 April, HC 912.]

4.30 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 132140 relating to free childcare.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

The petition has so far garnered more than 132,000 signatures, but the amount of public engagement generated through the Petitions Committee has been quite astonishing. We have had 33,000 posts on our Facebook page, which has been viewed by more than 492,000 people. I did a webchat, which, for someone so useless with technology, is a step forward in itself. A number of people also emailed me personally and some of the stories they told were quite heart-breaking.

The difficulties that many parents have to go through simply to go out to work ought to give us all in the House pause for thought. Because of the difficulties they face, some of those parents, understandably, are quite angry, and sometimes their anger—not in the majority of cases—turns against the wrong target, which is those getting free childcare for two-year-olds. I want to set out the position as it is because there is a misunderstanding. Many people think that free childcare for two-year-olds is only available to parents who are unemployed, but that is not the case.

As we all know, all three and four-year-olds are currently entitled to 15 hours of free childcare for 38 weeks of the year. The provision was brought in by the Labour Government for four-year-olds for 38 weeks of the year. The provision was brought in by the Labour Government for four-year-olds for 33 weeks of the year. It rose by 30% on average between 2010 and 2015, but in getting after-school childcare and holiday care.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making an important point about the need for flexibility in the timing of childcare. I am particularly encouraged that the Scottish Government, after a major consultation, have launched a series of trials to ensure that, in Scotland, we can offer places where and when families need them. Does she agree that those steps are significant in making the provisions work for everyone?

Helen Jones: I agree with the hon. Lady. That we need flexible provision of childcare because what we have does not always fit with parents’ working hours. I will come to that later, but first I will give a few examples of the cost to parents.

Of course, costs vary throughout the country, but so do wages. One lady who contacted me from the north-west said that her family pay £840 a month for three days of childcare a week. Now, they are not highly paid and, to put it into context, that is exactly the same amount as their mortgage payment. Another parent from Surrey, at the other end of the country, got in touch with me. She and her husband have a reasonable joint income of £69,000, but they have twins. They have found that the cheapest way to provide childcare for their twins is to hire a nanny, but the cost of hiring a nanny is about £25,000 a year, which is more than a third of their joint income—an astronomical sum. These parents feel caught in a trap that is not of their own making. They want to work and, in many cases, they need to work just to keep their heads above water, yet a huge chunk of their earnings is being taken by childcare.

I was also contacted by a nurse who wants to go back to work in the NHS, and the country certainly needs nurses to go back to work. She found that, for a 12.5 hour day shift, she would be just £25 better off after paying for childcare. Her solution is to work night shifts, which, for various medical reasons, are not good for her. That is an example of the barriers people face just in doing their job.

The other issue that many parents raised with me was one of access, and that seems to be particularly true when one partner is in the armed forces. One family contacted me—again, not pleading poverty. They said, “We have a good income”, but they found that every time they moved, the decent nurseries, at a reasonable cost, were full, and they charge—certainly in the south of England—between £50 and £100 per child just to be put on the waiting list. Frankly, that is a rip-off that the Government could and should end very quickly.

Another member of the armed forces—a single parent who is not earning a high income—told me of the real difficulty she faced in finding childcare that would fit...
with her irregular working hours. Another family told me that when they move, they find that some local authorities provide free childcare for two-year-olds of military families, and that others do not, but those families have no control over where they are posted or, therefore, whether they can access that provision.

These are parents who are trying to do the right thing and set a good example to their children but, naturally enough, they want the best provision for their children, as we would all want for our children. That is why we should be talking about early years provision and early years education, rather than childcare. We want to provide the best we can for our very youngest children, but the problem is that for many years there has not been sufficient investment in the sector, and there are not sufficient qualified staff. I am convinced, as someone who began her career as a secondary teacher, that if we invested more in the early years, we would prevent many who began her career as a secondary teacher, that if we invested more in the early years, we would prevent many problems further along in the education system. Such a move would pay off because it is the right thing to do not only morally, but economically.

The last Labour Government recognised that problem and they fully recognised the difficulty of ensuring that we had a sufficiently skilled workforce. Therefore, part of the job of Sure Start centres, which became children's centres, was about providing day care, but it was also about giving advice to parents and, crucially, working with other providers and childminders to raise standards across the sector. It therefore seems a tragedy that the coalition Government decided to remove from centres in the most deprived areas not only the obligation to provide full day care but the need to employ a qualified teacher. There are some Ministers—I except the Minister present from this—who believe that anyone can teach, but I assure her that that is not the case. I suspect that many members of the Government would not last a day in early years provision. I know that I would not, and I am a qualified teacher. Early years provision is a highly skilled occupation if we are going to do it properly.

At the same time, the Government set up the early intervention grant and ended the ring-fencing of funding for children's centres. They then reduced the grant year by year, meaning that not enough money was going into the system. The House of Commons Library estimates that the predecessor grants that were rolled up into the early years grants were worth £2.79 billion in 2010. Immediately on taking office, the coalition Government reduced the sum to £2.48 billion, and to £2.24 billion the year after—that is 10% lower than what they spent the previous year and 20% lower than planned. Two thirds of that money was spent on the under-fives, which gives an idea of the impact of the grants on the whole sector.

There was no extra money when the coalition Government expanded childcare for two-year-olds. They paid for it by moving some of the early intervention grant across to the dedicated schools grant, thus starving the rest of the sector of resources. The remains of the early intervention grant continue to go down. The grant was part of the start-up funding assessment when the Government changed to a business rate retention scheme for local government finance, and it was £1.71 billion in 2013, going down to £1.58 billion the following year. This year it is £1.32 billion and, if the indicative totals we have are right, by 2019-20 it will be just over £1 billion.

What is the point of this ramble through the byzantine pathways of local government finance? I must admit that I find it fascinating, but I have never found anyone else who does. The simple reason is that we can have good early years provision and we can have cheap early years provision, but we cannot have good, cheap early years provision. The real problem with what the Government are doing is that it pushes more of the cost on to parents because the free hours are underfunded, and it ensures that the expertise that was being built up in children's centres is gradually disappearing as they close and as the services they offer are restricted.

There is doubt about whether the extended hours that the Government are offering will be properly funded. The National Audit Office published a report earlier this year in which it said that there was real difficulty because the Government's implementation of the provision will mean the end of much cross-subsidisation. At the moment if a parent has, say, 40 hours' childcare a week, 15 of those hours are paid for by the local authority but at a fairly low rate. The hours that the parent takes on are paid at a higher rate to cross-subsidise the other hours. If the Government do not properly fund the extra hours, several things could happen: the quality might reduce; many providers might not take part in the scheme at all; or there might be a further cost for parents because providers decide to charge more for other types of childcare, such as childcare for the under-twos, holiday provision and out-of-hours provision.

Several providers that have contacted me say that they are already struggling to keep going, even though low wages are endemic in the sector. Staff have contacted me about how little they earn, which makes it even more difficult to attract good, skilled staff. Those issues are important to parents because the Government estimate that the parents of some 390,000 children will want to take up the extra hours, which means an extra 45,000 places are needed. In fact, even more places are likely to be needed as the figure is likely to be an underestimate. If the policy is successful in getting more parents into work or in getting parents to work extra hours, even more childcare places will be needed. The Government's response was to announce last year that they would increase the average national funding rate for early years to £4.88 an hour from £4.56 an hour for three and four-year-olds. That, of course, is an average. Many councils do not pay that amount because they are having such difficulty funding even statutory services that there is not enough money left to fund early years services.

It is fair to say that many providers found the Government's response unconvincing. The Family and Childcare Trust told the Childcare Public Bill Committee that it was

"unlikely to be sufficient to address the strategic challenge the 30 hour offer presents".

The National Day Nurseries Association found in a survey of its members that only 45% were likely or very likely to take part in the scheme. If so, the shortage of places that we already face will simply get worse. Already 45% of councils in England do not have enough places for families who work full time.

The second issue to which the Government must face up is where most three and four-year-olds access this provision. Some 58% of them are in the maintained sector, usually in nursery classes attached to a primary
school. Many of those schools are on restricted sites and would not be able to expand even if capital funding were available, which at present seems fairly unlikely. There is also a bulge in the number of primary-aged children coming through the system. It does not take a genius to work out that if it is having to address a bulge in the number of primary schoolchildren as well as extra demand for nursery places, any school that can expand will expand to meet the primary provision because it has to—it is as simple as that.

At the same time, the Government risk hugely damaging the best provision in the childcare sector, which is in maintained nurseries. Some 60% of maintained nurseries are rated “outstanding” by Ofsted, and 39% are rated “good.” Nowhere else in the education system even gets near that level of supply. In their consultation on early years funding, the Government say that they want to fund all providers equally. Wherever they are, each child will receive the same amount of funding per hour. That sounds reasonable until we understand that nursery schools are required to employ qualified teachers and a qualified head, and many of the heads in this sector are very well qualified indeed. Nursery schools also provide training places for staff. They do outreach work not only with families but with other providers. The very good maintained nursery in my constituency, Sandy Lane, is based on the same site as a children’s centre and a private nursery precisely so that the three can work together, but they need the funding to do that.

We are in a position where we risk getting rid of the best provision, or hugely damaging it, where the Government are underfunding childcare and where the cost is being heaped on to parents for the extra hours they purchase. Frankly, it is a mess. It is a national disgrace that we treat our youngest children in that way. By trying to do it on the cheap, we are putting huge stress on working families. I would love to be able to say that we can deliver free childcare for all working families, but we cannot do so without more money in the system and without more training for staff.

That situation cannot be solved overnight—it cannot. I believe, even be solved in one Parliament—but we need a national strategy for early years. The Government should consider it seriously and set up an inquiry, perhaps a royal commission, staffed by experts. I know that some Government Members do not like experts, but we need them. They are experts because they know something about the subject. The inquiry should do several things. It should chart a path to, if not free, at least heavily subsidised early years provision, and it should lay out how we can grow the workforce that we need. At the moment, for instance, when we need nursery nurses the most, the number of applications for training is falling. The inquiry should also set out how we can raise the skill levels of people already working in the field.

At the moment, if we are honest, a lot of children are being cared for by unqualified teenagers, who might be nice people doing their level best but who do not have the skills necessary to develop the minds of young children, at an age at which they are developing more rapidly than at any other time in their lives and need constant care. We must amend that to give them the best. I hope that such an inquiry would have all-party support, so that we could take a consistent approach through several Parliaments.

I recognise that it will not be enough to alleviate the problems that parents face now. I urge the Government to consider seriously what they can do to support parents. The first thing that they should do is end a policy that threatens the best provision in the sector. The Government need to consider how to develop maintained nursery schools, how nursery classes attached to primary schools can expand and what capital provision can be given for that. They also need seriously to consider raising the hourly rate paid for the care of under-fives. If they do not, decent providers in the private sector will not be able to continue. Those who try to provide good, decent childcare cannot do it without proper funding. The Government should work much more with businesses to develop workplace nurseries—not simply providing vouchers, but talking to businesses and explaining why nurseries are vital to retaining a trained workforce and why they benefit businesses as well as children.

The Government should also consider giving parents decent help now with the costs of childcare, perhaps by extending child tax credit or by other methods. What is happening now is not helping families or children. We need to stop thinking of early years provision as an add-on that we think about after we have thought about the rest of the education system and realise that it is the way to tackle disadvantage and ensure more social mobility. If the Government concentrated on early years provision rather than grammar schools, they would do much better.

Kirsten Oswald: The point about disadvantage is key. Mark McDonald, the Scottish Government Minister for Childcare and Early Years, has identified that high-quality early learning and childcare plays a vital role in narrowing the attainment gap, which is why there is such a commitment to increasing early childcare and education provision.

Helen Jones: It is certainly true that it narrows the gap, but I want to make the point that it is good for all children. All children deserve the best provision that we can offer them, and we are not offering them that at the moment. We need to get a grip on the situation, for the sake of families in this country and of our children. If we do not, although we might not pay for early years provision immediately, we will pay the price further down the line in educational failure, social disadvantage and children not reaching their full potential. I urge the Minister, when she replies, to take the issue seriously so that we can at last move forward in this often-forgotten and certainly underfunded area of our education system.

4.54 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who has given us a brilliant exposition of the current problems with funding for childcare. Hopefully I will not repeat much of it, but I think it is interesting that so many people signed the e-petition and, as she explained, wanted to get involved in this debate.

This morning, before this debate, I was lucky enough to be asked to speak on Radio Merseyside—a fabulous local radio station. Often, when I take my little girl to the school gate, I do not have much political discussion
there—parents tend to be busy and not thinking about politics—but it was notable to me that this morning when I dropped off my lovely girl, her teacher said to me, “I’ve just heard you on the radio talking about childcare,” and proceeded to talk to me about all the issues. It does not surprise me at all that my hon. Friend has had the experience of all those people getting in touch with her. This is one of the most significant issues that faces our country, and even though it may not appear to be high politics in the conventional sense, it is where politics in our country could most influence families’ lives for good.

I will go back to basics and talk about the principles of why Government should be involved in childcare, and then make a couple of points about how we should do so. In the end, support for families and children, and for parents at work, goes back a long way in our country. Beveridge recognised when he was considering what made people poor that there were two times in people’s lives when they had less earning capacity and extra cost. One of those was when they got old, and the other was when they had children.

Beveridge recognised that having kids had the power to plunge families into poverty that they would not be in otherwise. That is why he designed family support as part of the very nature of our welfare state. He thought that people should be able to smooth their costs over their lives and receive state assistance at times when they had extra costs and less capacity to earn, so that when they had the ability to pay in, they could do so, smoothing their income over their lives to prevent poverty. That is the principle of our welfare state, and it always has been.

Beveridge knew something else as well about preventing families from being poor. He knew that Government needed to be committed to the principles of full employment and prepared to provide public services to underpin good health and good education, to ensure that people had the ability not just in theory but in practical terms to get a job. When I read the e-petition as submitted, with its emphasis on helping working people, I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that that is exactly what our country should be all about. That is why I think we should adopt the same principles, attitude and approach that Beveridge did when he designed our welfare state.

However, there is a crucial difference between the labour market then and now: people like me can get a job. Women now rightly expect to go to work. It turns out that once the historic prejudices against women in the workplace were removed—piece by piece, by those women in the ’50s, ’60s, ’70s and ’80s to whom I owe every chance that I have had as a woman in the workplace—women in great numbers wanted to go to work and have a career. We therefore need to fundamentally rethink the way in which the Government support families when their children are small, and we need to confront the fact that our labour market is now very different. That means that, as a country, we must applaud the nature and instinct of people who want to go to work and we must seek to provide good public services to back up that driving instinct. That simple conclusion is supported by the contribution of the woman who spoke before me on Radio Merseyside this morning, a dedicated Scouse nan called Linda who had gone on the radio to explain how stretched her family was; not just the mum and dad but the grandparents were trying to work and do childcare.

Kirsten Oswald: The hon. Lady makes a point that we should all consider very carefully, which is that this issue is not just about women—even though someone who looked around this Chamber might be forgiven for thinking that it was. It is about all of us. It is about everyone in a family: not just the children, but the parents and the wider family too.

Alison McGovern: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Of course childcare is not just a women’s issue, but it is a fact that the labour market has changed because women have joined it in greater numbers, so we have to rethink how the Government support parents in work. As it happens, I am sure that in my constituency as many men as women care about the cost of childcare. As many granddads as nans are supporting their children to take care of their children. This issue affects the whole family, older and younger alike, for all the reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North has set out: costs are cantering away ahead of wages and successive Governments have been too slow to be radical on childcare.

Another reality that we have to face is that we have a productivity crisis in this country: we are still working longer to make less than our competitors, and I think childcare plays a hidden role in that. Over the summer I went back to work—I did days at work with different types of businesses throughout the north-west, including in retail, manufacturing and care. Managers often told me that they wanted to find people to promote from within their businesses, who could do more, earn more and drive the business forward, but that people were not able to take on that extra responsibility because of their responsibilities at home. They did not think that they necessarily had the back-up to step up and get that promotion. Businesses can get people in through the door to do the basic jobs, but helping them to move on brings the risk of their fragile family caring responsibilities being unpicked.

Helen Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that working hours have changed across the whole range of businesses and jobs? When I worked at holiday jobs in retail, for instance, we finished at 5 o’clock—it was 9 to 5. That is no longer the case, and it places a huge burden on parents.

Alison McGovern: My hon. Friend is correct. These days, retail is 24 hours a day. She makes an excellent case for some sort of royal commission or cross-party inquiry into the matter, partly because we need to take a sectoral approach. The challenges in retail are immense, and so are the challenges in care. The NHS and the care sector need their own childcare strategy. We have a nursing recruitment crisis on our hands, and a lot of it has to do with care. When I was shadow childcare Minister in the last Parliament, I argued that the NHS needed its own childcare strategy, which the Department of Health should lead across Government. That has not happened yet, but it must. In the present situation, with the risk of Brexit and the possibility of an NHS hiring crisis, we must recognise that a lot of the problems are of our own making. Nurses, doctors and other health professionals—women and men—are really struggling
to work the hours they need to and to stay in work as they wish to, when they simply do not have the appropriate back-up.

The world has moved on, as my hon. Friend said. We want our businesses to be as productive as they can and our public services to be as efficient as they can. It is therefore incumbent on the Government to think strategically and to question the infrastructure support we offer so that our economy can work well. I know that the Government are committed to cutting corporation tax, but I really question whether that is the priority for business right now. When we talk to people in the business community, they are more interested in business rates than in corporation tax, and they are definitely interested in childcare. The childcare challenge that many employees face is a problem for small and big businesses alike. As the CBI has said, the Government could have a real impact on dealing with the infrastructure challenge that childcare represents.

I have two final points: the first is about children, who I feel always get left out of this conversation, and the second is about a possible way forward, adding to the very good suggestion of my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North.

Disabled children, who face particular difficulties in accessing the right care and support, are often forgotten in all this. Their parents are entitled to the same childcare for Warrington North.

The second group of children who are often forgotten about is those who live in rural areas. Towns and cities face many challenges in getting the right childcare provision, because geography can be a natural barrier to access. Those challenges can often be overlooked in our modern economy. I ask the Minister to think about that too.

Frankly, even for those who do not face those challenges, being a parent of a small child is terrifying. All of us who have ever experienced it know that. We need to move towards universal childcare for a very simple reason, in addition to all the reasons that I have set out about the benefits it would bring to businesses and our economy. Being a parent can be a huge challenge for anyone, and the one thing that gives a parent a little bit of confidence is meeting that key worker in the nursery or the childminder who has brilliant expertise, so that they have someone in their life to ask, “Am I doing this right?” I know that in the past parents coped without help and support, but these days our experience is that difficulties with parenting can strike anybody, whatever their income level or their confidence.

Helen Jones: Before my hon. Friend finishes her speech, may I point out that parents in the past had a lot of support? Extended families lived together or near one another, which is no longer the case. People did not look after a baby on their own; they had grannies, aunties and great-aunties all around them. As families become more mobile, that support network tends to disappear, which is a real problem for parents.

Alison McGovern: That is a very good point. In addition, bearing in mind what we know now about child development compared with what was known many years ago, I would argue that childcare is a real expertise. All parents welcome expertise on the best way to help their child to develop. All the evidence shows that the most important learning years of a person’s life are those when they are very small, but that is terrifying for the parent of a very small person. We know that what we do in those important years will echo down that child’s life and we desperately want the best for them, so it is really great to have a professional there who can help.

We should have a vision that runs from the midwife who cares for the child when they are first born, and for the parents before that, through the health visiting system to which the Government have said they are committed, to that family working with a key worker through nurseries and some universal childcare provision. That way, all the child’s earliest years, professionals would consistently be around the family to help them, alongside their extended family, where possible.

How do we do that practically, though? I wish to add a final thought to the mix. We have heard from the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) about the work the Scottish Government are doing, which is to be commended, but some new devolved institutions are also coming to England. We should look at how childcare is provided through local authorities, because there is a possibility of doing more and improving expertise if local authorities are able to work together across boundaries to come up with a good universal childcare proposal for their area. We might then benefit from the efficiencies of local authorities working together, and it would also help them to think strategically about the educational challenges faced by their city or city region and then to put investment in the right place. Ministers cannot know that from Whitehall. With the greatest respect to the Minister, she is never going to have a fine detail of knowledge about the best childcare arrangements for Merseyside, but we could do that in Merseyside for ourselves. Will the Minister think about how resources could be devolved out of Whitehall and given to city regions or groups of local authorities working together?

I am afraid I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North: in the end, I do not believe we have backed up our children with nearly enough finance. Nevertheless, if we are going to spend more on childcare, let us do it in an effective way that respects the different challenges faced by cities throughout the country and does not dictate from Whitehall how it should be provided. If we do that, people will get a real sense that the Government are prepared to back them up. Our economy will most certainly feel the benefit, but—much more importantly—so will every family in the country.

5.13 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is really nice to speak on a petition in Westminster Hall; I have spoken in a number of other Westminster Hall debates,
but never on a petition, so it is nice to have another first 18 months into the job. I thank you for your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for leading the debate. As Members would expect, I wish to talk about the situation in Scotland, and what we are doing there on early learning and childcare. I shall discuss the real-life importance of childcare provision. The hon. Members for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and for Warrington North both gave a lot of real-life examples; I, too, will discuss a few. I shall also talk about the importance of choice for parents.

I shall start by talking a little about the numbers and finances. Labour Members, particularly the hon. Member for Wirral South, have discussed the amount the Government will spend to increase the number of free hours. I understand that the UK Government are committed to spending an extra £1 billion by 2020. The Scottish Government are committed to spending £500 million by 2021; considering how much smaller Scotland is than England, that is a stark contrast.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Caroline Dinenage): May I correct the hon. Lady? Although there is an additional £1 billion, the figure is actually £6 billion by 2020.

Kirsty Blackman: Yes, the Scottish Government have committed to spending an additional half of the UK Government's additional spend. Considering the differential in the respective populations, there is probably a differential in the spend. I took the figure for UK Government spending from the Library debate pack.

In Scotland, we will create 600 new early learning and childcare centres, with 20,000 additional qualified staff. Doubling the free early learning and childcare hours for all three and four-year-olds, as well as for the most disadvantaged two-year-olds, will benefit families by more than £4,500 per year, per child. That is a significant saving. I will come on to discuss the importance of that in the context of choice.

Our doubling of free childcare in Scotland will not be linked to employment status, unlike the changes down here, but changes will be made in both England and Scotland, and I do recognise that England is making positive changes to childcare provision. Our respective Governments are doing that in slightly different ways, with slightly different funding structures. I am not criticising the UK Government for increasing the number of free hours; quite the opposite. It is a very good thing. I have spoken before about how important it is.

I have a five-year-old and a three-year-old, and I have friends with similarly young children. A number of the women have had to go back to work for nothing. After the childcare costs are taken out, it turns out that they have gone back to work for pretty much no pay. The hon. Member for Warrington North mentioned £800 for three days' childcare a week; for a while, we were paying £300 a month for one day a week. That is an incredible amount of money, and it is difficult to earn that much in a month when working only one day a week.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): The hon. Lady is making a compelling case. Does she agree that there is a compelling need for both partners in a household to work, and that sometimes inhibits childcare provision? If they do not work, they will not be able to pay for that provision.

Kirsty Blackman: Absolutely. There is a real problem with choice for families. In some cases, families cannot afford to go to work because of the cost of childcare. We should not be in that situation. All parents—men and women—should be able to choose whether they go into the workplace. For some parents, it is much healthier to go to work. I was a rubbish stay-at-home mum and did not enjoy it very much at all. I did not do it for particularly long, because it just was not for me—I was going mad. It was much better for me to be in the workplace, but in some cases it was costing me money to do that. I was having to spend more on childcare than I was earning, especially once commuting was taken into account. As has been mentioned, that is a real issue in rural areas, and there is a need for specific provision for such areas.

Choice is a real issue. There has been a little discussion about whether childcare is a women's issue. In Aberdeen and my local area, it is probably more of a women's issue than in some other areas of the country. We have so many people, mostly men, who go offshore for work. As they are offshore for two or three weeks at a time, there is a real issue with women going back to work. They certainly cannot work night shifts, because there is nobody there to care for the children overnight. Historically, a huge number of women have had to decide not to work on the basis of their partner's working hours. The lack of flexibility in childcare is a real issue in that respect.

Alison McGovern: Does the hon. Lady agree that her argument is an absolutely cast-iron reason why this issue has to be addressed in a devolved way? It has to be devolved down to the best possible level, because local economies are different and not everything can be dictated from Whitehall.

Kirsty Blackman: It is really important that we look at how this issue is addressed in terms of devolution, and in different areas, because there are specific challenges—around specific industries, such as the one I mentioned; around rurality and the kind of distances involved in some rural areas; and around staff numbers.

We have a specific issue in Aberdeen with attracting qualified staff, because as we have historically had a lot of people working in the oil industry, where they have made lots of money, housing is more expensive than in other areas. Consequently, someone who works in childcare, or even teaching, will find it more difficult to live there. Although we have made local provision to deal with some aspects of this issue, we are not there yet, and it is necessary that local authorities, institutions and organisations can have input into how childcare provision is managed.

Kirsten Oswald: I am interested in what my hon. Friend says about Aberdeen, which is one of the areas taking part in a pilot scheme to examine the different models of childcare that might suit families in different areas of the country, as part of the Scottish Government's aim to double childcare provision. Does she agree that it is very important that childcare matches the needs of not only the local area, but individual families, whose work lives may have very varied patterns?
**Kirsty Blackman:** I absolutely agree, and my hon. Friend has given me a nice opportunity to talk about the trials that we are undertaking. Nobody, certainly in the UK, has cracked this childcare thing. We have not all got it sorted; there is no way that we can look at the system and say, “It’s perfect. We’ve sussed it out.” We all need to learn from each other about what works in different areas, and ask whether those things would work in ours. The Scottish Government are undertaking three trials, on three different things that local authorities have specifically requested.

In Edinburgh, the trial is establishing outdoor nursery provision. Children who live in the centre of the city may not get out too often to the woods and forests around Edinburgh, so that local trial, in which the Scottish Government will invest £32,000, will provide access to outdoor learning for specific groups of children. We will see how that works, and will evaluate it.

In Aberdeen, in my constituency, we are having a stay-and-play session for parents of two-year-olds. A group of parents have been reluctant to leave their two-year-old in nursery provision; they are not quite sure how that would work, and perhaps think that it is a bit too far for a two-year-old. The parents will be able to stay with their two-year-old, who will still get the benefit of being in an educational setting. Also, the parents will benefit. As was said earlier, parenting small children is terrifying, and a new parent has no idea if they are doing the right thing, ever; they just have to try their best. This trial is a good opportunity for parents to learn, too.

In the Scottish Borders, the trial being undertaken by the Scottish Government is about wrap-around provision—provision outside of core hours, holiday provision and after-school provision, and provision that is more appropriate for most people with normal working lives. Hardly anybody I know can fit in a job in the three hours and 10 minutes of morning nursery care that my youngest child receives. In fact, a lot of people struggle to fit in a job between 9 am and 3.15 pm, which is when my eldest child is at school.

**Kirsten Oswald:** That is an incredibly important point. Nobody, I know, or almost nobody, works from 9 am to 3 pm. If I had not been able to get childcare provision from 8 am to 6 pm, including for holidays, I would have had to stop my career progression when my children were little. It is really vital that we do not impede women, children or families in that way.

**Kirsty Blackman:** Absolutely. As the Scottish Government go forward with these pilots, and with possible changes, we will look to have much more flexibility, and much more access to nurseries and childminders, rather than just the kind of maintained provision discussed earlier. I am not sure that we use that phrase in Scotland, but I understand what it means. We look to have much more flexibility in the settings that children and young people can access with these free hours, which will allow more flexibility around hours and holidays.

I have already talked about choice and the benefits of choice. Heriot-Watt University has carried out a study for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that says that “reinforcing and extending the improved provision for good quality, flexible, subsidised childcare across the working year” would be one of the “most significant measures” to tackle poverty.

We have spoken about how childcare can have the benefit of tackling poverty by changing the system for parents who cannot afford to work. We have also spoken about the benefits of childcare as regards children’s attainment; actually, it has benefits for the attainment of all children, and not just those who are starting off with a disadvantage and are, if you like, at the bottom of the pile. However, we have spoken less about the benefits for the workplace and for productivity, although that was mentioned by the hon. Member for Warrington North.

If people can access the workplace without worrying about their children, and about whether they can get home for a 3.15 school pick-up, they will concentrate more on their job, and as a result they will be more productive. The more we can do to increase the choice for parents, the better. Whether they choose to work or not to work, we need to ensure that they can make that choice at all times; that would benefit everybody, including employers.

I produced a blog for Family Friendly Working Scotland, during its National Work Life Week, that encouraged employers to consider flexible working seriously. We are trying to make clear to employers the benefits of flexible working—for them, as well as for employees. The real benefit for the employer is in improved productivity, and in having access to a talent pool to which they currently do not have access. Sometimes employers hear the words “flexible working” and think, “Panic! We can’t do that!” but some aspects of flexible working are really very reasonable. If, for example, an employer is able to give shift patterns a couple of weeks out, instead of a week out, that makes all the difference for employees when it comes to planning and childcare. Using grandparents and other family members for childcare was mentioned earlier. Some women, parents and families do not have choice; some of them are not able to access grandparents. For example, a parent may not have a partner and so they have to try to do everything themselves.

The benefits of increasing free childcare are so wide-ranging that it is almost impossible to talk about them all in a half-hour speech, or even in a three-hour debate such as today’s. However, I think everybody recognises that increasing free childcare has huge benefits, and both the UK and Scottish Governments have made positive moves in the direction of increasing the amount of free childcare, and increasing provision, particularly around the number of hours and the changes to allow two-year-olds free nursery care.

In the future, we can learn from each other—something I always seem to find myself stressing in Westminster Hall. The Scottish Government can learn from what the UK Government are doing, and the UK Government can learn from some of the pilots that we are running, and some of the changes that we are making in Scotland. As the hon. Member for Wirral South said, local authorities and devolved institutions can learn from what is happening in other areas. They can learn whether good things that are happening elsewhere can be transferred across.

On the whole, what we are doing is largely positive, but I would like to see more of that, and more choice for parents. I would also like more access to free, high-quality childcare, and the assurance that enough funding will be provided for these things to happen.
The Government should also be frank about the fact that those out of work are not receiving the free childcare to which their two-year-olds are entitled, with only 42% of families in England who qualify receiving it, which compares with the uptake of Flying Start provision for two-years-olds under the Labour Administration in Wales, which stood at 86% in 2015.

Caroline Dinenage: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady’s flow, but I would like to correct her, as she has just given out a completely factually inaccurate statistic. Some 70% of eligible two-year-olds are taking up their entitlement to a funded learning place.

Tulip Siddiq: I thank the Minister for her contribution, but the source I have, which I believe and which is very credible, says that it is 42% of families, so we will have to figure out who is right. I would just like to point out again that under the Labour Administration in Wales the uptake of Flying Start provision for two-year-olds stood at 86% last year.

Labour believes that the Government have failed to deal with unacceptable local variations in the information that is available to families who could benefit from the childcare offer for two-year-olds. I have seen it myself, when knocking on doors in my constituency, and the Public Accounts Committee has heard that only 30% of parents are aware of the family information services. That weakens the value of the childcare already on offer, when the socioeconomic gap in educational attainment is large and the benefits that come from high-quality provision for disadvantaged children are clear for everyone to see. Extending the entitlement to 30 hours a week for working families is likely to place further strain on quality and access for the most disadvantaged children, so we need to tread carefully. Labour believes that that is due to the policy criteria, the capacity of the sector and the quality of the provision that can be offered under the current funding rates. Will the Minister outline how the Department will improve the quality and consistency of the information available to parents and also explain how providers can double provision with the funding they currently have?

It is clear that Government measures to help working families have been insufficient and have led to the justified anger seen in the petition. Over the last Parliament, the cost of a part-time nursery place for a child under two increased by 32%. A family paying for that type of care now spends in excess of £1,500 more than they did in 2010, and wages have been largely static, which adds to the pressures on working families. The member of the public whose Facebook post prompted the conversation we are having spoke for many when he said:
“Myself and my wife work full time and pay over £800 per month for childcare... If we had another child, I would have to give up my job, as it’s simply outrageous the amount we have to pay”.

On the Facebook page are other poignant comments by people who are struggling to make ends meet because of childcare costs. That individual’s experiences are also reflected in research by the Resolution Foundation, which shows that more than a third of mothers who want to work are unable to do so because of high childcare costs. That issue was referred to by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), and my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South spoke extensively and eloquently about the problems of the current labour market. She told us the story of Linda from Merseyside. I can safely say to her that there are countless other Lindas, not just in my constituency but across the country, who will be able to relate to that story. Of course, childcare is not only a women’s issue—a point that has been made—but it is no secret that the pressures of childcare fall disproportionately on women, in lots of situations, especially the one that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North mentioned.

I want to come back to the tax-free childcare scheme that the Government speak about. The Government talk about helping those who are just managing, but the cap on working tax credit means that in 11 local authorities the average cost of part-time childcare now exceeds the support on offer. Furthermore, the tax-free childcare scheme, which I am sure the Minister will mention, has been poorly communicated and twice frustrated by Government delays. Research has indicated that the scheme will only deliver for those on high incomes, meaning that it may not support the families who need it most. Labour believes that it is proving to be a wasted opportunity in addressing the root cause of mounting childcare costs, not least for those struggling to make ends meet.

I also want to touch briefly on the funding formula and the lack of places. We believe that the extortionate costs that parents face—different Members have mentioned that over and over again in this debate—are the result of reduced funding being given to providers and the shortage of places available. Under the new early years funding formula, many providers will receive a much lower hourly income for free early education places, which is a disgrace. That reduction is happening when providers are experiencing higher running costs and expanding provision to keep alive the Government’s pledge of 30 hours of free childcare a week. Anyone who listened to the last Education questions will know that I have raised the issue over and over again.

The Family and Childcare Trust reveals that the number of English local authorities reporting a shortage of free early education places for three and four-year-olds has more than doubled. Figures from the House of Commons Library show that the number of places available has fallen by 45,000 since 2009. The figures speak for themselves. The Department for Education recently announced that it was paying £3 million for a private consultancy to find the 45,000 places needed to make the 30 hours’ free entitlement work. That is a choice figure. The costs that providers face, such as business rates and pension auto-enrolments, are fuelling the rapid increases in childcare costs. However, what worries me is that more than one quarter of local authorities will lose money through the funding formula while being asked to manage the costs and to double the childcare entitlement. A 2015 report by the Institute for Public Policy Research explored the possible consequences of such a funding gap. It said:

“Underfunding the 30 hours offer would lead to a smaller, less flexible market as providers...either exit, reduce the breadth of services that they offer, take on fewer children, or refuse to offer the free hours... This would reduce parental choice and potentially push up costs for paid hours or other services outside of the free offer, such as childcare for most under-3s”.

I will draw my remarks to a close, because I want to hear what the Minister has to say. In addition to their punitive funding formula, the Government have as yet refused to commit to supplementary funding for nurseries beyond the two years. Nurseries have been clear, both in the conversations I have had and in writing to all Members of the House, that the cocktail of funding pressures will ultimately push them into an unsustainable financial situation. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North eloquently referred to that in her speech. I hope the Minister will put an end to the uncertainty and immediately commit to funding to guarantee the long-term future of nursery schools.

Labour believes that working parents are bearing the burden of the Government demanding unachievable expansion in provision while providing woeful underfunding. It is no secret that the autumn statement is happening this week. We demand that the Chancellor provides parents and teachers across the country with the funding to keep nurseries open, to reduce the costs of funded places and to meet the Government’s 30 hours promise to parents. I hope the Minister will be able to offer even the slightest encouragement that those figures will be in the Chancellor’s autumn statement.

I finish by echoing the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North, who secured this debate. The early years cannot just be seen as an add-on. They are crucial to social mobility and to children reaching their full potential. Most importantly, they are crucial to the future of our country and the productivity of our economy.

5.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Caroline Dinenage): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on securing this important debate and on all the hard work she has taken part in leading up to today, including all her various online activities. Regardless of her technical expertise, she has certainly triumphed. I am delighted to be here to set out the Government’s childcare offer to parents. As you know, Mr Davies, one of our top priorities is to give children the best start in life and to support working parents.

I congratulate all the Members who have taken part in today’s debate. Almost without exception, their contributions have been helpful and constructive and have shown that we all share a common goal, which is to support working parents and children in getting access to the best childcare, to work together with that aim, to share best practice and to find a common ground to build on. I say almost without exception because, while I welcome the shadow Minister to her place—I know that she is quite new to the shadow Government—I gently say to her that there was nothing positive or constructive in anything she said. At no point did I get...
the sense that she wanted to work with me on this area to make it work. All she wanted to do was make cheap political points in the name of the Labour party. She might as well have been dressed as a great big red rose and be done with it, but this area is too important for political point scoring. It is about children’s futures and parents being able to get out and work and make the money they need to run their families. It is not about cheap political point scoring, and she should be ashamed of herself. However, I congratulate the others who spoke.

I have been in the same position as other Members. I am a working mum, and the decisions I have made about my children’s education and their childcare have been among the most difficult I have ever made. It is difficult being in that position. For many years I was a single mother who felt like she was working only to pay for her childcare, so I understand how people feel. Wearing my other hat as the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities, I go round the country speaking to many women, and they tell me that the biggest obstacle to them getting back into work and fulfilling their potential is the cost of childcare. That is why we want to get things right.

The petition asked why we give free early learning to the two-year-olds of non-working parents. I want to be clear up front that the Government are proud to provide early learning to the most disadvantaged two-year-olds. We want to ensure that all children get the best start in life, regardless of their background. Unfortunately, evidence tells us that children from less advantaged backgrounds can be up to 19 months behind in their learning by the time they start school. We all know that gaps in learning can start appearing as early as 22 months of age, but high-quality early learning from the age of two can narrow that gap, helping those children to achieve better GCSE results and ultimately earn higher wages.

For that reason, in September 2013 the Government introduced the early learning for two-year-olds programme. Initially, it was for the most disadvantaged two-year-olds from non-working households in England. The programme was later expanded in September 2014 to include low-income working parents, as well as looked-after children, children who have left care, adopted children and children with special educational needs and disabilities. Now, 40% of two-year-olds are eligible. The Government are committed to supporting those parents who are just about managing, and the policy is focused squarely on those families.

Looked-after children and children who have left care can face multiple challenges in progressing well in the early years and at school. As a group, they persistently underachieve at key stages 1 and 2. As we know, adoptive parents are brilliant and play an incredibly important role. The Government want to ensure that they and their children get the best possible start and support. Giving adopted children an early education place is one aspect of the Government’s significant package of adoption support.

Research indicates that children with special educational needs and disabilities particularly benefit from early education. It helps their development and improves their social inclusion and wellbeing. However, families sometimes find it difficult to access appropriate care and can face higher costs. The hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) spoke about that, and she did an excellent job while she was the shadow Minister for childcare. Since 1 September 2014, two-year-olds entitled to disability living allowance, or those who have a current statement of SEN or an education, health and care plan, have been entitled to an early education place. Our new offer for three and four-year-olds includes a £12.5 million disability access fund to support disabled children in order to access the free entitlement.

Alison McGovern: I thank the Minister for giving way and for her kind remarks. I have one specific question on children with disabilities. Often it is the perception of difficulty in welcoming children with disabilities into early years settings that is a problem. Are the Government working on a way to break down barriers so that nurseries and childcare settings make it clear to parents of children with disabilities that they are welcome?

Caroline Dinenage: Absolutely. The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. We have heard a lot today about maintained nursery schools, which do a fantastic job with children with special educational needs or disabilities. They need to be supported to carry on doing that work.

Helen Jones: Many maintained nurseries have special units for children with special needs. They take in disabled children. Does the Minister accept that that is another reason why maintained nurseries need to be fully supported in the extra responsibilities that they take on?

Caroline Dinenage: Absolutely. I am a great fan of maintained nursery schools. There is one in my own constituency, which has significant pockets of deprivation, that provides outstanding support for children. That is why the Government have committed, as part of the funding formula, to an extra £55 million a year for at least the next two years to support maintained nursery schools over and above the normal funding formula. Maintained nursery schools make up only 3% of childcare places. However, 98% of them are good or outstanding and 80% work in areas of disadvantage, which is why we want to consult them further about how we can support them in their very important work.

We know that good quality education at two can have a fantastic effect on a child’s development. We want children in care, children who have left care, adopted children and children with special educational needs and disabilities to benefit from that, as we have a duty to help them thrive and reach their potential. It is unacceptable that a child should have inferior life chances because of their background; this programme is key to tackling the problem. I am sure all hon. Members would agree that it is vital we help such children.

Kirsty Blackman: It is still the case that a child’s long-term future exam results can be predicted by the highest level of their mother’s qualifications. Does the Minister agree that both our Governments are working hard to do something about this and that we should continue to keep this as a top priority?

Caroline Dinenage: I did not know that interesting statistic. The hon. Lady is right. Providing better early education can only ever be a really good thing.
Some hon. Members have asked why all two-year-olds do not get a fully funded place. Such places are not offered to all two-year-old children because evidence tells us that the greatest proportion of parents return to work and need childcare when their children turn three. Some parents feel that two years is too young for their children to be in formal childcare and prefer to keep them at home. I was similar to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North and did not stay in the childcare environment for as long as I could have done. That probably gives me an added respect for the amazing individuals who work in that incredible profession.

We wanted to focus resources where they would have the greatest impact for the largest number of families. That is why we prioritised the introduction of an additional 15 hours for the working parents of three and four-year-olds.

The main driver behind the two-year-old programme is to improve outcomes for the children who need the most help in getting the best start in life. For that reason, we do not impose conditions on parents who are eligible for a place, but we hope the programme will support parents from poorer backgrounds to move into employment and training. We have come an incredibly long way since 2013. As I have already mentioned, 70% of eligible two-year-olds now take up their entitlement to a funded learning place.

We also know that 84% of all two-year-olds who take up their entitlement do so in good or outstanding settings, which means that children are receiving their learning in high quality environments. That is fantastic progress and will ensure that thousands of disadvantaged children get the right start in life.

Tulip Siddiq: I am sorry the Minister seems a bit rattled by what I have said. I am the Opposition spokesperson and I will hold the Government to account and do my duty in making sure that childcare is properly provided to parents; and I want to hear about the funding. The statistic I cited, which the Minister disputed, was from the Family and Childcare Trust childcare costs survey 2016. In England, the uptake of free early education among two-year-olds stood at 58% in January and at 46% in London. I would like to hear what the Minister has to say.

Caroline Dinenage: I am keen to tell the hon. Lady what I think. Because she is very new to her role, I am prepared to cut her some slack. If she chats to her hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South, she will find that she can hold the Government to account in a constructive and positive way, rather than in an endlessly and relentlessly negative way.

Tulip Siddiq: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Dinenage: No, I have given way enough. In answer to her question, the figures are the Government’s figures and they are correct.

I want to make progress. We know that it is not only the most disadvantaged parents who need help with childcare costs. That is why we are increasing our investment in childcare from £5 billion to £6 billion a year by 2019-2020. We remain absolutely committed to providing 15 hours a week of early learning to all parents with three and four-year-olds. In addition to this universal entitlement, we will introduce 30 hours a week of childcare from September 2017, which will support more than 400,000 working families with three and four-year-olds, saving them around £5,000 a year in childcare costs. We want to remove the real financial barriers that prevent parents from going back to work or increasing their current hours, so that they can realise their potential and contribute to our economy and their children’s future.

Kirsten Oswald: I echo the Minister’s sentiments about removing financial barriers. Does she agree it is also important to remove structural barriers as far as possible by making sure there is flexibility of provision and that we do not continually assume that one size will fit all?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is right. Flexibility is really important, which is why our recent consultation response committed us to offering free hours between the hours of 6 am and 8 pm to meet the needs of parents who work shifts. We also encourage local authorities and providers to offer the free hours over more than 38 weeks a year so that parents can stretch their hours, whether it is fewer hours over more weeks or during the school holidays. The flexibility that she talked about is really important.

At present, the Government are piloting the programme in eight early implementer areas. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North spoke about the importance of the really good trials going on at the moment. It is the same in the early implementer areas. Through these early implementers, more than 3,500 children have already taken up a 30-hour place one year early, which is giving their parents more disposable income and an opportunity to return to work or work more hours. We expect that figure to increase during the course of early implementation, because more parents will become eligible for the extended entitlement at different points during the year. I want to put on the record my gratitude to Hertfordshire, Newham, Northumberland, Portsmouth, Swindon, Staffordshire, Wigan, York and the childcare providers in those areas who have worked tirelessly to make the programme a reality.

The eight early implementers provide us with an opportunity to address key delivery issues for the 30-hour offer, and for us to test the practical ways that councils and providers can work together. Various Members have spoken about the specific challenges of different areas of the country: for example, the challenges in Aberdeen with the offshore workers. My constituency has a lot of families with partners in the armed forces, particularly in the Royal Navy, who face a similar challenge. That is why we have various early implementer pilots going on to look at all such challenges. For example, Northumberland is focusing on rural areas and Staffordshire is focusing on work incentives, as is Swindon, along with flexibility, including the use of Saturday provision via a nursery attached to a hospital to support the staff who work there. Newham is focusing on developing a range of delivery models and supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities. Wigan and Hertfordshire are exploring partnerships through the use of childcare hubs and supporting parents back into work, and Portsmouth is supporting low-income families.
offer by developing approaches to support children with special educational needs and disabilities; developing scalable, flexible models that meet the needs of working parents; ensuring the sufficiency of the local childcare markets; and stimulating parental demand for the new entitlement to act as a work incentive.

I would like to point out that the consultancy that the Opposition spokesperson said £3 million is being spent on is actually not a consultancy: it is a contract to offer practical support to local authorities and childcare providers to help them get ready to deliver the 30 hours. It includes sharing lessons from the early implementers—

Tulip Siddiq: It is a consultancy.

Caroline Dinenage: It is not a consultancy. It provides courses and shares best practice. It is about being out there, on the ground, speaking one-to-one to administrators and deliverers. The hon. Lady really needs to look up the meaning of the word “consultancy”. It offers practical help on the ground to providers, and helps them to get the very best out of their business models.

The lessons learned from the combined delivery approach of the early implementers and innovators offer a unique opportunity to provide vital information to the local authorities getting ready to meet parental demand when national roll-out takes place. We are capturing learning throughout the year and sharing it with all local authorities to ensure that early implementation is a success—that is what the £3 million contract is about—and that full roll-out has the benefit of the learning that success generates. The more planning and testing we can do in the widest possible number of areas, the more likely we are to have a smooth launch of this key Government priority.

At the same time, the Government will introduce tax-free childcare from early 2017, which is intended to help parents with the cost of living by subsidising the cost of childcare. The tax-free childcare will be paid per child, rather than per parent, and childcare costs will be subsidised for children up to the age of 12, or 17 if they are disabled. The Government calculate that, once it is fully implemented, about 2 million working families across the UK will have access to the new scheme. It will give parents a 20% subsidy on their childcare costs, up to a maximum contribution of £2,000 per child per year, or £4,000 for disabled children. The scheme will effectively subsidise 20% of childcare costs—up to £10,000 per child.

In addition, the Government’s flagship welfare reform programme, universal credit, also offers help with the cost of childcare for parents on lower incomes, even if they work only a few hours a week. Working parents on universal credit can now claim up to 85% of their childcare costs. Together with the 30 hours and tax-free childcare, that amounts to an unprecedented level of support to working parents for their childcare costs.

The hon. Member for Warrington North talks as though the high cost of childcare—we all know it is high, and I have outlined the many things the Government are doing to tackle it—is a recent phenomenon. Many hon. Members who spoke today have the advantage of having youth on their side and of having young children—I am jealous of them—but I was a parent during the previous Labour Government, which the Opposition spokesman spoke about in such glowing terms. I put my children through early years childcare under a Government who presided over the most expensive childcare in Europe. I was working to pay for my childcare. The Government introduced the 15-hours offer, but not everybody offered it, and I had great difficulty accessing it. Childcare is one of the biggest obstacles to women getting back into work, which is why it is important that we have all the schemes I have talked about.

Helen Jones: I am sorry, but I cannot let the Minister get away with that. She is right that childcare has always been expensive, but the Labour Government expanded the number of childcare places in this country hugely and set up Sure Start and children’s centres for the first time. She cannot get away from the simple fact that the cost of childcare went up 30% under the coalition Government—five times the rate of wage growth. That is what has put so many families in such a difficult position.

Caroline Dinenage: As the hon. Member for Wirral South said, this is not a recent phenomenon; it has accumulated over a number of years. I can speak only from my personal experience—I know that the children of the hon. Member for Warrington North are a bit older. My children were accessing early years childcare during the years of the Labour Government, and I saw those prices go up exponentially. That is why we are dealing with this issue. In addition to various other policies that help many of the issues that have been described today, such as giving people access to flexible working and shared parental leave, which was never introduced under the previous Labour Government, more than £6 billion will be spent on childcare by 2019-20 in cash terms—[Interruption.] I know the hon. Lady is not listening, but that is more than any other Government have ever spent on this issue. It includes an extra £1 billion on the free early years entitlement.

Kirsten Oswald: The Minister is being very generous in giving way. Will she humour me and agree that the Scottish Government have gone further than any other Government in their commitment to early years education and childcare?

Caroline Dinenage: I do not know, but I am keen to learn from best practice wherever I find it, so I will be hot-footing it back to my office directly after this debate to see what we can learn from what is happening in Scotland.

A large amount of the additional money that we are spending on childcare is going to increase the average funding rate. The Opposition spokesperson said it is going down, but it is actually going to go up for private and voluntary providers in 88% of local authorities, including that of the hon. Member for Warrington North, where the hourly rate will go up by 19%.

Helen Jones: The Minister is missing out the fact that going up from a low hourly rate to a slightly better one does not solve the problem. The Government’s problem when they introduce the 30-hour provision will be that, unless they fund those hours properly, they will simply raise costs elsewhere in the system, so parents will be unlikely to benefit. Once the cross-subsidisation is taken out, costs will go out somewhere else, whether for
under-threes, out-of-hours childcare, or whatever. The low rate of funding throughout the system is what needs to be addressed—it leads to some providers struggling to maintain their provision and to endemic low wages in the sector, which work against recruiting skilled workers, and it does not provide the best quality of care.

Caroline Dinenage: I do not understand why the hon. Lady is saying that what we are doing is already leading to that, because we have not yet done it. The early years funding formula response has not even been published—it will be out soon. She is sniffing at a 19% rise in her area, according to the figures we saw in the summer, which seems a little unkind.

I was also a little disappointed with how the hon. Lady described early years professionals. She talked about them as unskilled teenagers, slightly undermining the quality—

Helen Jones: On a point of correction, I am sorry, but the Minister misquotes me. I said that children needed the best skilled and professional care but that some of them are being looked after by unqualified teenagers, who are not the professionals in this. The professionals are those who have the proper qualifications and experience. She really must not misquote me on that, because I was clear that the best outcomes for children are when they are looked after by skilled, experienced people.

Caroline Dinenage: I am grateful for the clarification, but the hon. Lady should be aware—I hope she already is and is just playing with me—that the quality of the workforce is already good and has been improving: 87% of staff in full-day care settings are now qualified to level 3, the proportion of such staff with at least that level having grown from 75% to 87% between 2008 and 2013, while the proportion of those with a degree or higher increased from 5% to 13%. We are not, however, resting on our laurels. We have a workforce strategy that will seek to support even further those excellent people who work in our childcare environment.

Kirsten Oswald: Regardless of the difference of opinion between the Minister and the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), will they both agree with me that the quality of staff in those childcare establishments is absolutely key? It is one of the main things that makes it possible for mothers and fathers to feel confident about leaving their children in such establishments. The staff’s work is exceptional.

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is right: the work those staff do is exceptional. Any of us who have had access to early years education all know that the quality of early years childcare is exceptional. Recent Ofsted statistics show that 91% of providers in the early years are good or outstanding, and that is the highest such figure we have ever seen. Alongside that, the most recent EYSS—early years SEN support—outcomes data show that almost 70% of children are reaching a good level of development by the age of five.

I thank all Members who have contributed to this important debate. I hope they can see that the Government care enormously about outcomes for children and childcare costs for all parents. It is completely unfair for children who are disadvantaged not to have the same opportunities as others, but the significant burden that childcare costs can have on parents is also unfair, which is why we have put in place all the measures that I have mentioned today to help solve the problem.

6.11 pm

Helen Jones: I only want to make a few remarks to wind up. I am grateful to the Members who have spoken, but I am disappointed that the Minister has still not responded to efforts to reach a long-term solution to the problem, and one that can command support over several Parliaments, if necessary. We do not yet have that, and we will not get it without proper inquiry into the way in which we do early years education in this country. We should not elide childcare with early years education, and early years education is what we really want for our children, by the best-qualified and most experienced staff. She needs to address both the shortage of early years teachers—I say “teachers”, not other staff—and, despite what she has said, the underfunding. We need to progress to a long-term solution to the problem, and I am sorry that she did not address it in her closing remarks.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered e-petition 132140 relating to free childcare.

6.12 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 22 November 2016

[SIR ROGER GALE in the Chair]

South-west Growth Charter

9.30 am

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Once we have heard the opening speech, I will indicate whether it is necessary to impose a time limit. Nine Members are seeking to take part in the debate, so we are probably looking at around five minutes each.

9.31 am

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the South West Charter for Growth.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger.—[Interruption.] That is a ringing endorsement. I am delighted to have secured this opportunity to bring to Westminster the campaign for the south-west to be seen as a centre for growth. The business community in the south-west is serious about introducing a framework for growth and economic prosperity in our important and much-loved region, which is what we are here to debate today.

We do not come to the Government with a begging bowl; we come to say that this is what the south-west business community plans to do for our region. The charter is not the brainchild of local authorities, politicians or quangos; it is the voice of business expressing its positive commitment to our region and saying to Whitehall, “This is what we will do. Now, Government, please do the part that only Governments can really do, namely infrastructure. Give us the tools to do the job.”

First, how do we define the south-west for the purpose of this debate? The Government usually describe the south-west as the seven counties from Land’s End to Gloucester, including Bristol and Stonehenge—a wide and disparate area. Not so today: the south-west for the purpose of this debate, the summit and the charter is primarily Cornwall, of course including the Isles of Scilly—I would not want to leave them out—Devon and most of Somerset, excluding the unitary authorities to the north. In other words, we are discussing the territory of the two local enterprise partnership regions of Cornwall and Isles of Scilly and the Heart of the South West.

The charter we are presenting the Government today builds on a growth summit held at the University of Exeter on Friday 21 October 2016. The summit was the initiative of one of the largest private-sector employers in our region, Pennon Group—the owner of South West Water, Bournemouth Water and Viridor—in partnership with the Western Morning News, a great champion of our region. The summit brought together the main economic interests of the south-west, alongside many of the region’s Members of Parliament. I am delighted that so many of my colleagues from Cornwall, Devon and Somerset, and from both sides of the House, are here today. The Opposition Members for our region are a tad depleted these days, but what Labour lacks in quantity the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) more than makes up for in quality. I am delighted to see him here today.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): You won’t say that after my speech.

Mr Streeter: I probably won’t. I have never agreed with a single word the right hon. Gentleman has said.

The south-west growth charter calls for a new partnership between the south-west and central Government to achieve the goals agreed at the summit, which was attended by more than 200 people, more than 40 businesses, the CBI, the region’s two local enterprise partnerships, academic institutions and 14 local authorities from across the region. The summit was addressed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, who made an excellent speech that I know the Minister will replicate today. The Minister is a champion for progress, growth and prosperity. Indeed, he oozes them from every pore.

Despite our many successes and the beauty of our region, the south-west has not known the investment and prosperity of other parts of the United Kingdom in recent times—it falls below even the European Union average. What is more, the region has not always made itself heard with a clear, unified voice at Westminster, but we are open for business. We are looking for growth, and we want to build on the success of the northern powerhouse and the midlands engine. Today, we are setting out a positive vision for the south-west region.

The summit and the wider “Back the South West” campaign have shown a clear, unified business voice outlining a vision for the economic future of Cornwall, Devon and Somerset. The campaign has captured imaginations across our region and is a positive initiative from business, with strong support from local media. I always find that quoting local newspapers is a good way of getting in the local newspapers, and the front page of the Western Morning News on 3 October 2016 said:

“Clean beaches, sparkling seas and fresh air. The South West has it all. But while the natural beauty of the region is incomparable, its economy too often lags behind…given the tools, the South West can really fly”.

That is what this debate is all about.

A key part of the “Back the South West” campaign has been about creating a south-west narrative and speaking passionately at national level about why the south-west region is a wonderful place to live, work and do business. We are all immensely proud of our region, but we face challenges, particularly in light of the forthcoming Brexit. The local enterprise partnerships in our region are already showing how well they can work together to address those challenges and take opportunities.

Infrastructure investment needs and connectivity improvements were the overriding themes of the summit. To paraphrase a politician from years ago, we want to talk about three key things today: infrastructure, infrastructure, infrastructure. I remember going to India a few years ago with some Indian businesspeople, and they talked about the creativity of their people and all the resources and energy in that fabulous country. After the monsoons, they showed me roads that had been swept away and told me, “This is what holds us back in
India. It is the infrastructure that we simply can’t manage to put in place.” I could say exactly the same thing about our region. All the creativity, the energy and the skills are there, but we need the infrastructure to get the job done.

We are all aware of the historical challenges in the south-west in relation to traditional infrastructure. For most of us, the key issue is the vital rail links to London and the rest of the country.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I am delighted that my hon. Friend has secured this debate. We can do much more on the second rail link between Waterloo and Exeter to increase the number of trains and to add more loops so that we can get many more trains through to Exeter and further down into the west country. I would like a junction connecting the rail link to the trams at Seaton.

Mr Streeter: My hon. Friend is a powerful advocate for his region, and I know he speaks to the Government. I am sure he knows that, by sheer coincidence, the Peninsula Rail Task Force’s 20-year plan will be launched at 11 o’clock this morning. The plan will spell out the improvement we seek to our rail infrastructure, and it will include the measures he mentions to equip our region for the 21st century.

Road and air transport are critical too, but it is not only about traditional infrastructure; it is also about wider connectivity. Big strides have been taken as part of the Government’s push to increase digital connectivity, but more needs to be done. As Bill Martin, the editor of the Western Morning News, has said, the south-west is known as “the region where every telephone conversation ends with the word ‘hello’.”

Digital connectivity is more important than ever in this 21st-century world, so making a success of the digitally enabled economy is critical, particularly for our region where peripherality is our challenge and connectivity is the solution. Now that people can do anything from anywhere and now that we have excellent universities in our region, connecting ourselves will continue to make us the most attractive and wonderful place to live, work and raise a family.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend enormously for securing this important debate. Encompassing everything, does he agree that the south-west has been very much neglected and left out? The Government ignore us at their peril, because we could be a powerhouse not just for ourselves but for the country.

Mr Streeter: There is no question in my mind but that we have not seen the investment that we might have wanted from Governments of all colours over many years, particularly over the past 30 years. Now that we have come together to speak with a single powerful voice, I believe we will see that change. The Government are listening to us.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On connectivity, the south-west can benefit from connectivity with the rest of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, and Northern Ireland can also gain from connectivity with the south-west. There are potential advantages for both, including in the agri-food industries, fishing and tourism. Those are three things that we could do together. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is how we should do it?

Mr Streeter: We are delighted to work with anyone, and we are always delighted to welcome tourists from Northern Ireland who come to enjoy our wonderful south-west.

The Government need to recognise that European funding has contributed greatly to digital infrastructure in the past, and that a home-grown solution must be provided for the future. We need 5G. Tourism has been a key part of the local economy for many years, but it has also meant a lot of low-paid jobs. We in the south-west have core strengths. We are home to world-class universities including Exeter, Plymouth and Falmouth, and to highly skilled workers. Our response has been for businesses, local leaders and academic institutions to create successful business clusters and networks, such as marine around Plymouth, environment around Exeter, and aerospace and defence around Newquay. The clusters have played a key part in the hundreds of thousands of growing businesses across the aerospace, marine, technology and creative industries, helping the region attract and retain talent. However, we need to do more, and we need the infrastructure to support that growth.

We in the south-west have proved that we are successful. Pennon Group, which has taken the lead on the excellent charter, is born of the south-west and headquartered there, and operates across the whole region, in Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and now Dorset. It is one of the UK’s largest listed companies. There are many other success stories, and no doubt some of my hon. Friends will mention them in a moment.

One of the Secretary of State’s key messages at the summit was about devolution. I will touch on that, and I think that one or two other Members might want to mention it as well. He made it clear that if the south-west wants an ambitious devolution deal, it must accept a directly elected Mayor. His argument was that in other countries in the G7, large regions, particularly around big cities, have a lot more power than we in Britain have traditionally given to regions. Too many decisions in Britain are still made in Westminster when they should be made at local level, but local power is often too fragmented. To make sensible decisions on transport, skills and infrastructure, he argued, we need much more joined-up thinking and a proper combined authority, with one elected person shouldering the accountability.

That has given our region food for thought, and discussions are ongoing, but it seems clear that if we want the devolution deal that the region needs and deserves, we must find a way to deliver a western super-Mayor, a strategic leader—[Laughter.] Do you see what I did there? I have been working on that all night. Perhaps it is time we came together to do so. It is what the business community wants. However, there will be different views, and the conversation is ongoing.

The charter that we will deliver to Downing Street later today is not about going cap in hand to the Government; it is about saying that we in the south-west can do an awful lot for ourselves, but we need infrastructure support. The charter supports the Government’s industrial
strategy and sets out how the Government can work with the south-west to increase investment and opportunities for people of all ages.

In the charter, the business community outlines its commitments to the region: to collaborate for growth; to invest in a self-sustaining south-west; to invest in innovation, industry and infrastructure; to invest in productive people and retain talent within our region; to invest in our environment and share the benefits of growth. What do we want the Government to do? We want a new Government partnership with the south-west, a firm focus on south-west growth in the Government’s industrial strategy and a funding road map so that the south-west can move from funding reliance to more innovative funding solutions.

We want investment in digital connectivity: ultrafast south-west, a new partnership with the private sector to deliver ultrafast south-west 5G mobile, fibre and wireless broadband to 90% of the population by 2030. We want investment in energy connectivity—switching on to opportunity—to address transmission and distribution restrictions on regional growth, to be completed by 2025, and a renewed focus by Ofgem, National Grid and Western Power Distribution. Crucially, we want investment in transport connectivity to get business moving. We want Government to back the Peninsula Rail Task Force’s long-term plan for rail improvements, which will be outlined in the report published later today, and to re-affirm commitments to road improvement projects in the pipeline, including the A303, the A30, the A38 and, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) would undoubtedly agree, the A358.

As Chris Loughlin, chief executive of Pennon, said at the south-west growth summit:

“We should be able to get our voice heard. We are, after all, a political battleground. Elections are won and lost on how the south-west votes.”

On that, we all agree.

The south-west charter will be delivered to Downing Street later today. The timing could not be better: it is the day before the autumn statement. The south-west has made a profound contribution to this country throughout our history, and we have some very successful businesses in the region. It is a charter for growth; more than that, it is a charter for aspiration and hope for all in the south-west, but particularly the younger generation. Tomorrow, we will look to the Chancellor to re-commit to the south-west. Leaving the EU creates uncertainty, but also opportunity. The south-west is ready to deliver.

To quote the Western Morning News for the third time—

Neil Parish: You should get quoted now.

Mr Streeter: It is a sure-fire thing. The Western Morning News said in its editorial last week:

“The government listens to those who speak loudly and logically and can make a good case. Too often, parts of the West Country have seemed to be pulling in different directions. Faced with petty rivalries, it has been easy for Ministers to dismiss the needs of our region and divert funds and support elsewhere.”

Not today. Here, the south-west is speaking with a united voice, led by the region’s business community and with far wider support from MPs and many in local government. There is clear momentum behind the campaign. I am delighted to throw my weight behind it, as are my colleagues from across Cornwall, Devon and Somerset, from both sides of this House. Together, we will raise south-west growth up the Government’s agenda and secure our region’s place in the new industrial strategy.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order Looking around the room at the number of Members who wish to speak, I reckon that given 10 minutes for each of the Front-Bench speakers and a couple of minutes for Mr Streeter to wind up the debate, we probably have about four minutes a head. I do not normally do this, but I will on this occasion, because this debate has clearly and rightly attracted a lot of interest from south-west Members of Parliament: I will give the list and batting order. Mr Bradshaw will speak for the Opposition next. After that, we have Oliver Colvile, Johnny Mercer, James Heappey, Kevin Foster, Sir Hugo Swire, Peter Heaton-Jones, Anne-Marie Morris and Rebecca Pow. I will not impose a time limit; I will impose a self-denying ordinance, on the understanding that those at the end may drop off the list if other colleagues are too greedy.

9.48 am

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I will try to adhere to that advice, Sir Roger, but as I am the sole Opposition MP in the region that we are discussing, it will be a challenge. I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) on securing this debate, which as he said is timely because the autumn statement is tomorrow, and because once again, overnight, the south-west railway has been cut off by flooding.

I do not think that anyone can criticise the document that we are debating. It is an excellent document, and no one could find fault with it. However, the regular loss of our connectivity, which has happened yet again in the last 24 hours, is a more accurate reflection of the current reality on the ground than the vision that the charter rightly sets out for the future of the south-west. The hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) said in an intervention, the reality is that we in the south-west feel neglected. When we look at all the investment going into London with Crossrail, the north of England with high-speed rail and all the other massive, multi-billion-pound infrastructure investments, we in the south-west feel like the poor relations. The electrification of the railway line to Bristol and south Wales has now been delayed, and even that will not come down to our part of the region, which needs it just as much.
[Mr Ben Bradshaw]

We all remember the grandiose promises made before the last election. We could not move in the south-west, particularly after the Cornish rail collapse, for visiting Prime Ministers, Chancellors and Ministers promising £20 billion of investment in infrastructure in this Parliament. I remember the then Prime Minister saying that he would do whatever it took to put our infrastructure in a good condition, but we have seen very little of that investment so far. Some might even argue that those promises and all those visits helped to sweep an almost full house of Conservative MPs to power in our region, with Exeter the only surviving constituency with Opposition representation. My Conservative colleagues have a big responsibility. If I may give them a little gentle advice, at some stage they will have to play hardball with the Government and demand that the promises made to them before the election are actually fulfilled.

Rail infrastructure is not the only problem. The hon. Member for South West Devon has already mentioned broadband; our broadband roll-out in Devon and Somerset is badly behind schedule and the way it has been handled has been an absolute shambles. Broadband is vital in rural areas, particularly for our small and medium-sized enterprises. There is also an awful lot of uncertainty, as the hon. Gentleman said, about Brexit—particularly in Cornwall, given Cornwall’s reliance on huge economic support from the European Union. Sectors in our region such as farming and fisheries, which are disproportionately involved and engaged in importing and exporting within the single market, face big uncertainties. Our higher education sector is very dependent on the free movement of students and academics and on all the investment that our membership of the European Union brings. All that uncertainty, combined with historic under-investment in infrastructure, raises real concerns in our region.

To add insult to injury, we have learned that our local enterprise partnership in Devon and Somerset—Heart of the South West, which the hon. Member for South West Devon mentioned—has been told that it can expect only a tiny fraction of the money that it had originally hoped to receive in the next round of development support grants. That led to an unprecedented letter, which we all signed last week, to ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to think again—I cannot remember another time when every single MP in Devon and Somerset signed such a letter. As the hon. Gentleman said, it seems to be something to do with the fact that we do not have an elected Mayor model; we also have a shortage of big businesses to match-fund the Government money. That is stating the bleeding obvious, because our region’s strength is our small and medium-sized enterprises. We have some excellent big companies, but we do not have the large number of big companies that a northern powerhouse, or whatever, has.

I very much hope that the Chancellor’s autumn statement tomorrow will reflect some of the serious concerns expressed in this debate. I also hope that the Communities Secretary will look very carefully at our letter, because there is a lot of anger about how we in the south-west have been treated, and that anger will only get worse if our next growth funding deal is even worse than we expected or is a lot worse than the previous two. I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Devon again on securing the debate; it is well overdue, and I hope the Government are listening. Our region must get the investment that it needs. Sadly, that has been symbolised again in the last 24 hours by its being cut off by flooding.

9.53 am

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak in this timely debate on the south-west regional growth fund, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) on securing it.

I have been Member of Parliament for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport for the last six and a half years. Uniquely for a Conservative constituency, it is an inner-city seat without a piece of countryside—all we have is the Ponderosa pony sanctuary and a rather muddy field. Although it has a low-wage and low-skills economy, it has a global reputation for marine science engineering research, a huge science base, two dynamic and expanding universities with more than 30,000 students and a very fine art college. I am grateful to the Government for the investment that Ministers have put into Plymouth, including the city deal in South Yard, which has also been turned into an enterprise zone. That city deal initiative will turn underused land in the dockyard into a marine industrial production campus, which will ensure that we can help the Government to deliver their industrial strategy and realise our full economic potential.

Although Plymouth’s economic future looks bright, it needs real help to develop its skills base and to improve its transport infrastructure connections. Earlier this autumn, the Ministry of Defence announced that the Royal Marines would be moved from Arbroath, Taunton and Chivenor. In 2020, Plymouth will host the commemorations for Mayflower 400, to celebrate the Mayflower ship leaving to found the American colonies—we might seek to invite the President to pay a visit to Plymouth, to see for himself how wonderful it is. Mayflower 400 will provide a unique opportunity for us to run a spectacular trade fair, just months after the UK withdraws from the European Union, but Plymouth and the surrounding area will need significantly improved train and road infrastructure to deliver that. The Government are reviewing the viability of reopening Plymouth City airport, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). Later today, we will launch the Peninsula Rail Task Force report on the future of a sustainable railway line from the west country to London and the west midlands. There is also a proposal to convert the A303 and the A358 to dual carriageways.

The two local enterprise partnerships that affect Plymouth have submitted growth deal applications to continue the development of the South Yard city deal, which will create 1,300 new jobs, and the redevelopment of the railway station in my constituency. The latter is vital, because it will ensure that when American tourists visit the place that the founding fathers left from in 1620, they arrive in a dynamic city. By providing the necessary funds for the development of the railway station, the Government will help our local tourist industry; ensure that the increasing number of Royal Marines and Royal Navy sailors based in the Plymouth travel-to-work area arrive in a modern, up-to-date facility; remain good to
Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak in this debate, Sir Roger. I would pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) for securing it, but time is short.

This debate is of supreme importance. I am afraid that I am going to use Plymouth as an example for the wider south-west. We all talk about investment in the south-west, but I want to put a bit of meat on the bones with some data and statistics. I know that statistics are frightening for some, but they are important.

Plymouth, like the rest of the south-west, is not talked about enough in this place, and the effects of that are clear to see. It was once an industrial powerhouse, centred on the dockyard, where tens of thousands of workers, welders, fabricators, shipbuilders and union shop stewards contributed more to the nation’s security and heritage than Plymouth is ever credited with. The military commitment, although diminished in numbers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colville) indicated, continues to this day—but Plymouth has always been much more than a military city. The harbour was used by merchant sailors for trade routes to London and all over the world, and transatlantic liners used to depart from Millbay.

There is a feeling in the streets and communities of Plymouth today that should be expressed in this place, which is that as the nature of the modern economy has changed and the nation’s focus on defence, rightly or wrongly, has declined, Plymouth has been forgotten—discarded after use. I therefore welcome the south-west growth charter, which lights a path back to a vision of better things. Hon. Members will all speak on different parts of it; in my short time, I will highlight infrastructure and Government spend in the south-west.

There is no doubt that infrastructure is the catalyst for growth. Regions in transition need a fair deal from the Government in all sectors. Every city’s representatives can come to Westminster and have a moan at the Government, but I want to put some evidence on record. I know that London is different, but the transport spend in Plymouth is £219 per head, compared with £1,869 in London. The public health spend is £47 per head, compared with a national average of £63. Despite being the most deprived area in the south-west, Plymouth is also the most underfunded. Why is so much less being spent on Plymothians? It is just not acceptable.

Politics is a team game, and it works both ways—not only from us to the Government but from the Government to us. I support the Prime Minister in everything she does, as do my colleagues, but our commitment to making the Government work for people in the south-west must trump everything else. I firmly believe that this Conservative Government have done more for our region of late than has ever been done before, but we must let it be known that if the line is crossed we will hold firm and hold together as a cohort to put our region first; otherwise, we will continue the degradation of politics that we are all so keen to avoid.

It is not all bad by any stretch. The jobs lag from a dockyard that employed 35,000 workers in its heyday, but employs 3,500 today, has been filled by enterprising, determined Plymothians who have created a buzzing local economy that just needs a bit more help from central Government. Similarly, when it comes to transport infrastructure, it is unacceptable for a region so large, diverse and productive as ours to be expected to survive on the rail link we currently have, irrespective of the Government’s plans elsewhere. I strongly congratulate the peninsula Rail Task Force on its report into rectifying the situation. I urge the Prime Minister and her team to read it very carefully indeed before committing to further investment elsewhere in the country.

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One might say that as elected officials, elections are our appraisals from our bosses—the people. For many years now, at every election, local or national, the largest party has not been Labour or the Conservatives, or even the Lib Dems; it has always been the “don’t cares”—those who do not vote. The time for blaming those people for not voting has passed. It is time that we turned that argument on its head and recognised that we have to give people something to vote for, not chastise them for their lack of interest in us. Plymouth is an ambitious city, with gifted, ingenious people who can adapt to change like those in any other city, but Governments of all colours have simply not delivered for too many in our city, as evidenced in our elections.

That has to change, so what do we do? We have a unique opportunity in this Parliament: almost the entire region is represented by the Government party. The biggest, most determining factor in economic growth for a region far from economic engines such as London is transport links to enable big companies to get in and out of our region, thereby providing the skilled jobs and professional development that our ambitious and talented people deserve. We cannot, as a cohort, continue to support the Government unequivocally without genuine “spade in the ground” investment in our transport infrastructure. It is unacceptable for a region so large, diverse and productive as ours to be expected to survive on the rail link we currently have, irrespective of the Government’s plans elsewhere. I strongly congratulate the peninsula Rail Task Force on its report into rectifying the situation. I urge the Prime Minister and her team to read it very carefully indeed before committing to further investment elsewhere in the country.
am afraid that in the south-west there is under-investment in them all. Bristol airport, which serves the region, has been growing at a great pace in recent years, but we need to ensure that it is better connected southwards so that is can serve the region that it is intended to serve.

Road improvements are coming along nicely, but the work on the A303 and the A358 needs to happen with some urgency. We must also be aware that, as we do that work, we risk making Somerset the rock in the stream, around which the M4 and M5 to our north and west, and the A303 and A358 to our south, move quickly while Somerset remains disconnected.

I encourage the Minister to support the work of my hon. Friends the Members for Bath (Ben Howlett) and for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who are campaigning for better access to north-east Somerset from the M4 to improve connectivity in the north-east of the region, and the ongoing work to support Hinkley Point by improving junction 23 of the M5 to allow better connectivity not only to Hinkley Point but into Mendip. We must ensure that, as we improve the main roads in our region, we do not simply make Somerset the unconnected rock in the stream around which everything moves quickly.

Yesterday, our region was once again cut off. The railway line between Bristol and Taunton was under water, causing huge disruption, not only for Members of Parliament returning to the House after the weekend but for the region as a whole, which feels awfully remote when water is on the tracks and nobody can get to us. It was Dawlish before; yesterday, it was the line through Somerset.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) is leading a debate in Westminster Hall this afternoon on the electrification of the great western railway to Bristol Temple Meads, so I shall not go into that now, other than to say that it is of course not just the electrification of those last eight miles between Bath Spa and Bristol Temple Meads that affects our region so much. Electrification is required in the Thames valley to release the rolling stock that is supposed to come from the Thames valley to serve the Bristol and Bath commuter network, which will in turn release the rolling stock that is supposed to go down to Devon and Cornwall to serve the Plymouth and Exeter networks. The delay to electrification has a real effect, not only in the west country but in the Thames valley. It is needed to increase capacity for commuters in our region. Most of all, it is a shame that the electrification of the great western railway, which we as a region thought was in the bag, now finds itself in competition with the excellent work of the Peninsula Rail Task Force.

On broadband and mobile, I absolutely agree with the growth charter that says that we must go for 90% connectivity by fibre for premises and that we should go for 5G. Let us not forget, though, that right now more than 10% of Devon and Somerset do not have access to a superfast connection at all, and much of the region has connection speeds that are down around 2 Mbps or less. Our mobile phone connectivity is improving, but there are still far too many hotspots, so there is work to be done before we embark on the more ambitious targets for the future.

We are a decentralised region with no obvious economic focal point, so it follows that there is no obvious focus for energy generation. I think that, as a region, we are the nation’s leader in the deployment of renewables, but we require real investment in our distribution and transmission systems to support that sort of energy system. The Minister should take note that there is also an opportunity for renewable energy, clean tech and new nuclear to be part of the industrial strategy for the south-west.

The south-west has a great deal to offer, with great universities, including the University of Bristol, the University of the West of England, the University of Bath and Bath Spa University, and great expertise, ambition and potential. We just need to be better connected by air, road, rail, fibre, mobile and electricity wire.

10.7 am

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) on securing the debate. It is a perfect day for this debate—a day when we again see pictures of hanging tracks in the south-west, demonstrating how important links have been cut off. It is a delicious irony that members of the Peninsula Rail Task Force, which has been referred to a lot, had to drive to Reading last night in order to get here to present a report on rail resilience. Why did they have to drive to Reading? Because of a lack of rail resilience. On top of that, my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) and I had charming experiences yesterday: I had an 11-hour journey from Torquay to the House, and his journey was significantly longer.

We could make the debate all about rather negative descriptions of the well-known issues with our transport network, but we could also be positive about the opportunities available and what is already going on. On Thursday last week, the Western Morning News published an opinion piece on how the south-west should unite to build on a charter for investment and infrastructure. On the very same page there were details of the work being done by four local colleges that have come together to expand their opportunities and help to support tech businesses. The article, written by the principal of South Devon College, Stephen Criddle, gives details of the world-class high-tech and digital innovation centre being created for the photonics industry, which has a long history in Torbay.

Before I address what I think the Government should be doing, it is important to look at what we can do ourselves. We clearly need to ensure we have the skills for businesses, because there is little point in creating jobs and opportunities if we do not have people with the skills—particularly in science, technology, engineering and maths—to take them up. There are also well-known shortages of skills and professionals in our health and social care industries. We need to look at what can be done at local authority level. I welcome the fact that my local council has put £50 million into a growth fund. I must say it makes the £15 million that is potentially going to be assigned to the local enterprise partnership look rather small when Torbay Council on its own is planning a fund of around £50 million.

It is welcome that that money is being used and—without giving away some of the details that perhaps would not be appropriate to share publicly—it has been encouraging to speak with the Torbay Development Agency and the
Transport infrastructure makes a huge difference. We have had the welcome investment of the Kingskerswell bypass, which serves my constituency and goes through the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris), after the small matter of a 61-year wait since it was first proposed. That delay also brings home why it is so important that we get on with some of these projects. We have issues such as Stonehenge that are almost as long-standing. The debates around Dawlish, which began in the 1930s and were delayed by world war two, are still going. Also, once decisions are made, we need to crack on and deliver what we can.

Also, it is important not only to look at the tracks but to have trains running over them. While we are debating rail resilience, at the same time I have CrossCountry Trains trying to axe most of their services to my constituency. We need the tracks and the services running over them.

I am conscious both of the time and that other colleagues wish to speak. I hope to see more investment in broadband speeds, but the key message that I would join others in giving is that we now have a united voice in the south-west, including, to be fair, the support of our sole Opposition representative, the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw). We do not have some of the petty rivalries that we saw in the past. That is why it is important for the Government to back the plans that are coming forth from the region, which will deliver not only for the south-west but for the country as a whole.

10.11 am

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) on securing this timely debate. It is the latest in a series of debates on the south-west and it is fantastic to hear so many colleagues speaking with one voice about our area.

I welcome the south-west growth charter, which originated, as we have heard, at the south west growth summit at Exeter University. I was able to attend part of that summit and I congratulate Pennon, the CBI and the Western Morning News on putting it together. Too often, we have not spoken as one voice in the south-west; the time to do so is now.

It is no secret that the south-west has lost out in terms of infrastructure investment in comparison with other areas. I just say gently to the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), who talked about successive periods of under-funding, that he was a member of a Labour Government that did nothing for the south-west for 13 years. Nevertheless, it is true to say that during those years, and before, we have suffered from under-investment. One example is that during the past 20 years transport spending in the south-west has averaged £35 a head compared with a national average of £98 a head, which has left the region £2 billion behind other areas. That has been a wasted opportunity, considering the vast economic potential of the area.

To take my own constituency of East Devon as an example, just a week or so ago I was at Exeter science park to look at the new £97 million Met Office supercomputer, which will make Exeter and the surrounding area a world-class place to do science. There is also the brand new and growing community of Cranbrook, just near Exeter airport, which offers another fantastic opportunity for local growth. As for Exeter airport itself, I very much hope that the Chancellor will say something about air passenger duty, which discriminates against Flybe, which operates out of the airport.

The south-west has huge connectivity, not least to Northern Ireland. When I was Minister of State for Northern Ireland, I used to fly regularly from Exeter to Belfast. I must say that the south-west welcomes tourists, of course, not least—I am pleased to say that I was in some way involved with this—the First Minister of Northern Ireland, who has holidayed in Cornwall in the past few years and who enjoyed herself there very much indeed.

I welcome Government plans to dual and upgrade the A30 and the A303. This is a much-needed and overdue upgrade that should have been carried out decades ago. I regret that there is still a question over some of the funding for this project; that question needs to be urgently resolved. Personally, I am disappointed that full dualling of this stretch of the road has been ruled out. I believe that a half-baked compromise will give the impression, once again, that the south-west is forgotten when it comes to infrastructure investment.

I give wholehearted support to the work of the Peninsula Rail Task Force. We have heard about the timely announcement today; it is also an appropriate announcement, in a sense, given the problems we are experiencing today as a result of all trains from Exeter to Taunton being either delayed or cancelled. That underscores, yet again, the need for greater resilience, faster journey times, more capacity and connectivity. These are absolutely the right priorities.

I also agree with the right hon. Member for Exeter that too often over the years when we have heard about investment in the “south-west”, people are talking about Bristol. However, some of us in the Chamber mean Exeter, Plymouth, Penzance and so forth, and we would like to see some of the money that is going to the north of England to unlock the northern powerhouse and to provide HS2 being used instead for small projects in our area. For instance, I support Devon County Council’s bid to the new stations fund for a new station at Marsh Barton, in the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency, which will make it much easier for constituents in East Devon and so forth to travel into and around Exeter and the surrounding area.

On broadband, we have had some leaked announcements, or some possible announcements, coming out of the autumn statement that we will have more money for connectivity and broadband. Again, we cannot argue for that too much in the south-west; it is absolutely a priority. Curiously, it is the more urban parts of East Devon, such as the Exeter suburb of Newcourt, that often have the worst internet speeds in the area, so improving connectivity and broadband is absolutely key.

As for the growth deal funding, considering the historic underfunding and the future potential of the south-west, it is disappointing—to say the least—that the provisional growth deal award is set to be so low. The Heart of the South West local enterprise partnership put together a £109 million growth deal that contained 26 projects,
including investment in superfast broadband. The provisional allocation of £15 million to £20 million is nowhere near sufficient and the Government need to go away and look at this issue.

As the right hon. Member for Exeter reminded me, it was the south-west Members of Parliament who delivered a victory for the Conservative party in 2015. So, we are owed for the victory that led to the formation of a Conservative Government. We had a manifesto for the south-west and at the next election in 2020 we should feel proud to be held to account for the commitments that each and every one of us stood on. At the moment, we have made a start, but we are by no means there. Nevertheless, this debate today represents a good move in the right direction.

10.16 am

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) on securing this very important debate. He made a clear statement and the phrase that sprang out for me was that we do not come here today with a “begging bowl”. Indeed we do not, but, as other Members have said, it would be remiss of us if we did not point out that for many years, and under Governments of all colours, the south-west has not received its fair share of investment. We need to put that right.

The reason is that, as this charter for growth shows very clearly indeed, the south-west is a vibrant and dynamic place to do business. The south-west has a very bright economic future and that was very much the feeling at the south west growth summit on 21 October in Exeter. That is also very much the feeling in my part of the south-west—North Devon.

This issue is all about setting out how the Government can work with the region to increase investment, productivity and economic opportunities. I must stress that it is about working together; this is a partnership. In the south-west, including in North Devon, there are brilliant and resourceful businesses, public authorities and third sector organisations bursting with ideas, which make the south-west a magnet for investment. However, to release all of that potential and to make things happen, we need investment in our infrastructure, as colleagues have said only too clearly.

For me, the key is one word and that is “connectivity”. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon and other colleagues have mentioned the roads that need to be vastly improved: the A303; the A30; and the A358. Also, I am sure that my hon. Friend also meant to mention the A361, which is the North Devon link road and the vital link between the M5 and North Devon. The former Prime Minister, David Cameron, once accused me of “banging on” about that road, which was a charge I was absolutely proud to plead guilty to. We must have investment in the North Devon link road.

Another issue is the resilience of our rail network. All the various newspapers have been mentioned—I am sure that the story is also in the North Devon Journal this morning—and they have pointed out that the rail links to the south-west are pretty much cut off this morning. That is something up with which we must not put.

On broadband, we hear that there is talk of investment in “hyper-speed” broadband. I have to say that in some parts of North Devon we have “no-speed” broadband at the moment. So let us at least get the car on the road before we push down the accelerator pedal.

Industrial strategy is also important. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made some very welcome remarks about industrial strategy yesterday and I hope we will hear some more about it in the autumn statement tomorrow.

It is reckoned by those who put together the south-west growth strategy that properly investing in our region’s connectivity could give gross valued-added economic benefits of £41.6 billion and create 22,000 jobs. As there could be extra economic benefits in things such as tourism and financial services of another £21 billion on top of that. It should not be a matter of whether we like the growth idea but of when we make the necessary moves to ensure that the south-west can grow in the way the document foresees. Yes, we want our fair share of Government investment, and the charter for growth shows that we are more than ready, willing and able to use that investment potentially to create a regional economy like no other. We are like a coiled spring, ready to unleash all that economic energy. I say, “Give us that chance. Northern powerhouse, you ain’t seen nothing yet”.

10.20 am

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Today we ask the Government for support. We ask for support for the south-west charter for growth. We speak with one voice—businesses, politicians, the community. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) said, we have huge, untapped potential. The figures need to be written in stone. The potential is there, yet we are the second-lowest funded region in the country. We could do so much better.

One of the challenges is that our economy is not well understood. People look at the south-west and think of us as a sleepy farming community or sleepy fishing community. That is completely wrong. Farming and fishing are very important. We feed the country; we have £2.7 billion turnover from our farming. As for tourism, we are the second most visited area after London, with 19% of those who come to this country coming to the south-west. So we have own powerhouse, thank you very much, but our potential must not be forgotten. Our marine sector represents a fifth of the UK’s marine sector. That is not small beer. We are a nuclear industry leader and we have the UK’s first nuclear industrial cluster. We have the brains. We have the power, and we want to be able to unleash it. In aerospace and advanced engineering we have 14 of the 15 top companies, plus 900 smaller supply chain companies. Some of the larger ones—for example, Centrax Industries and Centek Group—and some smaller ones, including Teignbridge Propellers, are in my constituency.

We are the south-west engine. We want a partnership with Government to build an industrial strategy to deliver productivity, not just for the south-west but for the UK plc. We will collaborate. We will invest together. This is not just putting out a begging bowl to the Government. We will invest, train and retain. There is an increasing number of young people in our community
and many young people come through our first-class education system and universities, so it simply is not true that the south-west is full of those who have retired. But we need the Government’s commitment to the south-west. We need, as my colleagues have argued, money going into road and rail. We need support for the Peninsula Rail Task Force report that will be released later today, and we must not forget the airports and the ports. They are very important.

The digital connectivity issue can never be underestimated, and although I am sure I could spend the rest of my four minutes talking about it, the points have already been clearly made. Without mobile, without broadband, we simply cannot unleash the potential. The point about energy connectivity is right. We lead in renewables but we do not have a joined-up system, and that is preventing inward investment.

The south-west engine has the third-highest number of businesses in the UK behind London and the south-east, so we should not be underestimated. We have the most untapped potential but for that investment from the Government, and we, as local businesses, are prepared to play our part. We have huge investment potential. I echo my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon: dream on northern powerhouse, the engine is here in the south-west.

10.24 am

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I feel like I ought to go like a train, Sir Roger, in the time limit, but not like the trains that were running out of the south-west yesterday, which were not going at all. I sometimes feel like I am the Boadicea of the north of the south-west region, and that my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter), who so gallantly brought this debate to the House, is like the Alan Sugar of the south of the region, but in between, we have a myriad of talent. We are a talented force and we are joining forces and working together for our region.

We should not be underestimated. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) said, the south-west Conservative MPs won the election—to get political about it. There are 51 of us and we should not be underestimated. We came into this House on a manifesto promise to increase productivity in the south-west, and we are determined to do that but we cannot do it without the right framework behind us. We already have so much going in the south-west; we are achieving a lot. We have a lot of top-quality businesses and companies, but we could do more with the right framework, so I urge the Minister to listen and not to take us for granted.

One must always have a plan and a strategy, and we do. We have the south-west growth charter, and we also have our local enterprise partnerships working. We have a really solid framework from which to work. We are not working individually—although we all have our individual bids—but as a team, particularly on infrastructure and our particular asks.

In the time I have I will focus on just a couple of areas: skills and infrastructure. As I said, we already have some top-quality companies in my constituency. I must mention the Claims Consortium Group, with its Investors in People gold standard, the Ministry of Cake, Peter Brett Associates, Albert Goodman, Francis Clark, and Viridor, which is under the Pennon banner. There are so many of them, all doing great work, but they could all do more. So often, we find it difficult to attract the right talent and keep it in our region, and that is something we need to concentrate on. I applaud the Government’s apprenticeship scheme—I think it will work well—but we need to work more. I have the first nuclear apprenticeship degree in my constituency, being run through Bridgwater and Taunton College, and, as has been said, we need to build on the nuclear strength we have in the south-west.

We need to build on health, aerospace, textiles and marine—the things we are really good at and strong in already—but it is important that we work with the region as part of the Government’s industrial strategy. We must ensure that we do not miss out on any designations that are being handed out under the strategy outlined in the Green Paper. We need to be part of the bidding process but we need to win, and we must not be hampered if we do not happen to have signed a devolution deal yet. We are already doing good work and we must not be hampered, or even penalised.

I will just mention AgustaWestland, as many people who live in my constituency work there. I had a very good meeting with the company. It employs 17,500 people across the south-west. It particularly urges innovation and investment in science and technology, with which I think we would all agree.

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rebecca Pow: I will give way to my hon. Friend, because the company is in his constituency.

Marcus Fysh: Yes, that is a wonderful industry and we need to focus on it and raise its skill levels. Investing in infrastructure is absolutely fundamental to what we are trying to achieve in the area.

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is right. The company stressed to me that it is not just about wanting engineers to build helicopters but about attracting young people into the area to be those engineers. The industry is inspirational and is going somewhere. We need the seed-corn money from business, and grants for medium and small companies so that they can start to do research in that field. We can do that in the south-west; we can build on it and we can all take advantage of it.

I just want to throw in that we need a university. We are warm-hearted in Somerset, but we are a cold spot where academia is concerned. I would like to speak to the Minister about how we ease the numbers game so that we can apply to be a university.

I will sum up on the infrastructure note. We all agree that we have lots of ideas but the Minister needs to bring it on. We want to see the spades in the ground. I want to see the A358 come to fruition before the next election. We have to have junction 25 upgraded, we have to have the A303, and we have to have the road to Barnstaple done. They all work together. I ask the Minister to put some money back into growth deal 3. It was almost in the bag, but the bag seems to have been opened and the money has been let out. Please can we have that, devolution or no devolution?
We can do it in the south-west. Give us the tools and we will deliver, but do not destroy our beautiful environments at the same time. We are a spectacularly stunning region. We can make the economy work but we can also make it work in a glorious environment.

10.30 am

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) on securing this debate. Owing to lack of time, I will not be able to reflect on all hon. Members’ contributions, which were extremely powerful in sending a message—I am sure the Minister received it—about the importance of the south-west and industry in the south-west. I want to reassure the hon. Gentleman that I do not see the south-west as a sleepy area. I am an MP for the north-east, which some may think is as far away from the south-west as one can get geographically, but in the north-east we are very fond of and admire the south-west. We share a history of mining and agriculture, as well as railways and great engineers, as other Members have mentioned.

The south-west has huge success stories, from the scientists of the Eden project to the engineers of the Campbell Valley. We would see such projects thrive if the Government sought fully to unleash the capabilities of all the regions of our United Kingdom. The charter for growth is a key step in achieving that. It is an opportunity for the Government to deliver on their promises, as has been pointed out by hon. Members, particularly by my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw).

We could say that, before the election, the Conservative party issued letters of promise for investment in the south-west to be redeemed after the election, but they have yet to be redeemed, as is clear from the contributions so far. I look forward to the Minister setting out how he will make right on the promises so freely given before the election.

Mr Bradshaw: One of the welcome differences with the current Prime Minister was an apparent willingness to invest more in infrastructure based on borrowing, which had been a long-time Labour policy. Does my hon. Friend agree that tomorrow will be a test of whether she was serious about that?

Chi Onwurah: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. It is absolutely clear that the economic failure of the previous Government to recognise the importance of counter-cyclical state investment has been rejected—in words at least—by the current Government. We will see tomorrow whether that rejection is made solid.

The previous Government’s abolition of the regional development agencies, which supported growth outside London, exacerbated the problem. Growth in the regions of the UK, particularly the south-west, faced economic hardship from austerity, particularly in the way in which it drained demand and reduced income for those in the public and private sectors. The Government have an opportunity to address those failings. I understand the sense of disappointment expressed by many MPs about the current indications that the local LEP will be materially disadvantaged in terms of regional funding because it does not have an elected mayor model. Now is the time for the Government to show they recognise that regions can achieve greatly without necessarily having a big man, a mayor, to meet the Government’s requirements.

The need for the charter is urgent. The south-west received £1.5 billion from the European structural funds throughout the 2014 to 2020 funding cycle and that stimulates development in the region. In fact, the south-west received the second highest amount of money from the European Union, second only to nearby Wales. Business in the area must be concerned about the Government’s toxic combination of indecision, doubt and confusion about Brexit. A commitment to a growth charter would be the first step in providing some answers for companies in the south-west.

Investment in physical infrastructure is one of the very important points in the charter. I must say I admire and respect the south-western Members of Parliament for making it to Parliament today, given the extraordinary lengths that some had to go to to make the journey from the south-west. For proper investment, we need long-term patient funding rather than the current short-term free market approach. For example, as has been mentioned, the A303, A30 and A358 corridor between Taunton, Honiton and Amesbury is key to reducing journey times to markets, promoting the inward investment that will help make the south-west’s economy more self-sustaining, as well as strengthening the already vibrant tourism in the area.

As hon. Members have said, rail links are equally important. The 20-year plan will bring jobs and growth to the region, as well as faster connections to the London airports. Businesses in the south-west should have better access to Bristol, London and the midlands, as well as to Heathrow and Gatwick. Rail links are key not just to link the south-west to other English economic hubs, but to support British industry and manufacturing. This investment should be brought forward and considered a priority. How will the Minister ensure that the Infrastructure Commission is independent and fully funded to make the much needed investment in our regional infrastructure?

However, physical infrastructure is not the whole story. As Member after Member has pointed out, in the face of the fourth industrial revolution, digital connectivity is just as important, so the plan for an ultra-fast south-west is welcome. The Labour Government left office with fully costed plans for universal broadband by 2012. As has been said today, we still have many businesses and individuals who cannot even get access to broadband speeds of 2 megabits, never mind the ultra-high speed mentioned in the announcements made today; and the universal service obligation is still four years away.

The European Union investment that was so welcome in Cornwall will not be available post-Brexit, and yet Ofcom researchers showed that in rural areas 48% of premises are unable to receive speeds above 10 megabits. I look forward to the Minister saying specifically how his Government will invest in rural broadband.

James Heappey: The shadow Minister is obviously aware of the speech delivered by the then Prime Minister and Chancellor in January last year setting out the
long-term economic plan for our region. Her speech today has reflected that Conservative vision for our region. Should we assume she supports it?

Chi Onwurah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I support regional economies that are strong and sustainable, where investment is in people, skills and infrastructure. I support economies that deliver high-quality jobs that enable his constituents to make plans for their own futures, rather than being at the whim of short-term, zero-hour, low-skill, low-value jobs. That is the vision for the future economy of the south-west, and indeed for the country, that I wholeheartedly support.

I look forward to the Minister setting out exactly what his industrial strategy is. The Prime Minister has created a Department with industrial strategy in its title—I have yet to hear what the strategy is. The Prime Minister’s speech yesterday did not set out how the Government will, for example crowd in investment from the private sector in innovation, new opportunities and skills. As a Member of Parliament for the north-east, I too regret the skills brain drain from our regions to the capital because of its stronger economy.

I particularly look forward to the Minister setting out how the Government’s industrial strategy is not simply an ever-growing reduction in corporation tax but one that takes our whole country with it to invest in increased industry, shifting the centre of gravity away from London to support our great regions, such as the south-west. The south-west growth charter is to be welcomed. I look forward to the Minister demonstrating that he will support its implementation.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the Minister, due to the incredible self-discipline exercised by colleagues, we have a reasonable amount of time. I congratulate you all on achieving that. We have called 13 Members in one form or another in addition to the Front-Bench spokespeople. I regard that as exceptional. Without wishing to incite insurrection, that does mean that the Minister will therefore probably be able to take interventions and still allow time for Mr Streeter to respond at the end of the debate.

10.41 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): Thank you, Sir Roger, for that incendiary opening remark. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship and it is an absolute delight to take part in such a generally wise, good-natured, warm and constructive debate. It is a particular delight for me to look round Westminster Hall and see the serried ranks of Conservative MPs from the south-west, and even the conservative Member from the Opposition, the excellent right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), who in so many ways shares so many of our inclinations.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) for calling this debate on a very important area and set of issues. We have already heard reference to Boadicea and Sir Alan Sugar from my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), but I like to think of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon as a kind of Abraham—a patriarch of the south-west, bringing his wisdom to bear and providing moral and spiritual, as well as parliamentary, leadership.

We have heard some excellent contributions. Not everyone is still in their place for reasons we perfectly understand. I have heard strong support for the area, the skills and the genius of the south-west; concern about infrastructure and connectivity; recognition of the Government’s achievements to date; and a desire for Government to step forward and do more. I will not run through all of the excellent contributions we have heard, Sir Roger. It is testimony to your brilliant chairmanship that the imposition of a self-denying ordinance, an interesting contradiction in terms, has had the excellent effect of enlisting so many outstanding and brief contributions.

Let me just point to one or two wider considerations in response to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) and pick out some aspects of the industrial strategy, before turning to where we are with the south-west. It is fair to say that there is not a Member of this House who does not believe in the importance of economic growth. If there are any, let us invite them to consider the alternative, which is not only painful but regressive. Economic growth is a very important part of our lives and is likely to always remain so. It is also important to attend to the kind of growth that that implies, which is not always the same. We have seen boom and bust over the last few years nationally and that is not attractive. What we are looking for, and what I know colleagues across the south-west are looking for, is a sustainable basis for long-term economic development—and rightly so. That must be development that enhances the genius of the people involved to create higher productivity and greater real wealth.

If we look at the industrial strategy, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central suggested that somehow it is some great failure. The Government have talked about industrial strategy almost continuously since they were appointed and are undertaking a very careful, considered process of framing a consultation document to be launched in the next few weeks, which will invite every section of our society, not just businesses and corporations, to contribute and reflect on what could be the source of that long-term economic growth.

Rebecca Pow: On my point about AgustaWestland and other businesses, will the Minister ensure that we are investing enough money in business-oriented innovation and science, so that we can build a solid future, not a one-off industrial strategy, for our young people in particular?

Jesse Norman: It would, I think, be injudicious of me to anticipate announcements to be made over the next few days and, in some cases, already trailed. There has certainly been widespread speculation in the press about great support for research and innovation, including the development and technology side of the equation. We have already seen that. The structure of the Government being focused on trying to concert better relationships between sources of research, be they industrial or commercial, and the development and commercialisation of those technologies, makes that very clear. We will see a lot more of that over the next few weeks.
Mr Bradshaw: The Minister talks about the Government bringing forward a consultation document. We do not need a consultation document. That is what Governments say when they are going to do absolutely nothing and kick something into the long grass. Clear and specific promises were made by the Conservative party in the run-up to the last general election, with money behind them, which all the Conservative MPs speaking in the debate today have referenced. When will those promises be delivered? Where is the plan to deliver them?

Jesse Norman: I detect a slight faux indignation on the other side, and I am sorry about that. The industrial strategy of this country is a serious, long-term matter. It needs to be agreed in a bipartisan spirit. It needs to include the whole country, including the devolved Administrations and nations. It is not something to be decided and cut off. That, if I may say, is an expression of Blairite, Napoleonic Government. We are looking for a consensus and a stable basis for future development, which can be shared by all and can survive a change of Government—it is essentially long term in character.

An industrial strategy has been attempted at various points in our past in this country, not always with great success. In the 1940s and 1950s, we had models of industrialisation based on the armed forces and people in Whitehall yanking levers that steered the ship of state. We had the corporatism of the 1970s. I suspect that we are looking to something somewhat different. If hon. Members doubt the necessity, let me remind them of two things. First, those who say they do not have an industrial strategy almost invariably have one without knowing it. Secondly, no company or charitable organisation would dream of attempting to take money from investors or donors and use it over a period of time without having a strategy for how to do so. Nor should the Government.

Neil Parish: I am encouraged by that, but is part of the strategy broadband? When we talk about superfast and extra-superfast, can we make sure that the rural areas of this country are connected with some form of broadband?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend understands, I am not the Minister for Culture, Media and Support. He also knows that when I was Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, I took an active interest in that issue, and we commissioned a very reputable report from a group of academics and industry experts, which found, among other things, that BT Openreach was under-investing in its network by hundreds of millions of pounds a year. It was accretive to investors and was not down to its cost of capital. I do not want to speculate on the reasons for that, but its effect has been massively to penalise people—particularly those in rural areas. I am sure my hon. Friend supports today’s announcement of a new fund to support other players in fibre through balance sheet-matched funding, which will enable fibre roll-out, particularly in rural and suburban areas, to proceed much faster than hitherto. That is a very welcome development.

James Heappey: The Minister is being very generous in giving way, and I am grateful. The long-term economic plan, to which I referred during the shadow Minister’s speech, was delivered 18 months or so ago. In its analysis of the region’s infrastructure and our sectoral opportunities, it is not a thousand miles away from an industrial strategy. Will the Minister commit to making that long-term economic plan, which was delivered by the previous Prime Minister and Chancellor, the foundation for his industrial strategy for our region? Our region widely welcomed it at the ballot box.

Jesse Norman: The idea is not to slow the process of investment—as has been recognised today, there has been considerable investment across the south-west, in the form of city deals, enterprise zones, expansions and local growth funding—but to incorporate it within a more nuanced national consensus about what the future will look like, out of which we should get a shared view of how the south-west and other parts of the economy can grow.

I draw my hon. Friend’s attention to the Prime Minister’s early words: she pointed out that there are no privileged areas of the country. Some might have had deals in the past, on the basis of areas coming together, but that model can be embraced by everyone. One of the interesting things about this debate is that the unity of Members of Parliament is so evident, but it is not absolutely evident that that unity is shared all the way down the tree of local government. It might be worth reflecting on whether that might have an impact on the region’s long-term development.

Sir Hugo Swire: My hon. Friend the Minister is doing a magnificent job at a time when it is impossible to get from Exeter, the capital city of Devon, to London because we have no trains. Can he communicate our frustration to the Government? If that were the case on the lines from Leeds to London, from Bradford to London, or from Manchester to London, there would be merry hell. We will not continue to put up with this sort of neglect for much longer.

Jesse Norman: I welcome my right hon. Friend’s point. I need not say it myself, because he did so much more eloquently than I could. I recognise the issue that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) referred to, which was mentioned in the Peninsula Rail Task Force report, and on which campaign work has been done. I congratulate them on that.

I am conscious of the passage of time, notwithstanding your incendiary words, Sir Roger, so let me proceed. The key themes of the industrial strategy will be those that have been flagged up in this debate. There will be an emphasis on sectors, the commercialisation of research and development, and innovation, and there will be a particular focus on infrastructure, skills and abilities, and the embedded institutions in particular regions. Those issues have been brought out very well today.

As the hon. Member for South West Devon said, this is a relatively tightly defined debate in terms of place, but an industrial strategy has to reflect the fact that places are very different from one another. Defining what the south-west is and where it ends can be a challenge for the Government, even if it is not a challenge for those who live there. It is an extraordinarily diverse, beautiful region, which has extraordinary assets to be cherished and developed. It is home to world-class universities, very skilled people and hundreds of thousands of growing businesses, many of which are in advanced,
high-tech areas. The development at Hinkley Point C, which has already been mentioned, will give the region a major boost. The counterpart to that is the need to invest in smaller pieces of infrastructure.

An awful lot of people's happiness, certainly in rural areas—I speak as a Member of Parliament for Herefordshire, which can only gaze at the quality of the south-west's infrastructure and its access to higher education—depends on small-scale road and rail infrastructure, as well as large-scale connectivity. I certainly hope, as I know colleagues do, that that aspect of infrastructure development will be reflected in the plans to come.

Chi Onwurah: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I am afraid I am running out of time, owing to your excellent work, Sir Roger.

Chi Onwurah: He has not said anything; it was a totally content-free speech.

Jesse Norman: I am happy to take an intervention with your approval, Sir Roger.

Chi Onwurah: Before the Minister finishes, he said that the industrial strategy will take some time and that it will take allowance of skills and sectors. Will he give a concrete indication of how long the consultation will last and when the industrial strategy will be published? During that time, will he give a running commentary on what is in the industrial strategy so business can make appropriate plans?

Jesse Norman: It is difficult if remarks one has already made have not been heard. I have already said that the industrial strategy will be launched in the form of a consultation paper in the next few weeks. It is not a thing in and of itself. The Government anticipate that there will then be contributions and a further refinement. At some point, it will be published, and it will then be a reference document from which regions and businesses can take comfort and refer to when making their own plans.

That is the structure of the industrial strategy. It is fair to say, in that context, that the south-west has made its voice heard in a way that few other regions have succeeded in doing. It has done wonderfully well in flagging up the advantages of that part of the world. It is a pleasure for me to work with the two LEPs that have been mentioned. I salute the work of the south west growth summit and the charter. We can only hope that that work will continue to be transferred into local energy and further Government investment.

10.57 am

Mr Streeter: The Minister, who knows I am a huge admirer of his, referred to the serried ranks of Conservative Members of Parliament from the south-west, and indeed he is right. The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) is also right that commitments were given in the run-up to the previous election, particularly about infrastructure. If the Minister thinks that if we fail to deliver on those commitments there will still be serried ranks of Conservative MPs from the south-west after 2020, I am afraid he is sadly mistaken. In 2020, we will be judged on the infrastructure and connectivity we deliver for our region. We have heard some very warm and supportive words from the Government, and it is great that we will have an industrial strategy, but we want action. There is a time for making promises and commitments, and there is a time for delivery. The time for delivery is now.

This positive charter was put together by the business leadership in our region. It is very positive about what they will do in our region, but it asks the Government to make specific commitments about delivery over the next five years. It talks about digital, energy and transport connectivity. My wife, who is coming up to London today, looked at the Great Western Railway website and said, “I cannot catch a train from Plymouth to London.” Colleagues were stranded yesterday afternoon and evening when trying to get from their constituencies to vote in an important debate in the House of Commons. People cannot get from Plymouth to London today by rail. It is not good enough. The time for promises is over. The time for delivery is now.

We want a new partnership between the private sector and the Government for the south-west. It is not rocket science. We know how to do infrastructure and connectivity. We want the Government to give us the resources and the commitment. We have the passion; give us the commitment.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the South West Charter for Growth.
Accident and Emergency Services: Merseyside and Cheshire

11 am

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered accident and emergency services in Merseyside and Cheshire.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and a pleasure to see the Minister in his place. We spent many a happy hour on the Public Accounts Committee in years gone by, and I have great respect for him. I am sure he will give due consideration to what I say.

The debate title is a slight misnomer, however, because it was intended to entice other colleagues from the Cheshire and Merseyside region. Sadly, they have not taken the bait, perhaps because of the limited time available, so I will talk largely and almost exclusively about my own patch.

Southport is a large seaside town on the Lancashire coast, with one of the most elderly populations in the UK. I have to point that out, because for some reason I am often confused with the Member for Stockport and I am referred to as such. Southport, however, is nothing like Stockport. Southport is a seaside town and has one district general hospital on a split site with Ormskirk. The accident and emergency provision, though, is split by age between the two sites, which is a bone of contention in Southport.

For the purpose of the sustainability and transformation review, Southport was grouped with other hospitals ringing Liverpool, including those in Aintree, St Helens, Whiston and Warrington. Southport has recently had a poor Care Quality Commission report on its A&E department and an equally poor review of its surgery. It has responded positively with further investment of £600,000 into the A&E department, so that now, according to the stats—I checked this with the chief executive only this week—it has one of the best-performing A&E departments in the north-west.

That might have been the end of the story, because the CQC report dates from some time back and because of the improvements, but for suppressed drafts of the Cheshire and Lancashire sustainability and transformation review that have been leaked. The leak showed a number of things, including a possible downgrading of Southport A&E and of other A&E departments in the area—the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) is now in the Chamber, and his is one of the areas affected, as we have discussed—as part of a cost-saving exercise.

That is not the first time that the suggestion has been made apropos of Southport, but the Minister knows from his own experience in Ludlow how politically explosive such suggestions can be and have been. He will also appreciate that those suggestions are sometimes entirely simplistic and often linked to another further bright suggestion that people come up with, which is to close down wards. The consultants charged with balancing the books, and often referred to by the national health service, might come up with the brilliant suggestion that the best thing to be done with a loss-making hospital is to get it to do less—to stop admitting people to A&E, and finding space for them in wards, and therefore to close down A&E and shut down a few wards.

The Cheshire and Merseyside sustainability and transformation plan proposals were made on the basis of the final report, so they fell short of actually advocating downgrades. However, that is not to say that that is not in mind as an ultimate objective.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Like him, I am concerned about the proposals set out in the STP and, with regards to east Cheshire, the document actually sets out that options being considered include downgrading from an A&E to an urgent care centre in Macclesfield. There needs to be greater transparency about the options and a frank conversation with people. There is already a Macclesfield petition signed by 8,000 people opposing any downgrading of A&E services in our area.

John Pugh: There is also a petition in Southport, and I am sure there will be petitions wherever in the country this sort of thing happens. As the hon. Gentleman suggests, the ownership of the sustainability and transformation reviews is wholly unclear. No one knows who writes the plans, how they are agreed, and few democratically elected bodies or people, or patients, have any kind of input. In fact, the Liverpool local authorities wrote in some indignation to the authors of the report to ask, “How can we be involved? It alleges in your report that we are involved, but we do not appear to be.” Furthermore, no one quite knows why the hospitals have been grouped as they are.

Southport hospital is in a particularly unfortunate position, because it has changed its chair recently and suspended its chief executive over a period of a year, so it is unclear to me how Southport and Ormskirk’s views could have been represented in any review. Roadshows were organised by the clinical commissioning groups to talk about the financial plight of the local NHS and things that need to be done, and I have attended some of them, but they spend all their time talking about things such as savings on prescriptions and none on the big league stuff that is agreed and discussed in NHS boardrooms. There is absolutely no transparency, and I am sure hon. Members share in my cynicism. We await the real cost-saving proposals—or, in some cases, the empire-building proposals that are often disguised by blather about clinical efficiency and safety, which come almost after the event.

I speak with some cynicism, because I am a veteran of such carryings-on. I regret all the back-stage manoeuvres and, in particular, that no one has been around to champion my local hospital in the review. There is a good case for keeping our A&E—elderly people throughout the country are the major clients of A&E, for obvious reasons.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The debate is clearly about Merseyside, but the issues for accident and emergency are the same everywhere in the United Kingdom, including in Northern Ireland. Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern about A&E being on the frontline of the NHS, so that is where the spend clearly needs to be? Does he also share my concern about Government policies to close some pharmacies, with their role, which will push many minor ailments to A&E, creating even more problems?
John Pugh: Precisely. I am going on to some brief analysis of the problems of A&E, but it is certainly the line in the sand that we must defend.

Elderly people are obviously the major clients for A&E, and Southport by any analysis has an enormous number—a very high percentage—of people who will require A&E. Moreover, as the ambulance service says, and as the hospital will confirm, when people arrive at A&E these days they are iller than ever before. The reason for that is that access to GPs and to social care is worsening—social care has suffered extensive cuts, and has done so in my area, and is struggling.

To make matters worse, one reason for A&E throughput being a little slow is that, more than ever, people going to A&E are not being turned around and sent home, but need to be admitted, so beds are needed for them, although previous reports recommended ward closures in Southport hospital. Furthermore, discharging people from existing wards is a slower process, because social services are, frankly, struggling. The system is getting logjammed, with ambulances at one end and people not being discharged at the other.

To add to the problem is a matter that the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) will wish to bring up: the CCGs have taken the community care contract off Southport hospital, where I thought it was well placed, and given it to two organisations new to the contract for urgent and community services to Virgin Care, which has no real track record. We do not have a big surgery in my patch complaining about abuse received by receptionists. Hon. Members will be able to receive from the Minister on this point—that the CCG—that is the local GPs—has just awarded the contract for urgent and community services to Virgin Care, which has no real track record. We do not have a real assessment of what is going on, and my constituents are being put at risk.

Rosie Cooper: There is a serious problem in West Lancashire and the Southport conurbation. The local population has been excluded from all these decision-making processes. There is a serious need for the NHS bosses to explain what they mean by “downgrading”, as their perception of A&E can vary quite significantly from my community’s understanding. Simply sharing information without any explanation leads to anxiety and serious distress about the future of health services. I come back to the point that the hon. Gentleman has just been making: in the face of the fact that it will destabilise the hospital, the CCG—that is the local GPs—has just awarded the contract for urgent and community services to Virgin Care, which has no real track record. We do not have a real assessment of what is going on, and my constituents are being put at risk.

John Pugh: I thank the hon. Lady for that clarification and amplification. There really is a problem with integration, and I do not know how that will be better solved by bringing more organisations—particularly untried organisations—into the fray.

We are all exasperated by watching people make a hash of things and create rather than solve problems. CCGs are neither accountable nor always reasonable, and frankly sometimes have their own agendas. They are often tough on hospitals but less so on GPs. They are of course GP-led organisations, which is a weakness in how they are structured. I have a letter from the biggest surgery in my patch complaining about abuse received by receptionists. Hon. Members will be able to guess what that abuse is about. It is not excusable, but the rationale for that abuse is that people are having real difficulty making appointments in a timely and effective way, and as a result they are going to A&E, sometimes in desperation. Surveys that I have done over time have shown GP access to be as much of an issue in my constituency as A&E waiting times. As the hon. Lady just said, NHS bosses collectively are either deliberately or accidentally causing the destabilisation and unbalancing of provision in the area, and no one can stop them.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for being so generous. Does he share my concern that the STP for Cheshire and Merseyside talks of “leaving the work at STP to focus on creating a framework to support development of” accountable care organisations? ACOs are generally associated with insurance-based systems such as those that exist in the US. Does he share my concern that that fragmentation is to do with breaking up the national health service?

John Pugh: I am not sure whether that is the deliberate intent, but that is certainly a possible result.

Rosie Cooper: CCGs are nominally accountable to the Secretary of State or NHS England. Will the Minister address who actually guarantees that CCGs will provide really good service? The incompetent CCG in Liverpool that presided over the unholy mess at Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust has been allowed to preside over future services and new contracts in Liverpool. It is the same incompetent organisation. How is that okay?

John Pugh: The hon. Lady reinforces the point that I was going to make next. No one in the NHS locally is in a position to bang heads together and say, “Hang on, what do the public actually want or expect here?” The CCGs speak to NHS England and the Secretary of State. They are the decision makers. It seems to me that one of the coalition Government’s biggest mistakes was abolishing the regional strategic arms of the NHS—the bodies accountable for integrating and making things work together and making services across an area work effectively. Instead, we have groups of special interests—the big providers on one side and wholly unaccountable CCGs on the other—and, frankly, a recipe for chaos.

Margaret Greenwood: On accountability, does the hon. Gentleman share my concern—I would welcome a response from the Minister on this point—that the Health and Social Care Act 2012 took away the Secretary of State’s duty to provide and secure a national health service in England? That is one of that Act’s key flaws.

John Pugh: There was actually an attempt to make clear in that legislation where responsibility lay. I am very familiar with that debate and do not want to re-engage with it at the moment.

There is an absence of a genuine force for integration at a local level. We all know that there are institutions in any local environment that will be shored up at all costs, regardless of the clinical benefits to the population. Like the banks, a big private finance initiative such as the Royal Liverpool hospital will never be allowed to fail, because when PFIs fail, they revert to the Government’s books. Such services therefore tend to attract neighbouring services, whether or not it is a good idea for those neighbouring services to be attracted and regardless of the practicalities or the patients.
To come to some sort of conclusion, without a 24/7 A&E in Southport and all that follows from that—a great deal follows from that in terms of what other services may then go—people will suffer longer and more anxious journeys. I shudder to think what would happen if there were an incident at a big event in Southport, such as the flower show, the air show or the musical fireworks, and we did not have a 24/7 A&E. For better or worse, Southport is on the periphery of Merseyside and the hospital is also used by large parts of Lancashire. Southport straddles the boundary between Sefton and West Lancashire. The local hospital trust has to interact with two CCGs that face different ways. As it stands, the hospital is massively convenient for patients but inconvenient for those who like symmetry in the NHS. Precisely because of that, we are in constant danger of being overlooked and not championed, which is why Sefton Council recently passed a motion drawing attention to its concerns, particularly about the A&E.

Hon. Members will have gathered that I do not have entire confidence in the transformation process. None of us will say that we are not aware of the need to work more smartly and in a more integrated fashion to make the health pound work a lot harder, but the record will show that this is not the first time that I and the hon. Member for West Lancashire have brought the affairs of this hospital and this health service patch to the House’s attention. I fought off a previous attempt to get rid of our A&E when that was mooted by consultants on the usual ground that if the NHS ceases to do anything, it will cease to cost anything. The public have campaigned vigorously for an urgent care centre in Southport, and a succession of Ministers have been lobbed in this place about that plan, only for it to be scuppered by behind-the-scenes NHS politics. I have no reason to feel any confidence at all in this process—not when I see the hospital trust itself make a complete hash of whistleblowing charges against senior management and protract the process through its own simple incompetence.

Rosie Cooper rose—

John Pugh: The hon. Member for West Lancashire is positively bursting to get in.

Rosie Cooper: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that STPs are in danger of becoming a managerial exercise in contingency and risk planning, where the NHS speaks to itself? Several years ago, in the Health Committee, I put to Bruce Keogh the charge that where we were going, there would be 30-plus trauma centres in this country and every A&E would be downgraded. With STPs, the NHS is talking to itself, not the communities it serves, and it will come up with that very same plan. I can see that happening in front of me right now.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. I have to make the point that these half-hour debates are specifically the property of the Member in charge. Mr Pugh is entitled to give way to whomever he chooses, but interventions should be interventions, not speeches, and every moment that is taken curtails the opportunity for the Minister to respond.

John Pugh: Thank you, Sir Roger. We are on the home straight now. The trust that we are talking about has been under the management of a series of interimsover the past year. That has not helped its affairs. Why should the people of Southport suffer? We have been poorly served—not by the doctors, the nurses and the hard-working staff, but by the NHS high command. People are angry. If they are to be repaid for their anger by having further services taken off them, that anger will simply come the Government’s way, to the Secretary of State who will make any final decisions.

I want to make a plea. Let us not have another NHS stitch-up on any patch, where MPs, councils, local people, patients and all the access issues provoked by these arrangements normally are ignored. Let us not have a fait accompli that suits special interests that is covered over at the last minute with a veneer of clinical justification. Let us have local decision making that is not a sham or a pretence, but is genuine local decision making. Lord Lansley had a frequent saying in many a debate on health—I am not a great fan of his, but the saying bears repetition—which was, “Nothing about me, without me.” We have had lots done to us with the health service on our patch, but it has always been without any genuine involvement of the population or their representatives. I make a plea to the Minister that he tries to correct that or to reassure me that this time it ain’t gonna happen.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a great pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) on securing the debate. He referenced the fact that we served together on the Public Accounts Committee many years ago in the early days of my parliamentary career, and I have therefore long understood his forensic approach to matters affecting his constituency. He has shown that again today with his characterisation of the health needs of Southport. It is good to see a number of neighbouring MPs joining this short debate. They share a common interest in guaranteeing high-quality health services for their local residents. We in the Department of Health obviously share that interest.

I have listened carefully to the concerns the hon. Gentleman has expressed about A&E services in particular in the local area. He and other Members have touched on wider health issues, and I will try to address some of those in the few moments I have today. I am particularly aware of the concerns he concluded with about the potential of the sustainability and transformation plan proposals for the area, which include urgent care among many other things. I will touch on that in my remarks.

We all recognise the increasing pressures in the NHS, particularly as we move into winter. I am sure all Members would acknowledge the hard work and dedication of those providing high-quality services across the NHS, including in Southport, which the hon. Gentleman referred to. The NHS cannot stand still, however. If people are angry, if they are to be repaid for their anger by having further services taken off them, that anger will simply come the Government’s way, to the Secretary of State who will make any final decisions.
hours, compared with 1.73 million a year ago—an increase of 1.85%. I give the House those statistics to point out that the NHS is seeing and treating more people within its targets than ever before. In Merseyside and Cheshire, that means that more than 2,400 more patients were transferred, admitted or discharged within four hours of arrival this September as compared with last September.

Turning specifically to the Southport and Ormskirk Hospital NHS Trust, there are clearly performance matters that need to be addressed. Although its A&E performance does not meet the national 95% target, at 91.5% it is above the national average of 90.6%. As the hon. Gentleman said, its current A&E performance is relatively better than that elsewhere. However, the CQC report that he touched on, which was published last week, rated the A&E department as “inadequate” for safety and “requires improvement” for all other fields apart from caring. Although that may be based on work done some months ago, I am sure he would agree that it is unacceptable. The trust needs to improve its performance for the people of Southport.

John Pugh: The Minister is making an important point. The argument about the CQC inspections is to some extent related to what the CQC inspects. If it is inspecting an A&E department—I hope I made this clear in my speech—the CQC often has to bear in mind the fact that it is not an isolated unit. A&E works in conjunction with adult social care, the ambulance service and so on. Getting snapshots of a poorly performing department without taking into account the background and the other arrangements in and around A&E can give a false picture of where the problem lies.

Mr Dunne: I am not going to get into a prolonged debate about the CQC report, but it rates the entire trust as “requires improvement”. We have confidence in the overall reporting, and looking at A&E in that context reflects an accurate impression of the current status of the trust. For example, three of the trust’s seven A&E consultant posts are filled by locums or agency staff. That mix of staffing is not sustainable for any A&E department. I am aware that the trust and its commissioners are looking to address that.

Several hon. Members referred in interventions on the hon. Member for Southport to the NHS sustainability and transformation plans. I emphasise to the House that STPs are collaborative plans designed to help local organisations deliver on the “Five Year Forward View”. They are formed by CCGs, providers and local authorities working together in an area to develop a plan. Some have also involved other stakeholders who will be affected by changes in their area and can contribute to improvements. The true test will be whether a revised healthcare system really improves matters for patients.

We are still at an early stage in the process. The local NHS describes the plan for Cheshire and Merseyside as a plan for a plan at this stage. I will not therefore pass judgment today on the STP process or the content of the Cheshire and Merseyside STP. I am not in a position to do so. I do not know the local position as well as the local clinicians who have drawn up the plan; no one in Westminster or Whitehall does. Local clinicians must ensure that they involve the public and patients—and Members, as the hon. Gentleman called for in his closing remarks—and explain what they think is best for each local area. I reject the charge that the plan will not involve the local communities; it absolutely needs to involve local communities to be taken forward. It is a central tenet of the approval of the plans that there is public engagement.

Rosie Cooper rose—

Mr Dunne: I am afraid I have very little time, and the hon. Lady will have an opportunity to pick my brains directly on anything I do not address in my remarks, because we are meeting next week. I am happy to talk to her. We have had a dialogue over some of the health issues that are of most concern to her, and I thank her for her efforts in bringing those to my attention.

The STP process is not run by or for the Department of Health. It is run by the NHS for patients of the NHS. Design of health services, including front-line health services and A&E, is a matter for the local NHS. The reforms that my noble Friend Lord Lansley made when he was in post have put clinicians in charge of the care people receive and how it is delivered to serve their populations best. Local authorities are vital in helping set the direction of health and social care development locally. Guidance on STPs from NHS England has been clear about the importance of local authorities in partnership arrangements and of the NHS working with local authorities to deliver prevention and public health improvements. It is crucial that the NHS and local authorities work closely to ensure the key aims of the STP process can be delivered: better health, better patient care and improved NHS efficiency.

The STP for Cheshire and Merseyside was published a week ago, on 15 November. As I said, the NHS described it as a plan for a plan. In the area represented by the hon. Member for Southport, it builds on the “Shaping Sefton” local delivery system, which I understand had considerable public engagement. It is disappointing that the leaking of an early and incomplete draft of the STP led to speculation and some concern. I hope that the publication of the formal document will dispel some of those fears. I assure the hon. Gentleman that no changes to the services people currently receive will be made without local engagement. When and if final plans propose service change, formal consultation will follow in due course.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
It is important that the elderly do not think that self-care ends when they move into a care home. They must be able to maintain their independence and live life to the full. A main component of that is ensuring that they are able to buy personal goods. I was therefore disappointed when I was contacted by a constituent who was concerned about the treatment of his mother-in-law in relation to the personal expenses allowance that people in nursing homes get. That allowance has not been raised at all, which means that, due to inflation, people have less money to spend. In an email to me, he said:

“Recently, as you will be aware, her annual pension and pension credit increased by 2.9% in line with inflation. However, the PEA remained at £24.90 per week. So in effect her increase in Pension and Pension Credit from Central Government was passed straight through to the Local Government and she has received zero increase. No doubt her personal items such as underwear, clothes, shoes sweets etc. will increase in cost this year leaving her actually worse off for the increase.”

It seems I have dropped this on the Minister—that was not my intention, but it is an opportune time to bring the case to his attention—but will he explain now or later why the personal expenses allowance was not raised in line with inflation or even further?

Health education needs to continue throughout life, particularly at key stages such as when people start university, have their first child or retire. That would help people to understand which parts of the NHS they should use based on their health needs and whether they need to access health services or could self-treat safely at home.

It may be an opportune time to mention this. I am one of the three Rotherham MPs and we have a scheme called social prescribing, which is contracted and paid for by the Rotherham clinical commissioning group. I understand that the team from the Rotherham social prescribing service, who I spoke to at a community function last Friday night, have spent some time with the Secretary of State, who has seen exactly what they do. They are helping people with long-term health conditions to use a wide variety of services and take part in activities provided by voluntary organisations and community groups; 1,600 different community groups are playing a part.

People do not always need medicines. Medicines play a part in people’s lives where the health service does not engage, and we would not expect it to do so, but the scheme is about preventing people from going into the healthcare system. I know a lot is changing now in the plans being laid down at local level, which are advancing in Rotherham as well, but something like social prescribing is a good way of involving other people—not just the health service—in helping to ensure that people avoid, if at all possible, going into the health service.

Last week, the Proprietary Association of Great Britain—the trade association that represents the consumer health industry—published new research that found that 92% of people agree that it is important to take responsibility for their own health to ease the burden on the national health service. Despite that, 46% still visit their GP or accident and emergency with self-treatable conditions. Its research also found that 47% of people would not visit a pharmacist first for advice on a
self-treatable condition, with 18% claiming that that is because they do not think pharmacists are as qualified as doctors or A&Es.

It is clear that more needs to be done to educate people about the expertise of pharmacists—at this stage, I should say that I chair the all-party pharmacy group. My experience of the fitness of pharmacists to look after people without the need to bother doctors was not in this country. Many years ago, I was on holiday with my three young children in Spain. One of them fell ill and I asked the hotel staff how we could contact a doctor. They said, “Just go up the road to the pharmacist.” I went up to the pharmacist and it was extraordinary: we came away with the right medicines, which cured the condition pretty quickly and the holiday carried on.

I try to keep healthy myself, but that was the first time I had seen the expertise that pharmacists have and how they could help us. Pharmacists are expert health professionals who have a front-line role to play in giving people information and empowering them to take responsibility for their own health. I am sure the Minister agrees with that, as we have talked about pharmacies and the current situation with the pharmacy budget. He will be pleased to know that I will not bring that up today, but we have talked a lot about it. Better signposting to the pharmacy is necessary when we consider that 57 million people go to their GP and 3.7 million people go to A&E for ailments that only a few generations ago would have been safely treated at home with advice and medicines from a pharmacy.

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough clinical commissioning group reported in March that, over the Easter period, people visited A&E with splinters, broken nails, paper cuts and hickeys. I am certain that that is not particular to Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and that we would hear similar reports from A&E departments up and down the country. I know that about 50 people came along to my own CCG in Rotherham last year because they had toothache. I have no doubt that those people will have passed a local pharmacy where they could have bought some reasonably cheap pharmaceutical products to get rid of the toothache in the short term, and so not clog up the A&E.

People are clearly confused about when and how to use the NHS and need help in knowing where to go. I know that work is being done to improve the non-emergency helpline, NHS 111, which is important. Every day NHS 111 sends to GPs and to A&E people who could just go to a pharmacy without waiting and without an appointment to get the help that they need. We need to make sure that people receive a consistent message about self-care, whether they look at NHS Choices online, call NHS 111, visit a GP or speak to a pharmacist.

I know other hon. Members want to speak, so I will sum up by saying that more has to be done to address the escalating demand on the national health service, to combat the general confusion about where to go in the system and to improve people’s ability to look after their own and their family’s health. Excellent though it is, Self Care Week alone is not enough, as I suggested earlier. The local activities and events taking place during Self Care Week are definitely part of the solution to empowering people and addressing the demand on the national health service, but a bigger, more co-ordinated programme of work is essential if we are to move the self-care agenda along quicker.

Our all-party parliamentary group concluded earlier this year that we need a national strategy for self-help, led by a Government Minister and a national director to ensure implementation. It should be designed to co-ordinate policies across Government Departments and throughout the NHS and public health at the national and local level. It should be designed to empower people and should lead to a self-care culture and a behaviour change, so that people know not to go to A&E or to a general practitioner with their splinters, understand what steps to take to avoid serious conditions and know how to avoid hospital emergencies by managing long-term conditions. We would all agree that that is essential, but it does not happen very often. More than 70% of national health service expenditure in this country is on people with long-term conditions. People normally have more than one, of course, which sometimes seems difficult to grasp.

It seems to me that these issues are plain to everybody. We need to tackle them and to shape the national health service around long-term conditions, and not let the national health service shape us on how we should present to it. That needs radical thinking but, the Minister will be pleased to know, not legislation. I sat on a Committee back in 2010-11 that was suspended for a while because of the turmoil over the national health service reorganisation that was happening at the time, which is the last thing we want now. However, we want people in the health service and elsewhere to recognise that things ought to change and can change, and that legislation is not needed for that to happen. We need to make sure that we see a population that is able to self-care for life.

2.43 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. May I start by thanking the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) for bringing this timely debate, and also for his clear and detailed explanation of his position?

For my part, I supported Self Care Week last week by treating the latest winter cold I have picked up with a couple of lozenges and a few hot toddies. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) has set me a challenge to get through the debate without coughing: I have to confess I have failed already. However, I will repeat the dosage later on.

We have heard that self-care is the act of looking after one’s own physical or mental health, and that that extends to treating common illnesses with over-the-counter drugs and managing long-term conditions. We know that 80% of all care in the UK is actually self-care, and most people feel comfortable managing everyday minor ailments themselves, particularly when they feel confident that they have been successfully treated before using over-the-counter medicines.

Self-care is a fundamental part of healthcare—and Self Care Week provides an opportunity for us to encourage people to engage in self-care in a wide variety of areas—but it is important for us to get the balance right between managing conditions that are self-treatable and knowing when to get professional medical help.

The right hon. Member for Rother Valley stated some examples in which it was clearly inappropriate to go to
accident and emergency, and it is getting that balance right that we have to promote.

Self-care need not be as lonely as the term suggests. Often, conditions that can be self-managed are done so with support, be that from health professionals, organised support groups or advice from community pharmacies; people are not out there on their own with self-care. There are many good examples of such support across my constituency, covering a range of conditions and ailments. Eczema Outreach Scotland, which is based in Linlithgow, is a support charity for families affected by eczema. While it does not provide medical advice, it helps affected families in many ways, from practical advice to emotional support. As we know, one of the most common conditions experienced is joint pain, and the central arthritis self-help group, which meets in Grangemouth, organises outings, hydrotherapy and exercise sessions to assist sufferers.

Obviously, self-care for mental health is just as important as for physical conditions. In Bathgate, there is the West Lothian bipolar self-help group, which helps people affected by that common condition to share advice and insights on getting back into work and staying fit. Another example is the West Lothian health and social care partnership, which brings together NHS Lothian and West Lothian Council. It runs the superb “Eatright West Lothian” scheme, which aims to promote good nutrition and healthy eating, which can assist with many different conditions.

It is worth noting that the Self Care Forum recommended the following top tip:

"Involve the local pharmacists and community nurses in giving the same advice and support for self care; and work with the local pharmacists to ensure that their triage of common problems is similar to that in the practice."

That is not quite the way I would have worded it, but I agree wholeheartedly; it is very good advice. Community pharmacists can only give out certain medicines and products, although the benefits of that can be massive, as it can cut the workload of GPs and other NHS staff across the country. The Scottish Pharmacy Board stated that, in 2015-16, more than one in 10 GP consultations and one in 20 A&E attendances could have been managed by community pharmacists utilising the minor ailment service.

Some 1,200 pharmacies throughout Scotland provide a range of services on behalf of the NHS. As well as dispensing prescriptions, they offer four new NHS pharmaceutical care services which have been gradually introduced since 2006—the minor ailment service, the public health service, the acute medication service and the chronic medication service. Those new services involve pharmacists in the community more in the provision of direct, patient-centred care, with every community pharmacy in Scotland having patients registered for the minor ailments service by 31 March 2015.

The minor ailment service allows people to get advice and free treatment on issues such as, but not exclusive to, acne, headaches, athlete’s foot, head lice, backache, indigestion, cold sores, mouth ulcers, constipation, nasal congestion, cough pain, diarrhoea, period pain, earache, thrush, allergies, sore throat, threadworms, hay fever, warts and verrucae; in fact, pretty much everything that is covered with self-care. Nearly 18% of the population of Scotland are registered for the minor ailment service—a total of 913,483 people. More than 2.1 million items have been dispensed under it, accounting for some 2.2% of all items dispensed by community pharmacies in Scotland.

In Scotland, we recognise just how important community pharmacies are. The Scottish National party Scottish Government are helping to explore new ways for community pharmacies and other primary care services to aid self-care within our communities. The SNP Scottish Government are committed to supporting and developing local GP and primary care services, and have just announced a three-year, £85 million primary care fund to help to develop new ways of delivering healthcare in the community, which will involve pharmacists delivering aspects of patient care.

In conclusion, I welcome the recent words that we have heard from the UK Government that they want to copy the Scottish Government’s approach to community pharmacies and the minor ailment service. I thoroughly recommend that model to everyone, because we have found it to be very good and effective to date. I also welcome the opportunity to take part in today’s interesting and good-natured debate, which I hope will help to promote self-care further to the wider public audience.

2.49 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson: It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I welcome this important debate and the fact that it has been secured during Self Care Week—

Sir Kevin Barron: Just after it.

Mrs Hodgson: Just after Self Care Week. I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) for securing this debate and for his excellent speech, which shows his deep knowledge of and passion for all matters relating to the health of our nation, especially with regard to preventive health measures. I thank him for that.

This debate is especially important, as it is the first time we have had a dedicated debate on self-care in a very long time. We heard an excellent contribution from the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day). Before we hear from the Minister, I want to look at the issue of self-care and the wider picture of preventive measures through the lens of the cultural shift in the NHS away from care and repair to prevention and wellbeing promotion. I will also look at how aspects of current Government policy, such as the cuts to public health funding—I know I keep banging on about that, but it is important—is detrimental to our shared vision for an improved NHS and to achieving a healthier nation.

When NHS England’s “Five Year Forward View” was published just over two years ago, we were promised a radical upgrade in prevention and public health. That belief in reshaping the approach of the NHS and our health services away from a sickness alleviation service towards a wellbeing service that promotes healthier lifestyles choices, improved wellbeing and the prevention of ill health through behavioural change is supported across the NHS and in wider society.

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That shift is paramount when we see the NHS in a state of crisis, with longer A&E waiting times and GP appointments becoming harder and harder to come by. One in four patients wait at least a week to see their GP. My husband had to wait three weeks to see the GP because it was not an emergency, but he thought it was an emergency; sometimes we do not know, and it is up to the doctor to decide what is important and what is not.

Some parts of the NHS are at crisis point. That is not a party political point at all; it is supported by health organisations such as the Nuffield Trust and the Health Foundation, which professed this time last year that the NHS was at risk of a “catastrophic collapse”. If the worrying trends in waiting times that I have described are ever to be reversed and we are to save the NHS, we need to have a wholesale rethink about the way we approach health policy. Prevention must be the key, and self-care should be a central part of that reconsidered approach.

Self-care is about empowering people and patients to maintain their own health through informed lifestyle choices, better awareness of symptoms and better awareness of when it is important to seek professional advice—for example, for possible cancer symptoms, where early diagnosis is absolutely crucial and a matter of life and death—and when an ailment can be treated by someone themselves in the appropriate manner by talking to their community pharmacist, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley described on the occasion of a family holiday. With improved confidence, people can take control of their own health or long-term conditions much better and make decisions that are far better for the NHS.

It is completely understandable that when we are unsure about the cause of symptoms or the best course of treatment or care, our first port of call is the NHS. However, being more aware of how we can treat ourselves and having preventive practices in place that reduce the prevalence of ill health will help go some way towards pulling the NHS back from the brink. The NHS is a trusted bastion, but sadly we are seeing more and more people accessing NHS services when there is no need and that training is provided for staff, to equip them to provide consistent self-care messaging.

It should not go without saying that there are examples across the country that show the innovative and positive impacts of improving self-care, such as a scheme in my own neck of the woods in South Tyneside—the neighbouring borough to my own—where a borough-wide conversation has been developed that shifts away from asking, “How can I help you?” and instead asks, “How can I help you to help yourself?”

Those initiatives need funding and encouraging from Government to succeed. However, what we are currently seeing has been described as a frustrating and perverse approach to preventive measures, with cuts to public health funding of £200 million in last year’s Budget, along with an average real-terms cut of 3.9% each year to 2021, announced in last year’s autumn statement. Hopefully tomorrow we will see our new Chancellor go some way to rectifying and reversing that; we can live in hope, unless the Minister has some insight into what the Chancellor will announce. We will keep our fingers crossed.

The Minister is well aware of my opinion on those cuts, because we discuss them every time we meet, and the need to rethink the whole approach, but it is not only me saying this. Only recently, the Health Committee, chaired by the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston)—who I am sure would have been here today if not for the health debate coming up in the Chamber very soon—uncovered serious concerns about the finances and funding of the NHS and public health. In a letter to the Health Secretary in October, the Committee said: “All the indicators suggest that demand is continuing to grow and that we need to go further on prevention”.

I could not agree more. These cuts are a false economy and are exacerbating the situation within our health services. We are seeing funding directed to our crisis-ridden A&E departments, which are having to crisis-manage failures that could have been addressed a lot sooner.
The Minister needs fully to understand that to make cuts to one part of our health service without considering the impact on other parts is leading us down the road to rack and ruin. To give him some understanding of the cuts, I suggest that he look at the Health Committee report “Public health post-2013”. The Select Committee does good work, but the Chair is not here to hear me highlight all this work. The report that I have just mentioned highlights research by the Association of Directors of Public Health, which found that local authorities are planning deep cuts to public health services due to the cuts coming from central Government to local authorities. It shows a marked rise for 2016-17 compared with 2015-16.

The Government need to have a wholesale rethink of the funding of the NHS and public health services that sees a redirection to prevention, which will go some way towards addressing many of the problems in our health service that are now being documented weekly. I hope that the Minister takes some time in his response to consider the points that I have raised in relation to public health funding and how current actions are failing the vision of the five year forward view and the health of our nation. Self-care needs properly to be funded and supported to be innovative, so that we ensure that the continuing crisis facing the NHS can be reversed. We cannot continue as we are, because our NHS is too precious to let it fail. The health of the nation needs to be protected, where possible, to enable people to lead long, happy and fulfilling lives.

3.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): First, I congratulate the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) both on leading the charge on this issue and on his work in the APPG. This has been a shortish debate, but there were very good speeches from all hon. Members. In fact, I agreed with much if not all of the speech given by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), and I will come on to that.

The right hon. Member for Rother Valley rightly talked about the impact that self-care needs to have on demand in the health service. He used a very important phrase that is spot on: in the course of his remarks, he asked why we are not doing more to try to shape the NHS around long-term conditions, given that, as he rightly said, some 70% to 80% of total NHS expenditure relates to long-term conditions, such as diabetes, chronic pain and dementia. As he also rightly said, increased longevity means that more and more people are living with more and more of those conditions. We need to deal with long-term conditions—this relates to a point made by the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day)—on a preventive basis, on a care plan basis, and not necessarily on an ad hoc, repair basis; I think that was the word that he used. Those points are spot on and are why we need to continue to do better in the whole area of self-care.

It is worth reflecting on why, in many ways, the moment for self-care has arrived. The Self Care Forum has been doing a lot of work in this area for a number of years, but I think that there are several reasons why self-care is particularly critical at the moment. One is demography. We are getting older. That is a good thing, but the consequence is that about 1 million more people aged over 75 will be around in 2025. We will have more long-term conditions. That is just a natural feature of ageing. Those long-term conditions are precisely where self-care gives us the biggest bang for our buck, because there is absolutely no need to continue going to see the GP all the time. People have talked about pharmacies, and I will talk about that.

Another reason is that there is a general perception in the population that people are more empowered vis-à-vis their own health and what they will accept from health professionals. We often hear of people saying, “Well, it’s not a question any more of the doctor telling me what I should do, but of having a discussion with the doctor about that.” Where that takes us to, in terms of our expectations of the health service, is a whole load of things around choice and, in particular, personalisation. Self-care also has a role to play in that. Part of it is about not just clinical outcomes, which is where we have come from historically, but out-turns that consider the general wellbeing of an individual.

The right hon. Member for Rother Valley made the point about social prescribing as a big part of that, and it absolutely is. Increasingly, it is important not just that patients with diabetes manage glucose levels and all that goes with that, but that they exercise. It might be just as appropriate for them to be referred to a football team or to talk to someone else with diabetes, in a mentor group. Frankly, social prescribing needs to be commissioned by CCGs as much as some of the clinical things that have happened in the past.

Another area that has made self-care even more prominent, and which is a component of it, is technology. We have not talked yet about technology, but there is a lot more out there. It ranges from people just being able to look at Google, see what is wrong with them and take a view—that can be dangerous and is not always to be recommended, but nevertheless it empowers people in a way that did not exist at one time—to some 900,000 health apps. People who are interested in all that stuff—who are interested in all that stuff—and possibly more IT literate than I am—can use all those, and they do. The combination of those things has meant that the whole ethos of “Doctor knows best” is giving way to much more of a dialogue and a care plan orientation, and a big part of that care plan will be self-care.

What is the Government’s response? That is the challenge that we received from the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West. I suppose there are two areas. There is the whole general area of public health. I will not get into a discussion about the relative size of budgets and all the rest of it, other than to say that the Opposition’s position on where we should spend more money versus less money in the health service and anywhere else would be stronger if occasionally they agreed that in some areas it is right to spend less in order to spend more in other areas. If their position is that we must always spend more money on everything, their comments may be taken by Ministers with a bit more of a pinch of salt. I merely say that in passing.

In terms of awareness and education, the right hon. Member for Rother Valley made a good point, which I had not thought of, about health education in schools...
being a step up from other types of education. There does need to be more awareness, and I will mention a small thing that I became aware of recently. One of my responsibilities in dementia now is that I had not realised that obesity is a major factor in someone’s likelihood of getting dementia. I know that now, and perhaps everyone else in the Chamber also knows it, but I suspect that many people do not; I do not think why obesity and dementia go together is that intuitive. That is an example of the need for awareness.

Let me talk about the sorts of things that the Government need to encourage and are encouraging. We have a campaign on stopping smoking—Stoptober. We have “Everybody Active, Every Day” and Change4Life, which involve people taking control of their diet and how they live. I talked about dementia, and there is the dementia friends initiative. There are some 1.7 million dementia friends now. Dementia has become the condition that most people die of in the UK, and dealing with that will be a real challenge in the years ahead.

That is about public health, but we have a whole stack of things to do with clinical outcomes. We have put into the NHS mandate a clear requirement for it to improve its response to long-term conditions, with a clear requirement for self-care to be part of that. That includes the need for more personal health budgets. Some 4,000 people now have a personal health budget; those budgets are analogous to personal care budgets. Our target for 2020 is between 50,000 and 100,000 people having such budgets. That is about choice and about control. Various tools are available for patient activation and to help patients understand the sorts of choices they can make day to day. NHS England has a target of 1.8 million people accessing tools, as well as being assessed on where they see themselves on the self-care spectrum and what they are doing about it.

It is worth talking briefly about the STP process. The shadow Minister made the point that we spend too much on acute healthcare in this country and not enough on primary care, on mental health and on the self-care options that we are talking about, including pharmacy, which I will talk about. The STP process is a precise attempt to make self-care happen in a structured bottom-up way. If the Opposition oppose the STP process at every turn, as opposed to acting as critical friends, which is how all MPs should act, they oppose what could be some very sensible, thought through and locally driven reforms to healthcare that may well result in higher budgets for prevention, which is a point that she made, and a tilt away from our spending so much of our budgets on secondary care and hospitals, which are very expensive.

NHS England has produced a book about self-care that was printed last week. “Realising the value” is about empowering people to make their own decisions about medicine and care and engaging in the community. There is a lot in the book, which was produced by Nesta, that is valuable and good. I guess it is an attempt to embed some of the things that we have been talking about. National Voices, the Health Foundation and voluntary organisations were involved in it.

Social prescribing is a large part of the initiative, which is about peer groups and making sure that people who have a diabetes issue are not overwhelmed by concerns about losing a limb and about glucose levels changing. It is about managing all of those types of things and ensuring people look at their own diet and at whether they are doing enough exercise or sport and are in a group of like-minded people with the same issues.

If I were diagnosed with diabetes, it would be valuable to me to talk to people who had had it for a few years. That is as valuable as going to see the doctor and his telling me what I should be doing.

The right hon. Member for Rother Valley made the point that roll-out is patchy. In truth, many things are patchy. All we can do in the centre is try to encourage CCGs to consider the advantages of what they have in terms of their own business case: a reduction in the number of visits to GPs and so on.

On the role of pharmacy, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk rightly said that I was on record as saying that we have something to learn from where Scotland is in pharmacy. I will say it again: I think we have. We are doing our own review in England—the Murray review—of the services we want to see in pharmacies over the next few years. I have absolutely no hesitation or compunction in saying we could learn from Scotland. I do not take a “not invented here” view. A phrase I always used at work was “steal with pride”. If there are bits in the Scottish model that we can take and steal, we will.

On the direction of travel, the right hon. Member for Rother Valley chairs the APPG and he knows my view is that we need to move pharmacies away from predominantly dispensing and being paid for dispensing into a model with many more services in it. That is what we are determined to do. As we go through the process, that is what we will do. A fund of £300 million between now and 2020 has been set up. There is a lot of opportunity, and the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk gave us some examples. We have announced two things already: the urgent medicine supply service and NHS 111. If someone is out of medicine, particularly if they have a long-term condition and have not had their prescription revalidated, NHS 111 has historically told them to go and see an out-of-hours GP or even an A&E service in order to meet a doctor to get the problem sorted. We are changing the script so that 200,000 calls a year will be directed to pharmacies, which will be empowered to make a judgment about the patient and will write the prescription and dispense the medicine. That is a big change and that is exactly where we need to go.

We heard from the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk about the national minor ailments scheme. In England, we are now committed to rolling that out nationally by April 2018 so that the list of minor ailments that the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk talked about will be treated in pharmacies in England. The pharmacist will be paid separately for the consultation and any dispensing that comes from it.

Another service-based activity in pharmacies was announced two weeks ago by Simon Stevens: the sore throat pilot. Pharmacists can do a test to determine whether someone’s sore throat is a bacterial or a viral issue. If it is bacterial, they will send someone to a doctor so that they can have antibiotics prescribed. If it is viral, they will not. As that service is rolled out nationally, it will save 800,000 GP consultations a year, but this also relies on awareness and all that goes with that.
Diabetes self-care is a big area on which we can make progress. Diabetes is a growing problem and people will benefit greatly from individual care plans and social prescribing. We have changed the GP contract so that when GPs identify type 1 or type 2 diabetes, they put the person on a structured education course. GPs are now being paid for the numbers of people they get on to such courses. A big part of those education courses is explaining better to people how they can self-care.

I was going to talk about technology—I have probably spoken for long enough, but perhaps I will deal with some of the various points that were made. The right hon. Member for Rother Valley asked about the personal allowance in care homes, which he is right to say was not uprated. I will get back to him on the rationale for that. I suspect the reason is, as we know, that the care sector is under financial pressure. However, the money was not cut, but went to the rest of the adult social care budget. A judgment has to be made about what is adequate and where money is best spent, but I will write to him with a fuller answer to his question.

The right hon. Member for Rother Valley also talked about the need for a national strategy on self-care. I have been a Minister for about four months now. My general learning point would be that we need fewer strategies and more implementable plans, and I suspect the right hon. Gentleman would agree. We need to do things, and there are some things that are quite sensible. I have talked about some of them, but they need to happen. We need to go further and faster.

I agreed with much of what the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West said. She talked about a wholesale rethink, which is what we are trying to do with the STP process. The Opposition would do well to not necessarily oppose every part of that, but to act as critical friends, as all MPs must. She made good points about making every contact count. She talked a lot about common sense, which I completely agree with. I guess she will not be surprised to know that I am not going to talk to her about the autumn statement; all I have said on money is that the UK now spends more on health as a proportion of GDP than the OECD average. It is about one percentage point less than France and Germany; that is about where we are, and it is clearly critical that we look properly at every area of expenditure and maximise its value. I believe we did so with pharmacy, and we are trying to do it with the STPs, as regards the difference between secondary care and primary care.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow made the point that in the thrust towards self-care—which is right—we must still be careful to say that people sometimes need to see a doctor. Sometimes there is something serious wrong. Too many people go to the doctor too often with trivial things; but on the other hand people do not always know when they have the initial symptom of something serious—it can be something that looks benign, or a lump or something. It is important to understand that GPs are there to look after such things. We need to be aware of that in the drive towards self-care. I thank the hon. Members who spoke in the debate.
Heathrow Expansion: Air Quality

Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair

4 pm

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect on air quality of proposed Heathrow airport expansion.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. As you and the Minister are aware, I have spent much time in Parliament on the issues of Heathrow and Heathrow expansion because many of my constituents in Twickenham are concerned. It is therefore a great disappointment to me that the Government recently decided to support Heathrow expansion, and I reiterate that I am still firmly and utterly opposed to that decision.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady, my constituency neighbour, on securing this debate. I alert the House that many MPs for constituencies in and around Heathrow airport have constituents who are worried about the implications of the proposed expansion and about air quality, which is increasingly important locally.

Dr Mathias: I thank the hon. Lady for making that important point, as this not only affects Twickenham. Four councils are currently taking the Government to court over air quality because of Heathrow. Air quality is an important concern for many people.

The people, like the hon. Lady, know that Heathrow is not deliverable on many levels, including cost, noise pollution and the upcoming legal challenges, but the insurmountable challenge, and the reason I secured this debate, is air quality. The Minister will know that air quality is a major and increasing concern, and he may recall that in January 2016 I asked the then Prime Minister about the shocking news that the annual legal limit for nitrogen dioxide had been breached in London by 8 January. A map of nitrogen dioxide levels across London and Heathrow shows high concentrations in central London and Heathrow. Nitrogen dioxide, of course, affects the lungs, particularly in people with asthma or bronchial conditions, and decreases lung function growth in children.

Perhaps of even more concern is particulate matter. I am sure the Minister is aware of the World Health Organisation’s comments on particulate matter, which affects more people than any other pollutant. Although I will be talking about the legal limits for PM2.5 and PM10, I remind him that the WHO has said that for PM2.5 “no threshold has been identified below which no damage to health is observed.”

There is no safe level but, just like for nitrogen dioxide, London breached the annual legal limit in the first few months of this year. Forty cities in the United Kingdom have already breached the annual legal limit for PM2.5, and London is in the top six. PM10 is also of serious concern. Only 11 cities in the United Kingdom breached the annual legal limit in the early part of this year, and London is in the top four.

Particulate matter contributes to fatalities from strokes, heart disease, lung cancer and acute and chronic respiratory diseases. The cost in human terms is that 9,000 deaths a year in Greater London are attributable to nitrogen dioxide or particulate matter, which are just some of the air pollutants. Four thousand deaths in 1952 gave rise to the Clean Air Act 1956. Now we have more than double that number every year, and the Government are not doing enough.

What concerns me is that, within just over a week of the Government’s being found guilty in the courts of not having an adequate plan to address air quality, they decided to approve Heathrow expansion. The expansion will involve perhaps 50% more planes. The Minister might say that it is not the aircraft but the cars that are adding to the air pollutants, but Heathrow lies near the M4 and the M25, two of the country’s most congested motorways. He will also know that, with nearly 250,000 more flights planned, there will be thousands more passengers and staff, and they will not be walking to and from Heathrow airport.

The number of cars will increase, and I do not agree or accept that electric cars will be the answer. There are 11 million diesel cars in the United Kingdom, and they will not be scrapped and replaced in time for the proposed Heathrow expansion. I do not want to hear that putting on facemasks will protect us from particulate matter, because the British Lung Foundation says that there is no evidence that that will help.

Heathrow implicitly acknowledges the risk to air quality. I am sure the Minister has a well-thumbed copy of the Airports Commission report, and page 225 states that £799 million will be spent on car parks at an expanded Heathrow. That will increase air pollutants, which are already breaching legal limits. Heathrow Airport Holdings Ltd will argue about how much it wants to spend on surface access—that is one argument—but nobody who favours Heathrow expansion denies that surface access will increase, which means more road trips and more pollutants.

Ruth Cadbury: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Mathias: I will in a while, if I have time.

Heathrow airport prides itself on being a leading cargo airport. Again, cargo and freight are not coming to and from Heathrow in an electric car or on a horse and cart. My question to the Minister is simple: if the Government support Heathrow expansion, how will they get air quality within legal targets? I have asked two Prime Ministers, two Secretaries of State for Transport and a Minister from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how they can expand Heathrow airport without increasing air pollution. Thus far, I have been assured that it will happen, but I have not been told how. I hope that today, at the sixth time of asking, I will be told.

Howard Davies spent years and millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money on his commission’s report, and he said on page 307 of the Minister’s well-thumbed copy that “an expanded Heathrow Airport must be contingent on acceptable performance on air quality.” Howard Davies said that that was needed but, again, the report did not specify how it would be achieved. We need airport expansion, but it must be in a place where the legal limits for air pollution have not been breached.
Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate; she is making a compelling case. The overwhelming body of legal and expert opinion on environmental and transport matters is that it is not sustainable. Does she agree that it is a welcome sign that the Mayor of London has put the resources of TfL behind the campaign, and will support all of us who are campaigning to ensure that Heathrow does not expand, because of that particular risk?

Dr Mathias: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that absolutely brilliant point. I would think that the Mayor of London supporting the campaign would focus the minds of the Minister and the Cabinet, because four councils—Richmond, Wandsworth, Hillingdon and Windsor and Maidenhead—are taking the Government to court for noise and air pollution as a result of the proposed Heathrow expansion. Ministers have a chance to change their minds and deliver runway capacity in an area where air pollution is not so critical. No other place in the United Kingdom is as vulnerable as the area around Heathrow, close to Greater London.

If the Government continue to support Heathrow expansion without a plan to reduce air pollution to within safe medical and legal limits—it must be done in a critical time frame, as ClientEarth told the Government in the Supreme Court and the High Court—I will ask the Government to admit that they are wilfully and knowingly increasing the number of deaths attributable to air pollution caused by an expanded Heathrow.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Before I invite the Minister to respond, I warn him that I am likely to interrupt his speech if a Division is called in the House.

4.12 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr. John Hayes): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) on securing this debate. She has been a regular, repeated and determined advocate for the case that she makes today.

The Government are straightforward about our plans, as my hon. Friend made clear in her speech. The Secretary of State has announced the steps that we are taking in respect of Heathrow, which she has drawn to the House’s attention, but in doing so, the Secretary of State was absolutely clear that it will now be subject to a consultation, that it will be gauged according to that consultation and that the Government are committed to the interests of local people, just as we are committed to the interests of people who wish to travel to and from Heathrow. Of course, she is right to suggest that squaring those two objectives is a significant challenge, but it is one that the Government are willing to meet.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Does the Minister agree that airport expansion can cause pollution not only from aircraft but from traffic going to the airport? We need many more electric cars, and we need to ensure that public transport runs not on diesel but on petrol or hybrid. What are the Government doing about that particular situation?

Mr Hayes: It is apposite that my hon. Friend, with his usual insight and judgment, should raise that matter. Just this morning, I gave evidence to the Lords Science and Technology Committee, which is producing a report on exactly that subject. The Committee asked telling questions about the pace of those developments, their character and what social and environmental effects they might have.

Dr Mathias: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I will in a second, after I finish this point. I was able to orate at considerable but not excessive length on all those matters. My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) will have a chance to see the report. In addition, because I always like to go that one step further than other Ministers, I will drop him a line summarising, given that I know his interest in these matters. [Interruption.]

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Minister; he can continue his remarks when we resume. A Division has been called in the House. If there is one Division, the sitting will be suspended until 4.30; if there are two, we will resume at 4.40, and the Minister can continue his remarks then.

4.15 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.30 pm

On resuming—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is resumed. Those Members who are here for the debate on the electrification of the great western line are 15 minutes early, because we are 15 minutes behind schedule because of the Division. You are most welcome to stay; you may learn something about air quality at Heathrow. The Division rudely interrupted the Minister, whom I invite to resume his remarks.

Mr Hayes: Those who were present earlier had the excitement of hearing the beginning of my speech; those who have joined us rather later are going to have the excitement of the peroration. It is almost like having two bites of the cherry for those who have been here throughout.

Before the sitting was suspended briefly, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton had asked me about electric vehicles. I do not want to go down that road, and I do not think you would permit me to do so, Mr Hollobone; it is sufficient for me to say that I will write to him, summarising the evidence I gave to the Lords Science and Technology Committee this morning to better inform further consideration of that important matter.

Dr Mathias: Although I absolutely applaud electric cars, there are 11 million diesel cars. The point is the timeframe. I do not believe that the Government will move to all cars being electric, with no air pollution, in the timeframe within which they want Heathrow expansion, which cannot take place with air quality levels as they are.

Mr Hayes: I would not claim for a moment, and have not done so, that we are going to have an entirely electric fleet of cars, privately owned or otherwise, in the near
future. Nevertheless, the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton is reasonable, given that that is a factor that will affect the way we drive in future, with a consequent effect on emissions.

Dr Mathias: Does the Minister agree that because air pollution is at such a dire, illegal level, complete electrification is the only way we will be able to get safe levels in future?

Mr Hayes: My hon. Friend clearly has greater prophetic powers than I do. I would never want to have claimed to have second-guessed the whole of the future. Technological change is, by its nature, unpredictable, and the circumstances we currently face are highly dynamic. We know that electric vehicles are here and established. The numbers being driven are growing and the Government support that. I fully anticipate that number continuing to grow significantly. It will affect emissions accordingly, but there will be other technological changes in the near, medium and longer term, and they are likely to make cars more efficient. Frankly, I suspect that those changes are also likely to have a beneficial effect on emissions. As I say, though, far be it from me to be a prophet in those terms; I simply try to do my best to estimate what is happening now. It is difficult enough to do that, let alone to be more ambitious.

I turn, in the short time available, to my hon. Friend’s salient remarks—salient in the sense that they are relevant to the debate in a rather stricter way than the territory into which we were just straying. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport announced the decision on the north-west runway at Heathrow—as a preferred option, I hasten to add—in the following context. He said that, among other things, expanding Heathrow will better connect the UK to long-haul destinations in growing world markets, boosting trade and creating jobs. Passengers will benefit from more choice of airlines, destinations and flights, and expansion at Heathrow will better connect the UK to long-haul destinations in growing world markets, boosting trade and creating jobs. Passengers will benefit from more choice of airlines, destinations and flights, and expansion at Heathrow will be subject to a world-class package of compensation and supporting measures for local communities. My right hon. Friend also made it clear that the Government’s announcement was just the beginning of the consultative process I described earlier, which will allow my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham and others in the community and elsewhere to make their views known.

Let me be clear on the impact of the expansion. The Government’s commitment to dealing with emissions will be central to the discussion of the air-quality impact and to meeting the challenge of balancing the need to grow airports with the need to maintain the health and wellbeing of the people who live near them, and of all our people. We have made it clear that we must tackle air quality and noise and meet our obligations on carbon, both during and after construction of the expanded airport.

Dr Mathias: I greatly appreciate the Minister’s giving way again. Will he confirm whether I am correct in concluding that if the consultation shows that air pollution levels cannot be brought within legal limits, Heathrow expansion will not take place?

Mr Hayes: It would be entirely inappropriate of me to prejudge the consultation, still less its outcome, as my hon. Friend invites me to do. Nevertheless, given her absolute consistency and vehemence in defence of the cause she has identified today, I shall give her my 10-point summary of the issues. Ten points is the very least she deserves, given her consistency.

First, air quality is a significant national health issue, as my hon. Friend says, and the Government take it seriously. However, she knows that the prevailing issues of air quality associated with an urban environment—indeed, those associated with the kind of cars we drive and how that is changing—are the most significant feature of some of the public health arguments that she made earlier. We should not be preoccupied with assuming that airport expansion is the be all and end all in this, and I am sure she is not so preoccupied.

Secondly, the Government are already taking action to cut vehicle emissions. For example, the UK is delivering a programme, backed by £600 million of investment, to support the long-term transition to low-emission vehicles, to which I referred a moment ago.

Thirdly, the Department for Transport, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Treasury have already embarked on a joint project to identify further ways in which we can tackle this issue. Indeed, if the consultation goes that way, by the time a new runway opens in the next decade we intend to have made substantial progress in tackling air-quality challenges throughout the whole nation.

Fourthly, as announced in December 2015, we tested the Airports Commission’s analysis against the Government’s 2015 air quality plan. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend is right that the evidence base in this policy area is ever shifting, and we do need to recognise that there is more work to do; I happily do so today. We have to keep our assessments up to date and to take account of changing technology and what that brings.

Fifthly, Heathrow airport will have to play its part. The new runway must be underpinned by further industry-leading measures to mitigate air quality impacts.

Sixthly—I am rattling through these points because I am conscious of the time, Mr Hollobone, and this Chamber deserves as much information as possible—the Government believe that, with a suitable package of policies and mitigation measures, the Heathrow north-west runway scheme can be delivered without impacting on the UK’s compliance with air quality limit values.

Seventhly, final development consent will be granted only if the Secretary of State is satisfied that, with mitigation, the Heathrow scheme is compliant with legal requirements on air quality. I do not think that is quite what my hon. Friend asked for—as I say, I do not want to prejudge the consultation—but she must be pleased with what I have said today; she would be churlish not to be.

Dr Mathias: The Minister is being very generous in taking interventions. Will he confirm that, after all these measures are taken, if air quality levels are illegal, the beginning of any construction for a third runway at Heathrow cannot and will not take place?

Mr Hayes: For the sake of clarity, I will repeat exactly what I said for the record. Final development consent will only be granted if the Secretary of State is satisfied that, with mitigation, the Heathrow scheme is compliant
with legal requirements on air quality. Whether that is quite what my hon. Friend wants or not, I do not know, but I think that is quite a big commitment to make and it is certainly made in the spirit that I described earlier—that of a Government who are absolutely concerned to do the right thing by local residents and in terms of emissions generally.

Dr Mathias rose—

Mr Hayes rose—

Mr Hayes: I will give way briefly to the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury).

Ruth Cadbury: I thank the Minister for giving way. Last week at Transport questions, I asked a question about an issue that concerns my local area, which is the proposed expansion of the M4, which, so far as I can see, would be needed if the third runway is given the go-ahead. Will the Minister comment on the impact on air quality of a tunnel coming up either in Brentford or Chiswick?

Mr Hayes: Yes. Among my many responsibilities, although I know that Members in this Chamber think that they are too few, are big roads, and the M4 is indeed a big road. However, it is important to point out that in any expansion that takes place at Heathrow, a range of transport connections would be considered. I know that Heathrow is considering how people would get to and from the airport. That will not just be by car. The hon. Lady will know that about 45% of people currently make their journey to and from Heathrow by private vehicle, but that number is not fixed in stone. One would hope that—indeed, I would expect it to be so as part of this package—all kinds of innovative solutions will be delivered as to how people can get to the airport efficiently.

Therefore, I do not want to prejudge that issue and I certainly would not want either to say anything that contradicted the answer that the hon. Lady received last week, because the question then was not posed to me; I think it was posed to the Secretary of State. I reassure the hon. Lady that we are broad-minded about the means by which people get to and from Heathrow and the effects that might have on local people.

Let me make my last three points, because I promised 10 points and so far I have delivered only seven. The Government have also made it clear that we must tackle noise and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham is also concerned about this. We will also meet our obligations on carbon. On noise, Heathrow Airport Holdings Ltd has committed to a ban on scheduled night flights of six and a half hours, more predictable periods of respite for communities and new and binding noise targets.

Ninthly, the Government’s announcement was just the beginning, as I said, of the process, as the preferred scheme will now be subject for consultation through a draft airports national policy statement that will follow in the new year. Of course, that is something to look forward to after the excitement of Christmas.

Finally, it is important to point out—I know that my hon. Friend is very conscious of this and I thought she deserved an answer on it—that the Government accept the recent High Court judgment that more needs to be done to improve the nation’s air quality. That does not apply simply to airports; I am looking at a range of transport modes, as she will doubtless appreciate. I can tell her that the Government will produce a revised plan by 31 July 2017 and my team in the Department for Transport are beavering away and working with other relevant Departments to make sure that the plan meets all the necessary requirements.

Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I think I have only two minutes left, but what a delight it is to give way to my hon. Friend.

Jonathan Lord: I thank the Minister for giving way. Many experts, commentators and indeed Members of this House feel that the air quality projections made to date have been somewhat fanciful, including a large dose of wishful thinking. Can he reassure us that there is anything in the next year’s worth of consultation that will be more robust, and that the Government will take note of what many experts are saying?

Mr Hayes: I can give an absolute assurance that while I am the Minister of State at the Department for Transport all that we do will be studious and robust, and that includes the considerations of the kind that my hon. Friend has identified. It is important that we do the work to produce an evidential argument and also articulate that argument in a way that sends the public a very clear message—this Government are serious about transport and about wellbeing. All that we do in the Department, while I have influence over it, will be gauged by wellbeing and the effect that it has on the national interest and the common good.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the effect on air quality of proposed Heathrow airport expansion.
Great Western Line: Electrification

4.45 pm

Charlotte Leslie (Bristol North West) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered electrification of the Great Western line.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. This is a debate that I never wanted to have to bring to the House and I am sure that many other Members felt the same. In doing so, I acknowledge that the Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard)—is relatively new to his post and that many of the problems I am highlighting will be ones that he has inherited. I also acknowledge that he has been and remains a formidable constituency MP, as well as now being a great Minister, so I hope that he will forgive many of us for expressing passionately the views and interests of our constituents. That goes to the heart of why I called for this debate, because I am sure that there are those somewhere who will say, “What is an MP for Bristol North West doing having this debate?” Neither Bristol Parkway nor Bristol Temple Meads are in my constituency, so some will say, “Well, she’s not affected by this.” However, anyone who says that an MP such as me is not affected by this issue misunderstands fundamentally the nature of transport and the nature of our railways in particular.

Our railways are not simply stretches of iron rail in the location where they are constituted; they are the circulation system, if you will, of our regions, our communities and indeed our entire nation. If something happens to one part of that circulation system, it has wide-reaching effects and impacts on the body as a whole. I applied for this debate because of deep concern about the recent Government announcement of the deferral of electrification, which yet again appears to leave the south-west region trailing behind other parts of the country in terms of transport infrastructure investment.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I am sorry to interrupt her so very early in her speech. I know that most of the speeches in the Chamber this afternoon will be about the problems and the deferral of electrification. However, would it not be gracious to say that 10 years ago there was no prospect whatever of electrification anywhere to the west of London? We should be glad that the Government have delivered electrification as far as Chippenham—in my constituency, or just outside it—and that we have quite a few things to be grateful for, albeit that we also have a few problems.

Charlotte Leslie: It is always a profound joy to give way to my hon. Friend. If he had waited for a small amount of time before intervening, I would have come to that point. However, since he has made that case, I can skip over some of my speech, because it is a very valid point. We do not want to let the best become the enemy of the good and I want to acknowledge where we are.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I do not want to dispute the hon. Gentleman’s maths, but given that the decision to electrify the railway was made in 2009, which is less than 10 years ago, I beg to differ with what has just been said.

Charlotte Leslie: The hon. Lady also anticipates something that I will raise in my speech. Whichever Government want to make dramatic railway infrastructure improvements, they face challenges. Whether a Labour Minister or a Conservative Minister was sitting in the Minister’s chair here, I suspect that the challenges involved in delivering what they want to do could be very similar. I will come back to that point in my speech.

I am afraid that all south-west MPs might agree that, when we see the bills for HS2 soaring to £42 billion, the deferral of our meagre-by-comparison £5 billion project is particularly hard to swallow, especially since the south-west has consistently been among the bottom regions in the league tables for regional spend per capita.

The south-west is a region that boasts exciting opportunities, that is incredibly fast-growing, and that desperately needs the kind of focus on rail investment that we have seen with HS2 and Crossrail. So, forgive me, Minister, if I say for the south-west that, when it comes to seeing actual infrastructure—not promised but built—many people in the region feel that it is now our turn.

Nevertheless, returning to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) raised, there have been improvements and the Government are making efforts. I must also be fair about the context of this debate. I recognise that, this deferral notwithstanding, the region will still receive, which it might not have received otherwise, 5,000 extra seats on journeys into London at peak time. Most of us have made that journey, so we know that those seats will be very welcome. We have been promised new trains, which will deliver faster journeys. We are told that there will be station improvements down the line. However, I hope that the Minister will forgive me for being honest and saying that, given the recent announcement of the deferral, we will believe these things when we see them. I would also appreciate a bit more clarity in the Minister’s response about the exact tangible benefits we will get in return for what has been a hard blow in the form of the announcement of deferral.

As I said, the improvements are welcome, and I do not want to be ungracious by denying that. However, major concerns remain about what the decision says about how we do big infrastructure projects and I will be asking the Minister specific questions. If he is not able to answer them today, I would deeply appreciate a detailed written response.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I want to pick up on my hon. Friend’s earlier point about the south-west not always being at the front of the queue for such things. Bristol is, I think, the fastest-growing core city outside London, and therefore has a huge economic benefit to bring to the country. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is strange, therefore, that other areas have been given preference on the list for electrification? The deferral also includes the deferral of some of the Thames valley commuter lines and some of the lines to...
Oxford. Would it not now be sensible to re-examine the business case for the electrification of some of the lines radiating out from Bristol, on the basis that the economic case for Bristol’s economic zone must make it more attractive? That would go some way towards addressing the relatively low priority that Bristol and the south-west have previously been afforded.

Charlotte Leslie: If Hansard could kindly ascribe my hon. Friend’s comments to me I would be very grateful, because that is exactly the point I want to make. Yes, it does seem strange. It plays to a historical view that the south-west is always overlooked. I do not understand why we seem to have been axed when other places still seem to be a political priority. On the economic arguments, that does not make sense.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): It is not just the south-west that has been axed from the great western line electrification. I had hoped to be able to contribute to the earlier debate about air quality around Heathrow. One thing that will damage air quality around the airport is the fact that the Windsor-Slough link will remain a diesel one—it will not be electrified, as was originally promised. People like me supported the original proposal for the third runway at Heathrow because we were promised that electrification.

Charlotte Leslie: I start my speech by saying that what happens in one area of the country affects another and then I go on to make an unapologetically biased—not biased, but strong—case for the south-west, but I hear exactly what the right hon. Lady says. Something happening in one region deeply affects another, but I continue to make a special case for the south-west, which has not, historically, had its merits duly considered by the Department.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one example of how the south-west does not benefit from investment is that at the moment it is impossible to get a train from Plymouth or Exeter to Bristol along the very great western network on which we rely?

Charlotte Leslie: I think that anyone who has travelled that route will echo, with gusto, what my hon. Friend has just said.

Moving on to macro-level concerns, I find the National Audit Office report into the functioning of Network Rail, and into the Department’s ability to project manage and to hold Network Rail to account, deeply concerning. I do not doubt the good intentions of all those involved, but we read in that report about over-optimism from Network Rail on significant elements of the electrification project and about inadequate project management. And the list goes on. The trouble is that it has become almost impossible to get a train from Plymouth or Exeter to Paddington that those trains will enable?

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. As a Welsh MP—the only one here, I think—I add my weight to the argument that the south-west is under-represented where infrastructure is concerned and that there is a lack of confidence. Wales is also under-represented. Will the Minister assure us that the other core elements will be completed, such as the Filton bank capacity enhancement project, the new Hitachi hybrid intercity express trains and the two new services per hour between Bristol Temple Meads and London Paddington that those trains will enable?

Charlotte Leslie: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that extremely good point.

I know that many other Members would like the chance to speak. My final concern, which has been raised locally, is about rolling stock. The effect of the deferral of the electrification of the Thames valley branches on the planned cascade of the Thames turbo class 165 and 166 rolling stock to the west of England is vital to the MetroWest phases 1 and 2 projects. I have been very public about what seems to me, and to many
others in the region, an appalling missed opportunity on the part of local decision makers—their failure to prioritise the Henbury loop line in the MetroWest scheme. I have been clear that I do not think that such schemes are ambitious enough to meet the exponentially growing branch line demand in our region; however, they are a start. If the MetroWest scheme, as it is, were to suffer even further detriment, that would be catastrophic for our city and our region. I cannot impress that upon the Minister enough. Can he give assurances today that the rolling stock cascade—the Thames turbo class 165 and 166—will not be affected by the deferral?

I turn briefly to the Bristol East junction and to Temple Meads, issues that the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) will probably want to raise in more detail than I will. I have been pleased to be able to work, in many ways cross-party, on rail for our city. Can we get assurances regarding the concerns about the future of the remodelling of that junction and about plans for transforming Bristol Temple Meads to accommodate new trains at platforms zero and one? I know that the hon. Lady will want to speak about that, but I would like some replies from the Minister.

This is an important debate for so many MPs and so many of their constituents. It is not, as I fear it might be seen by some, people fussing over whether we have wire in the sky. It is about the south-west being sick of being the poor relation in our nation’s transport projects while other high-speed projects go roaring on. It is about a real concern that this is somehow the thin end of a wedge that will see all the progress we have made over the past six years, of which I have been so proud, melt away. It is about all of us here, regardless of party, asking serious questions about whether the mechanisms and bodies that this or any Government have at their disposal to plan and build rail infrastructure are any longer fit for purpose. Given what we have seen of projects soaring over budget and over time and then getting paused, deferred, cancelled or any other word anyone would like to use, under an array of Governments, it is hard to believe that Network Rail is fit for purpose. If it is not, and assuming Britain wants to be a global competitor, can the Minister provide some thoughts on what on earth we are going to do about it?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate is due to finish at 5.45 pm. It is an hour-long debate. It is very difficult to chair because I have an array of parliamentary talent before me and just over 20 minutes of Back-Bench time before I have to call the Front-Bench spokespeople. Unfortunately, I am going to have to impose a time limit of three minutes. If Members intervene on each other, some of you will not get called, but if you stick to three minutes, everyone will get in, and there may be time at the end to intervene on the Front-Bench spokespeople.

5 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on securing the debate. I will curtail my comments.

I speak for my Bristol South constituents, who also use Bedminster and Parson Street stations, when I say that the so-called deferral of this project has confused and outraged passengers in my constituency. We are confused because, despite the promises that we received and the significant disruption that we have tolerated, we have a half-finished project. We are outraged because the rail connections are such an important part of our economic development and our success. Bristol is key to the entire regional economy and that is why this is such a critical decision.

In 1835, an Act of Parliament created the Great Western Railway. In just six years, Brunel managed to build the entire thing from Paddington to Bristol—but in the last six years we have seen a complete lack of progress. Decisions have been delayed and deferred and now progress has been halted. At the Public Accounts Committee next month, we will consider the National Audit Office report and I would be grateful for comments from all Members. I suspect the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) will also join that discussion. The report is very clear. Who is accountable now for the decision? Who is in charge of the plan to deliver benefits to passengers? Who lined up the key components of the new trains with the infrastructure and the operator? Who is managing the critical path alongside things such as the signalling works?

I have three asks of the Minister. If he does not have time to answer my questions, I would appreciate an answer in writing. First, is there still a case for electrification? What is now the Department’s analysis of the benefits for passengers in terms of journey times, frequency and capacity—dare I mention having a seat?—of bimodal trains versus electrification? We do not seem to know.

Secondly, Mr Brunel built the entire railway via an Act of Parliament, so why did the Department for Transport not at any point place an order under the Transport and Works Act 1992 for all the works? It might have taken longer to get to this point, but Network Rail would not have had to go through the myriad processes that it has had to, across the whole line.

Thirdly, what is the role of the regulator, the Office of Rail and Road? The Government have chosen to make it an arm’s-length body, but what is its responsibility in all of this? There is a political choice between enhancements and renewals or maintenance. The regulator has a clear role on renewal and maintenance, in light of its safety responsibility, but enhancement such as electrification is different. I am interested to know what the Minister thinks about that.

The core of the matter is passengers and our constituents. Whatever processes were undertaken to deliver the decision, it is true to say that as a result Bristol people feel we are being short-changed, and as we are the gateway to the region, the entire south-west region is being short-changed. Who is making these decisions on behalf of Bristol colleagues? Consider the make-up of the Government, the Cabinet and the Tory Front Bench. Apart from the Secretary of State for International Trade, the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), the south-west has no representation at the top table of Government. There are 51 Tory MPs in the south-west, out of 55. I congratulate them on their victory, but they have a small smattering of Ministers from their number to be able to deliver top decisions at the top table—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I call James Heappey.
5.3 pm  

**James Heappey** (Wells) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on securing this debate, and for representing my parents-in-law so well.

It was a real blow to hear that the electrification of the great western main line would be deferred beyond Bath Spa, not least because as Members for the south-west region, we had all rather hoped that over the course of this Parliament we would be making the case for electrification to go on beyond Bristol to Weston-super-Mare, to Taunton and then on down into the far south-west. The fact that we are now here asking for it to be electrified to Bristol as originally planned is somewhat disappointing.

I have just one station in my constituency, Highbridge and Burnham, which is some way south of Bristol, although many people commute from there to Bristol and on to London. Many more of my constituents access the rail network in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) at Worle, or that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare, to Taunton and then on down into the far south-west. The fact that we are now here asking for it to be electrified to Bristol as originally planned is somewhat disappointing.

In the brief time I have today, I have a couple of asks. First, bimodal trains are hugely impressive in the technology that they employ, but there is a sense that they have one foot in the past with diesel and one foot in the present with electrification. Given that so many of the bimodal trains operating out of Paddington towards Bristol Temple Meads will continue their journey on from Temple Meads to Weston, Taunton or Exeter, is there not a case for unmuzzling those trains—as the trains that operate on the Reading/Castle Cary/Taunton line have been unmuzzled—so that they have a bit of extra oomph to accelerate while under diesel power?

Secondly, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West raised the arrival of the additional rolling stock from the Thames valley, given the deferral of the electrification there. That is a real issue. I know from conversations earlier today with the Minister that it might be that the arrival of that rolling stock is not to do with the deferral but with delays elsewhere. Either way, that rolling stock is absolutely key. The commuter belt around Bristol—I know the part to the south particularly well, but I am sure it is the same for parts to the north and east as well—is increasingly congested. Two or three-carriage trains trying to serve those routes are simply not enough. We urgently need that rolling stock to come down from the Thames valley to serve the growing rail demand in the west country.

The Minister kindly came to the launch of the Peninsula Rail Task Force report. I ask him to ensure that all the things in that report about resilience in the far south-west do not find themselves competing with the very urgent things that need to be done to improve connectivity to Bristol.

5.7 pm  

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) for securing this debate. My constituents in Bristol West are as perplexed and as outraged as I am to learn that the much-needed and long-awaited electrification of the Great Western Railway is being postponed. The works were initiated by the last Labour Government, who rightly recognised that investing in infrastructure to support economic growth is a vital duty of government and that electrification helps to decrease air pollution, of which diesel engines are such a great cause.

Since then, the coalition and subsequent Tory Governments have paused, unpaised, and now paused the works again. As recently as June 2015, the then Secretary of State told the House:

“Electrification of the Great Western line is a top priority and I want Network Rail to concentrate its efforts on getting that right.”—[Official Report, 25 June 2015; Vol. 597, c. 1068.]

**Karin Smyth:** Would my hon. Friend also agree that there is deep concern in Bristol that money has been diverted from the west country to fund the so-called northern powerhouse—from the great western line to perhaps HS2 or other projects?

**Thangam Debbonaire:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The HS2 project is of course hugely, vastly more expensive than this project. It is extraordinary that the electrification is being sacrificed for other projects.

Similar uncertainty has been meted out to other regions, such as the electric spine and midland main line. In fact, in June, when the Secretary of State was confirming his support for the great western line electrification, he was at the same time pausing midland electrification and that on the trans-Pennine route. That does not appear to me to signify a coherent, thought-through plan to invest in infrastructure.

I would like the Minister to respond to the following questions. Where is the Government’s commitment to a western powerhouse? Will the west of England devolution deal end up having to cover the cost of the electrification project? What answers do the Government have for passengers who are currently stuck with journey times that feel to them routinely longer than those in the 1970s, when it was apparently possible to travel from Bristol Temple Meads to London in 90 minutes without stopping? Where is the sense in suspending the work when so much of it has already taken place? How does the Minister answer the Bristolians who have been given the idea that we are not worth bothering about? How does the Minister square the postponement with improving air quality, something which my constituents in Bristol West so badly want to see? Finally, when will the Government sort out a coherent, reliable plan for investment in infrastructure, and will that plan include proper levels of investment in local train services inside Bristol as well as to Bristol?

5.9 pm  

**Justin Tomlinson** (North Swindon) (Con): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. My contribution will be brief. First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie). It is right that we collectively challenge and scrutinise the work of Network Rail. This project comes on the back of record investment not seen since Victorian times, and it is in stark contrast to the just six miles of electrification that was delivered under the previous Labour Government. I say that not to make a political
point, but to highlight what a large engineering challenge this is. I know that first-hand, because I had the pleasure of visiting the electrification training centre—a £10 million facility based in Swindon—where all the apprentices and staff working on the project will go to do their training.

It is frustrating, and we would all love to see this happen tomorrow, but there have been some successes already. The test track finished on time on 30 September, the Severn tunnel finished on time on 22 October, and all of last year’s Christmas and Easter work was finished on time. The budget for the Christmas work is increasing from £60 million last year to £84 million.

I have some asks for the Minister, building on the positive news about the Hitachi trains, which will see a 40% increase in capacity. The Network Rail teams must engage with MPs and physically show us the engineering works, the challenges and the opportunities for the future. I know the Minister is held in very high regard, but I echo the plea for more south-west MPs to be on the Front Bench. I think we are all currently auditioning for that—we would all vote for ourselves if Front Benchers were democratically chosen. I hope the Minister will join me in lobbying the Government for the much-needed £5.5 million redevelopment of Swindon station, which is vital because there has been a 50% increase in train usage in the past decade, and it is anticipated that the extra capacity that the electrification work will create will make Swindon an even more popular destination—hard to believe, given that it already is the centre of all great things. Disability access must be a given for all future works at stations—I know the Minister will do that. Finally, as we look at the long-term arrangements for the operator of these lines, a long-term franchise must be put in place so investment in the day-to-day services matches the Government’s commitment to improve our rail infrastructure.

5.12 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as ever, to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on securing this debate.

Last week, the National Audit Office issued a damning verdict on the way that this project has been handled to date. It described the project as “a case study in how not to manage a major programme.” The Secretary of State agreed when I put that to him at Transport questions. He said: “I am not happy about the way in which the... programme has been managed” and that he is “still not satisfied with the progress that is being made.”—[Official Report, 17 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 368.]

We need to look at what this tells us about how we handle major infrastructure projects—particularly transport infrastructure projects—in this country. They always seem to go over time and over budget, and they never seem to reach completion in the way that was originally intended. The epic mismanagement of this programme will cost the taxpayer £330 million, which is more than Bristol City Council’s annual day-to-day budget.

Bristol Parkway now has to wait 18 months longer than planned for electrification—until the end of 2018—and Bristol Temple Meads, the station that most of my constituents use, now has to wait until at least 2024 for an electrified connection to the Great Western Railway. There is no certainty it will happen, and many of my constituents have said that they have had to endure traffic jams caused by road closures for the essential work being carried out on bridges to prepare for electrification. Other roadworks are being carried out in Bristol, such as the MetroBus construction. It is already the most congested city in the country. My constituents have to endure more and they now feel it has been for nothing.

The Great Western Railway is already one of the most overcrowded routes in the country, and almost 8 million extra passengers a year are expected by 2018-19. Most of us who have travelled on that line will think, “Where on earth are you going to put them?” because it is already difficult to get a seat—certainly at peak times. The Secretary of State assured me that new stock will be rolled out sooner rather than later, but we are waiting for that promise to be fulfilled.

As well as calling on the Government to do what they can to speed up electrification, I want to flag up next year’s feasibility study of suburban rail in the west. Local rail is an important part of what needs to be an increasingly integrated transport network. The hon. Member for Bristol North West talked about Bristol East junction. It used to be in my constituency, but I was cruelly deprived of it by the 2010 boundary changes, along with Temple Meads station, Lawrence Hill station and Stapleton Road station. I now have no stations. We are, however, campaigning for the re-opening of St Anne’s Park station, which was closed in 1970. That would massively improve connections to jobs, services and culture for my constituents living in the more peripheral parts of east Bristol. I hope the Minister takes that on board, too.

5.15 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to be back in this Chamber for the second time today talking about the desperately vital need for infrastructure investment in the south-west. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on securing this debate.

It is not all bad news coming down the track for Great Western. We will soon have the first new set of Intercity Express trains ordered in my lifetime. I think the last set was ordered back in 1976. I suspect it is tempting for the Minister and the Department for Transport, given all the issues they have had with this renewal, not to order the next set until 2056, but hopefully they will soon be on the line.

It is right that this debate has focused on the electrification programme. I represent a constituency in the far south-west that was not initially part of the electrification process, and the coastal track at Dawlish is very unlikely to be part of it in the near future, given the obvious issues of mixing high levels of voltage and sea water. My concern is about the impact of the project and, in particular, how its cost has risen dramatically.

As the Minister knows, we talked earlier about the Peninsula Rail Task Force and a £280 million project to secure the Dawlish line. That is about 10% of the cost of the electrification project, and only a fraction of the increase in cost in the past couple of years. My concern
[Kevin Foster]

is about the choices that the Government have when they make initial decisions and about the solidity of the information. As the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) said, we will certainly explore that at the Public Accounts Committee. My fear is always that projects look very attractive, and the price can look just about affordable, but they can require a much larger commitment that has not been predicted. In this case, we quickly found that the engineering required to put the masts in made it almost inevitable that the costs would rise significantly.

Given what the NAO report said, it is clear that in the future we need to plan how we deliver a whole railway, not just individual aspects. Passengers do not get on a train that has been heavily delayed due to flooding and say, “Great, I’ve got better wi-fi”; they look at their whole experience on the journey. That is why it is right that we ensure our investment projects are better managed. We must deliver projects without such issues and we must make our railway more resilient. As I said in an intervention, there is no train service between parts of Devon and Cornwall and London. The intervention, there is no train service between parts of Devon and Cornwall and London. The well-known issues with the network are screaming out for investment.

5.18 pm

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on securing this debate on a subject about which many of us have spoken together over the past few years.

The electrification of the main line is still projected to cut the journey time between my constituency and London, but, given the pinch point at Bristol East, there is a question about whether it will actually speed up the journey time between Bath and Bristol. That has obviously caused concern among my constituents and, I think, pretty much all of our constituents across the whole of the west of England.

I was very disappointed by the Minister’s announcement that the electrification of the line is going to be put on hold until control period 6—2019 to 2024. Following Network Rail’s frustrating report, I welcome the fact that the journey will still be introduced, and that the new Hitachi Intercity trains and the new commuter trains will be on the line by 2018. However, our constituents are justifiably concerned, given that they have to sit on the floor and the trains break down regularly between Bath and Bristol Temple Meads and onwards to other parts of the suburban rail network.

The electrification of the great western main line will now stop at Tingley Junction, which, contrary to rumour, is just before Bath Spa. We have had to endure a long period with the Box Tunnel being reduced in height, and we would like to have confirmed that the reduction in height will still enable the new trains to get through to Bath, Bristol and beyond.

The increase in capacity will clearly make a big difference and contribute a large economic benefit to our communities. However, there is genuine concern that how much the economy of the west of England contributes to the national economy is often underestimated: we have the second largest number of tech and creative companies anywhere outside Hoxton in London; we have one of the fastest growing economies anywhere in the country; and yet, off the top of my head, we receive the lowest amount per capita of transport infrastructure spend in the country. That desperately needs to be re-evaluated.

Electrification would have a positive impact on the tourist economy, which is hugely important to my world heritage site city. Bath is a beautiful city and I want to see more tourists come to it, which would have a big knock-on effect for Somerset and Bristol, and that is another huge draw. With those trains, more people will have the confidence that they will arrive in Bath and the west of England on time.

Lastly, I want to echo some of the comments made about Network Rail. For time immemorial, we MPs have had our concerns about Network Rail being able to deliver the infrastructure projects that we require of it. I do not think that anything should be off the table, in particular given the contents of the NAO report.

5.21 pm

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on securing the debate. She made many of the points that I wished to make, but much more eloquently than I might ever have done. I join her in expressing disappointment at the decision to defer the four electrification projects along the great western route.

I will reiterate a couple of the points made by my hon. Friend, because that decision will have a direct impact on a number of my constituents in south Gloucestershire who travel from Yate, specifically, to Bristol Parkway and on to London. More passengers will continue to use the Bristol Parkway service as a result of the worsening congestion for many residents of south Gloucestershire.

I will also express some concerns about the knock-on effects of the plans to delay investment. I first seek reassurances from the Minister, as others have done, that the deferral of electrification of the Thames valley lines will not affect the cascading out of the Thames Turbo trains, the 165 and 166, to the west of England. They are essential to replace the trains that Great Western Railway has to return at the end of their leases. Failure to do so will result in a reduction of services and an increase in passenger overcrowding.

The chairman of our local West of England LEP called those trains “essential to deliver the £100m MetroWest Phase 1 and 2 rail schemes”.

Phase 2 of the MetroWest scheme includes the plan to increase the frequency of services between Bristol and Yate from hourly to half-hourly, which will be hugely important to people in Yate, Coalpit Heath and surrounding areas. It has overwhelming support from people who want to see a reduction in overcrowding on the service. It will without doubt increase the number of journeys to the already congested roads around Yate and Coalpit Heath. I will be grateful if the Minister clarifies that in his closing remarks.
I will also be grateful if the Minister clarifies the impact of the decision to delay on the local four-tracking project at Filton, which, too, is essential to deliver MetroWest phase 2. South Gloucestershire Council has already started some of the clearing work, so an early indication of any effect from the Minister will be extremely welcome.

Lastly, I call for reassurance that there are no plans to change the proposed four inter-city express services an hour between Bristol Temple Meads and London, two of which will pass through Bristol Parkway and connect directly with Yate services.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West for securing the debate, and I will welcome the Minister’s reassurances.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front Benchers’ speeches. I want to call Charlotte Leslie again to sum up the debate no later than 5.43 pm, which means that the Front-Bench speakers have nine minutes each. Were the Opposition spokesman to take less than nine minutes, there will be more time for the Minister to speak and, potentially, for interventions, but we are in her hands. I call Pat Glass.

5.24 pm

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. I will endeavour to be as quick as I can.

The recent decision by the Department for Transport to delay the electrification of the great western route is just the latest in a series of announcements of delays and pauses made by the Government on electrification of our railways. We have had one announcement after another by the Government, who still state that they are planning electrification, but while the Government have promised much, they have delivered little.

I sympathise with the Minister. Like me, he is new to the role and just happens to be holding the parcel when the music stops. However, I have a criticism about his recent announcement, because he appeared to sneak it out just hours before the November recess and on the day of the American election when, presumably, he was hoping we would all be looking the other way.

I therefore congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on securing this important debate. She and I served together on the Select Committee on Education when we were new Members in this House, and I understand her dedication to the city of Bristol. I also want to acknowledge all the MPs from Bristol: they are four strong women, who are here together fighting for a better future for rail in their city.

The case for the electrification of the route was set out in October 2009. The Department for Transport projected that it would take eight years to complete and cost up to £1 billion. According to the original timetable, we should have been looking at a fully electrified line from London to Swansea by the end of next year.

The wires will now not reach Kettering and Corby until 2018—four years behind schedule.

Mr Hollobone. I will endeavour to be as quick as I can.

The cost of the project was reassessed in September 2014, when the Department estimated it at £1.5 billion, up 50% on the original costings. Although the cost-benefit ratio expected by the Department for Transport in March 2015 was within the Department’s high value-for-money range, at 2.4:1, by the end of last year that had dropped to 1.6:1, which meant that it had fallen to within the medium value-for-money range. That is because the Department was forced to announce that the cost of the project had been revised yet again and was now estimated to be more than twice the original projection, at £2.1 billion. The latest announcement is in another league altogether, however, with the estimated costs to the taxpayer reaching £5.58 billion. The Government have managed this infrastructure project so badly that the cost-benefit ratio has now fallen through the floor.

The issue is not isolated to the great western route alone. Rather, the Government’s handling of the electrification of UK railways is being felt right across the country. First, we had the delays to the electrification of the trans-Pennine railway. Originally planned to be completed by the end of 2018, that is now looking distinctly unlikely—to put it politely. The electrification of the midland main line was paused in June last year. The wires will now not reach Kettering and Corby until 2019—that is today’s estimate—whereas the original plan had been for electrification to stretch far beyond Corby to Derby, Leicester and Nottingham by 2018. When the Government finally announced that both plans had been revived, it was only to say they would be four years behind schedule.

In 2013, 30% of the most crowded train services in England and Wales were Great Western services into Paddington, and the Department for Transport forecast tells us that passenger demand on that route is to grow by 81% between 2013 and 2019. Electrification is therefore essential if we are to see any improvement for passengers. It will lead to further economic benefits, in particular driven by freight trains running on electrified lines, and it is vital if we are to reduce our carbon footprint and will help to build a greener transport network, with the increase of freight on rail being central to that aim. It is therefore really disappointing to see that a significant part of the estimated £330 million that will be added to the bill for the electrification of the great western route will come about because of the revisions that are needed to the new all-electric trains that the Government ordered.

Thanks to the delays, those trains, which were set to cost the taxpayer £4.1 billion, will now need to be fitted with diesel engines so they can run on sections of the great western route that the Government have now decided will not be electrified. Adding those diesel engines will make the trains heavier, less energy efficient, more polluting and more damaging to the track. So this Government will spend £5.58 billion on upgrades to the as a result. As the Minister knows, the National Audit Office, in its recently published report, laid the blame squarely on the Department for Transport, stating that it did not “plan and manage all projects...in a sufficiently joined up way.”

I have worked in government at local and national levels. At the national level, I found that the lack of planning and joined-upness makes local government look like a smoothly operating machine, and that is saying something. Even in that, the Department for Transport has its very own place.

The cost of the project was reassessed in September 2014, when the Department estimated it at £1.5 billion, up 50% on the original costings. Although the cost-benefit ratio expected by the Department for Transport in March 2015 was within the Department’s high value-for-money range, at 2.4:1, by the end of last year that had dropped to 1.6:1, which meant that it had fallen to within the medium value-for-money range. That is because the Department was forced to announce that the cost of the project had been revised yet again and was now estimated to be more than twice the original projection, at £2.1 billion. The latest announcement is in another league altogether, however, with the estimated costs to the taxpayer reaching £5.58 billion. The Government have managed this infrastructure project so badly that the cost-benefit ratio has now fallen through the floor.

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great western route that will in fact cause a reduction in capacity, a slower service and an increase in carbon emissions and mean that rail lines will require even more regular maintenance work. That is quite an achievement.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona MacTaggart) said that this issue impacts on the earlier debate about pollution in the Thames valley and the decision about a third Heathrow runway. Further, passengers in the north of England and Scotland will have to wait up to two years longer for improvements to their services, because the revised plans and delays to infrastructure works mean that old Great Western Railway stock will not be passed on to other areas that were depending upon getting that old stock to make such improvements.

The budgeting for this project has been shambolic, and clearly no one can confidently rely on any figures produced by the Department for Transport. The Government cannot be allowed to get away with continually claiming to be investing in infrastructure when we see Ministers once again with their tails between their legs trying to sneak out announcements about further delays to their plans.

Will the Minister tell us exactly when the Government intend to follow through on the great western line? When can we expect the pause to cease and the project to restart, if it restarts? In what shape will it be if it ever restarts? At the beginning of the debate, the hon. Member for Bristol North West talked about passengers. She is absolutely right: neither passengers nor taxpayers are getting a good deal, and quite frankly, they deserve better.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. Will the Minister bring his remarks to a conclusion no later than 5.43 pm to allow the mover of the motion to sum up the debate?

5.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on securing this debate. Contrary to what we have just heard, I actually welcome the debate and the opportunity to discuss a complex project. Whether I can do it justice in nine minutes is another matter, but I will do my best. If I fail to address anyone’s points, I shall be more than happy to write to colleagues, and I thank all those who have participated in the debate.

My hon. Friend started by suggesting that the south-west was perhaps not first in the queue. My diary shows that I started today at the publication of the report of the all-party Peninsula Rail Task Force. Immediately afterwards, I had a meeting about the Exeter to Barnstaple railway line, and I have spent the rest of the day addressing this issue, which is a priority for the Government—and not just today. This is the first major rail electrification project for many, many years, and there has been an awful lot to learn. I am not someone who tries to go for cheap partisan points, but there is one that cannot be avoided in this discussion: the Labour party electrified fewer than 20 miles of track in its 13 years in office. We are having to overcome a backlog of delayed investment.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): As we have heard, the NAO report on the electrification of the Great Western Railway states that £330 million has been wasted so far. Does the Minister believe that that huge waste of money endangers the final delivery of the Cardiff to Swansea section of the project?

Paul Maynard: We certainly recognise a lot of what the National Audit Office report says, and I will set out what the Department is doing in response to that. As the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) pointed out, the Secretary of State was critical of progress on the project so far at Transport questions last week. I share those concerns; the project clearly has not gone well.

However, it is worth stressing that we are having to defer four elements. I have heard many words pass around the Chamber—“cancellation”, “pause” and all sorts of others—but “deferral” is quite a precise term. No work is being paused; if one considers the various elements that make up the scheme around Bristol, work is continually ongoing. We are raising bridges, improving line speeds and resignalling. That is all preparatory work before decisions can be taken on proceeding with further electrification. The only work that has been suspended in the greater Bristol area is the erection of the overhead line equipment. That is what has been deferred until a future control period. I cannot make precise statements about what control period 6 will contain, because that has to be part of a wider national package, but I want to make it clear that we are not stopping work on the electrification programme in the Bristol area. That work continues.

Karin Smyth: If that is the case, why do the Government continue to spend money doing something that they cannot at any point say when we will need? Is that not potentially wasting more taxpayers’ money? What is the purpose of electrification if it does not deliver benefits and we are going to spend more money at some unknown time in the future?

Paul Maynard: I have just said that we will be making announcements about what—[Interruption.] Is the hon. Lady going to listen to my reply or just mutter at me? I am happy to respond to her point if she wants to listen. We will take decisions about what control period 6 comprises and announce the whole of that control period at the appropriate time. As a member of the Public Accounts Committee, she will be more than aware that Sir Peter Hendy has already reprogrammed other projects across the country. As Rail Minister, I am not prepared to part-announce elements of control period 6 depending on what debate I happen to be in at any moment in time. That would not be a prudent way to go forward—or, were I in her position on that Committee, would I think it a particularly prudent position for any Minister facing her queries to take.

John Penrose: Will the Minister give way?

Paul Maynard: I will happily give way, and then I will need to make a little progress.

John Penrose: Can the Minister reassure us that as a result of the deferral that he has just described, the cost-benefit ratio of the elements of the programme that have been paused will not be substantially changed?
Can he also provide us with information about how those cost-benefit ratios compare with both the decision not to go ahead at all with the electrification of the suburban Bristol railway lines and things that are going ahead, such as High Speed 2?

Paul Maynard: There will always be ongoing recalculation of the cost-benefit ratios of any wider projects, as well as the elements within them. I do not see this as a matter of HS2 or the great western main line. There are investment backlogs that we have to catch up on in all parts of the country, and each investment has to respond to a specific rail need in that region. Here, we are trying to respond to a specific rail need by ensuring that all the possible benefits that can be accrued by electrification can be delivered as soon as possible for the use of the new bi-mode intercity express programme trains.

John Penrose: That is very reassuring. I would be very happy if the Minister would provide the specific numbers that I asked for, perhaps in a letter.

Paul Maynard: I will happily write to the hon. Gentleman with that information at a later point. That is more than fine.

Hon. Members have noted the extra seats and the 15-minute journey time saving from London Paddington to Bristol Temple Meads via Bristol Parkway that the new trains will provide, and I hope that they will also note that those trains should stimulate economic growth across the region as a whole. Bristol is one of the few cities that is a net contributor to the UK Treasury, and that has to be recognised. We need to do more to work with Bristol to ensure that all those in the commuter belt around Bristol are properly able to access the city. That entirely makes sense. But we need to go back to the fundamental point that modernising this line has been an ambitious and challenging undertaking, and it has not been straightforward. Even closing the Severn tunnel for six weeks this autumn has caused immense disruption to journeys and people’s lives, but it has been worth while, because had we not closed it for those six weeks, there would have been five years of weekend work and disruption.

As a result of that challenge and the complexity of the work, with ageing assets, heritage sites and a very busy line that Network Rail has to work around, difficulties have occurred. As was mentioned, the National Audit Office report was highly critical of what had occurred. However, what is often not pointed out in these debates is the recognition the NAO has given to the changes that the Department has made since 2015. In particular, we now have a programme board for each route upgrade across the country, chaired by a senior responsible owner from the DfT, to provide effective oversight of delivery.

We are working closely with Network Rail, train operators and other partners to ensure that major construction works and the introduction of new train services occur in a pragmatic, sequenced and timely manner and that all elements of those complex processes interact sensibly with each other. There is no point in delivering a piece of rolling stock that cannot operate on a particular track because the infrastructure work has not been done. That requires work to be sequenced. Much of the criticism in the NAO’s report was of the failure to sequence early on in the process and understand the true scope of the project.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West was concerned that the decision represents a waste of money. I would say that it does not at all. The preparatory work will enable future decisions to be taken, which is also a point that she made. If one takes some of the work around Bristol East junction, for example, the savings made through the deferrals are specifically targeted at bringing forward the work to enable the capacity improvements that will allow full advantage to be taken of the new bi-modes. If that did not occur, there would be less benefit from having the bi-modes because there would not be the capacity at Bristol East junction. That underlines the point about sequencing work and, in a project of this complexity, the overall need to have a degree of flexibility in the system so that, as technology moves on, options change and new pieces of locomotive and rolling stock come on stream, we have the capacity in our projects to make those pragmatic decisions and seek to deliver the benefits to passengers as soon as is possible.

As I mentioned earlier, this decision underscores a wider approach to rail investment across the country as a whole. Passenger outcomes must be delivered while achieving the best value for every pound spent. On that point, the Government have been clear about the rationale for electrification. We are not against using electrification as part of a wider strategy for delivering improved services. Electrification does bring benefits. It enables, for instance, the use of electric trains, which over time reduce the cost of running the railway as well as bringing environmental benefits—but we have to make improvements in the way that makes most sense and gives most value to the taxpayer. Therefore, in some cases, where a train can run on both electric and diesel power, it is right to look at how that can be factored into any decision about how we sequence the different elements of any electrification process.

In the end, electrification is not an objective. It is a means to an end. It is about putting wires up. It is about traction and power. It is an engineering solution to a defined problem. Yes, it is an enabler of environmental benefits—but we have to make improvements in the way that makes most sense and gives most value to the taxpayer. Therefore, in some cases, where a train can run on both electric and diesel power, it is right to look at how that can be factored into any decision about how we sequence the different elements of any electrification process.

In the end, electrification is not an objective. It is a means to an end. It is about putting wires up. It is about traction and power. It is an engineering solution to a defined problem. Yes, it is an enabler of new trains, but that new capacity is needed by passengers as soon as possible. Therefore, if we have access to these new trains, I think it right that we go down that path.

Nick Smith: May I press the Minister on when he thinks the Cardiff-to-Swansea section of the project will be completed? What is his latest estimate?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. Before the Minister replies, may I say that he must allow time for Charlotte Leslie to sum up?

Paul Maynard: I do beg your pardon, Mr Hollobone. I was looking at the clock showing the time left for my speech. If I may, to save time, I will write to the hon. Gentleman. I will end it there and write to any further Members who asked questions to leave time for my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West to finish the debate. I thank hon. Members for listening.
Charlotte Leslie: Before I pay tribute to the Minister for answering and to Members who have come here, it is appropriate to pay tribute to Network Rail workers. While Network Rail has taken a bit of a battering for its organisational abilities at the top level, we should pay tribute to those who over the past couple of days have been working so hard to keep our railways running, as well as those at Great Western Railway on the ground who are making passengers’ lives bearable on a day-to-day basis.

We have had a wide-ranging debate. I am proud to be part of a group of powerful women speaking for Bristol, who have dominated the debate in many ways with Bristol’s interests and articulated powerfully Bristol residents’ concerns about the announcement. The case has been made that the whole region is affected by Members from as far afield as Torbay, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) made the case about his city well.

There is anger generally that Network Rail does not seem to be able to deliver the projects that any Government—whether Labour or Conservative—want it to deliver. I take the Minister’s point that not an awful lot of rail was electrified under the previous Labour Government. Perhaps they were wise in leaving it as a promise for the next Government because they realised how difficult that might be to do with the mechanisms they had at their disposal. I pay tribute to our Government for even trying.

I take the point that the project is complex. However, if we are to be a global competitor, we need to sort it out. We can sit and talk about the reasons, the complexities and the sequencing, but other nations in Europe manage to get it done. If we are to compete properly, we need to up our game dramatically.

5.45 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 23 November 2016

[GERAINT DAVIES in the Chair]

Exiting the EU: Higher Education

9.30 am

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the effect of exiting the EU on higher education.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. My delight at securing this debate is slightly tempered with disappointment, because I originally submitted it to the Brexit Department but it was passed over to the Department for Education. Much as I like and respect the Universities Minister, especially since he campaigned on the same side as most of my hon. Friends and me in the EU referendum, I wish that the people responsible for this mess were answering these questions. But never mind; we are where we are.

For a matter of such crucial importance, the future of universities barely featured in the debates before 23 June; it was completely absent from the notoriousleaflet, it was not on the side of any bus and it was not in any of the TV debates. However, it seems that some catching up is under way. The other day I opened my alumni magazine from its polythene wrap to find a long essay about it from the vice-chancellor of Cambridge University—or should I say a long lament? A Prime Minister’s question and a parliamentary question were asked on the subject last week, and I recently turned on the TV and found that the House of Lords was debating it. In her answer to the PMQ, the Prime Minister affirmed the need to continue to attract the brightest and best, but I am afraid that many in the sector fear that the opposite could happen because of the decision to leave. The damage must be limited now.

Brexit in general raises all sorts of questions of uncertainty and unpredictability, from macro stuff, such as the freedom of movement and the single market, to micro issues that people can get their heads around, such as the size of a Toblerone or the price of Marmite. Universities too have macro and micro issues, all refracted through the academic prism; this debate is almost a microcosm of all such debates. I will raise some of those issues before seeking some assurances and listing some asks of the Minister.

In the Times Higher Education’s ranking of 800 universities according to a range of indicators, UK universities were three of the top 10. We should all be proud of that, but it is now imperilled. I see a parallel with how the leave campaigners kept saying, “We are the fifth largest economy; we’ll be okay”, but now, soon afterwards, it looks as if we are slipping down to sixth place. Most of the rest of those 10 universities are in the United States, so we should be under no illusions: our placing is a result of the all-important English language, but it is also buttressed by our access to European networks and by our intellectual climate. We need to do all we can to indemnify our universities now.

On macro issues, it is arguably the role of a university to be about global reach and collaboration. Many speakers in the Lords debate spoke about soft power. Other people like the phrase “bridges, not walls”—although the chief advocate for building literal walls has found that the reputation of his own university, Trump University, has not fared that well recently, given the court case that was settled on Friday. Leaving that aside, concrete examples of research projects that have benefited from EU funds include the hadron collider space research that captivated the world.

EU students on campuses have also benefited. I taught in universities for many years before I came to this place in May 2015, and I know that many of our courses are populated by EU students—particularly STEM subjects and business studies, which are less popular with home students. When I talk to my friends in the sector, they say that a lot of masters courses would completely collapse without those students. We need some assurances on the fee code that will apply to them; we know that there are assurances up to 2018-19, but what will happen after that?

We also know that the Treasury will underwrite research funds obtained while we are in the EU, but such research streams often go hand in hand with EU structural funds—I think Portsmouth has had a medical campus out of it. Structural funds related to EU funding fluctuate yearly but can be between £50 million and £100 million.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does she agree that universities and their research and spin-offs have a crucial role post-Brexit, but that to make the most of it they need to be assured that lost EU funding will be totally reinstated, that collaborative research with researchers and institutions in the EU will be enabled to continue and that restrictions on overseas students’ post-study opportunities must be relaxed?

Dr Huq: As always, my right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He has anticipated my speech very well, because EU students and their migration totals are on my list of asks, which I am coming to.

Dr Huq: “an economy that works for everyone”.

Universities are often the biggest employers in their cities. There are lots of figures on this; in 2014-15, 125,000 EU students generated some £4 billion for the UK economy, and there is off-campus spending as well. We must not ignore all that. We need to bust the myth that universities are merely insular communities up an ivory tower with their heads in a book and provide no wider public benefit. In addition, there is the £836 million of research funds—15% of the total. Universities provide good economic value.

Universities are also changing. My constituency is home to the University of West London, but also to a distance learning and blended learning institution, Arden University. People felt that there were already pressures on the sector, but Brexit is exacerbating everything.

As well as statistics, we should also consider a wider set of philosophies. In my alumni magazine, the vice-chancellor of Cambridge wrote that
“the University has a duty of leadership that it will not forsake... Our commitment to Europe...is...to a shared cultural and intellectual heritage”.

In the ’90s, as a twentysomething, I did a stint at Strasbourg II, one of Strasbourg’s many universities. I want others to have the same opportunities. After I finished my degrees, I worked as a university staffer; the Russell Group, where I was employed early in my career, has had to lay on hotlines to provide not only emotional counselling but legal help for its institutions to get indefinite leave to remain for academics who are completely traumatised by what has happened.

I know from friends in the research community that British researchers are already being snubbed for Horizon 2020 funding or are being told, “You can’t be the lead partner institution any more because you will be gone soon”, and we have not even left the EU yet.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): The hon. Lady makes some valid arguments. I was on the other side of the Brexit campaign from her, but I know how important universities are. European research funding makes up 11% of the research budget for York University in my constituency. She has hit a key note. We really need to know whether Britain will be part of a wider collaboration with the EU and involved in the future beyond Horizon 2020, whatever it may be. We do not know what that future will be, but we need to make certain that UK universities play a leading role in it.

Dr Huq: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. There are many unknown unknowns in this debate. A former employer of mine, Professor Martin McQuillan from Kingston University, where I was last employed, has written an article about the post-1992 sector. York is a Russell Group university, as is Cambridge, and Manchester, where I used to work, but at the other end of the spectrum we have the new universities that John Major equalised—the ex-polys, which felt precariously perched anyway. In his article, he outlines some of the pressures—we discussed some of them on Report on the Higher Education and Research Bill on Monday—including rocketing class sizes without commensurate resource, reforms to the research excellent framework, and the new teaching excellence framework.

My old boss says that to some extent EU funding used to level the playing field, but if that is gone, it will tip things even more unequally towards the older universities. He highlights the shocking Higher Education Funding Council for England prediction that between 2015 and 2019, the funding gap between the best and worst-performing institutions will widen, with the spread running from plus 21.5%—some will be in surplus by that much—to the worst performing at minus 28.6%. That is quite a disparity, and it is set to grow; hardly an economy that works for all.

I would rather we had remained in the EU to shape the criteria. One of the arguments was that we might be like Norway, having to do all the same stuff but not making the decisions at the top table. But we are where we are. I shall now go through the list of asks, or—I do not know—demands; or should I be collegiate and friendly and call them the suggestions that we might like to build into a future strategy?

Dr Huq: Yes. Many academics, and not just them but the ancillary staff and all those other people, such as the technicians, are part of the 48%. If we are going to jump off a cliff, it is a good idea to have some idea of where we are going to land, preferably with a parachute to soften the descent.

Here come the assurances I am seeking. First, I urge the Government to heed the warning of MillionPlus, which is the pressure group for the post-1992 sector, equivalent to the Russell Group. It says that any moves to create a more “hostile environment” for EU or international students in order to drive down immigration is “problematic”, so we should remove students from the immigration targets. All the polling shows that people see them not as immigrants but as temporary stayers, and they are welcome here and valued by the population at large.

Secondly, we all do surgeries and we all deal with the Home Office. Home Office procedures and the vexatious visa requirements should be speeded up. The tier 2 visa threshold is now at £35,000; it was £18,000. I have spoken about it previously in relation to curry chefs, but the principle also applies to people such as lab technicians, who are highly skilled but who in universities might not be earning £35,000, which is quite high on the spinal scale. The threshold should therefore be looked at again.

Thirdly, I mentioned my experience with the Erasmus programme; access to Erasmus+ should be guaranteed for UK students. Even if it requires funding, the money should be found from somewhere, because we want to be a forward-thinking trading nation that keeps engaging with the world. Fourthly, we have had short-term assurances on Horizon 2020 and fees until 2018, but longer-term stability is needed for forward planning as we voyage into uncharted waters. The business model cannot continue as “business as usual”.

Fifthly, we are substantial net beneficiaries of our universities’ European dealings, so we somehow need to retain as much as possible in a new way, which is why I would like to see higher education represented at the top table in Brexit negotiations. I hope that the Minister will be there, given all his expertise and all the multifaceted aspects. Will we be like Norway, with access but no influence? Will we be a sort of pay-as-you-go country? Or will there be some third way that I have not thought of?

Sixthly, since this debate was announced I have received loads of suggestions from institutions all over the country—far wider than Ealing Central and Acton. My old union, the University and College Union, has produced a charter that urges the Government to enshrine human rights, and has also said that there should be an urgent inquiry. If that inquiry, or any other, goes ahead, it should consider campus hate crime. Anecdotally, we have heard of a worrying upsurge now that people feel disinhibited in voicing what was previously not politically correct, or was politically incorrect. We had already heard about Islamophobia and anti-Semitism rearing their ugly heads on campuses. The climate at a university should be that of a safe space for all, so all intolerance should be stamped on.

Seventhly, of all the different quotes I have seen in preparing for this debate, my favourite is this one, which I think the Minister may recognise:
“European research funding offers a good example of how the EU can get things right...EU countries are among our most crucial partners...Free movement of people makes it easier for our universities to attract the best talent.”

Those words were of course said by the Minister, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson). They are as true now as when he said them. I know that we have lost that argument, but we still need to do everything we can to ensure that the Prime Minister dispels all doubts that EU nationals in the UK, and their dependents, will ever be bargaining chips in some kind of negotiating game. The Minister must also set out robust reciprocal arrangements for our academics who go elsewhere.

I could go on. I have spent a lifetime in universities: from 1990, when I started my undergraduate degree, to May 2015. That is quite a long time, and I have never really got out—I am always in the Library upstairs. In my experience, Westminster Hall debates sometimes have meaningless responses from Ministers, but I am optimistic that this Minister, whom I like, trust and respect, will come up with something better for us today, and I am keen to hear the contributions from right hon. and hon. Members from both the Government and Opposition Benches.

We have had our fair share of bad news this year. I could go on and on listing so many international atrocities, the result the other week and the referendum result. Before all that there was our friend and colleague, Jo Cox, whom we lost in June; that is still very difficult for many of us to process. We have had so much bad news that I am hoping for some good news from the Minister when he responds.

9.46 am

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing this debate. She should be more forthright in her demands of the Government; I give her some encouragement in that direction.

The terms of Brexit are clearly still to be decided. My priority, and that of my party, is to campaign for the least bad option for the Welsh economy. That includes getting the best possible outcome for higher education and putting in place every possible safety net to mitigate the potentially catastrophic effects of leaving the European Union in a hard-line way.

Mr Andrew Smith: Has the hon. Gentleman had cause to reflect on why Wales voted so strongly to leave the European Union?

Hywel Williams: The right hon. Gentleman asks a very interesting question, but given the shortness of time I shall not go too far in discussing it. The research that I and other respected academics in Wales have conducted shows that deprivation was an important factor. The constituency that received the most money from Europe—that of the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), who is not here today—voted most heavily to leave. It is something to do with deprivation and being left behind, but it is also, of course, much more complicated than that. I should say that my constituency voted 60-40 in favour of staying in.

Plaid Cymru has been united in its determination to maintain membership of the single market and the customs union, at least, because that would be by far the least damaging option for the Welsh economy—first, because of the wide-reaching benefits of being in the single market and customs union for Wales; and secondly, because it will enable Wales to qualify for the cross-border and transnational programmes and research and innovation funding from which our higher education sector derives such benefit.

Higher education is a major economic actor in Wales. It generates around £2.4 billion of Welsh gross value added and sustains almost 50,000 jobs. As for structural funding, I once worked at Bangor University, which alone has benefited from around £100 million of EU funding over the past 10 years. That investment supports jobs as well as capital projects. Swansea University’s campus on the bay was backed by £40 million of structural funds, plus a finance package worth £60 million from the European Investment Bank. These are huge sums of money. If we are to continue our success, the UK Government need to match the commitment of the EU to the principle of regional equalisation. That is why we call for a UK convergence strategy to replace EU funding, and on a needs basis.

I opposed, and still oppose, leaving the EU for many reasons: philosophical; historical; educational; the EU’s promotion of peace on our continent; and most importantly for me, at least, the EU’s cultural and linguistic diversity, and the normality of multilingualism, which is sadly not matched in this member state and certainly not in its Parliament.

Higher education has been a central feature of Welsh policy for many centuries. When we were last independent—a little matter of some six hundred years ago—there were three main planks of Government policy in Wales, one of which was the establishment of a university to join Padua and Oxford, which were already up and running. That ambition was not realised until the 19th century; it took us four or five hundred years to get our act together. Nevertheless, it is indicative of the importance that we place on higher education in Wales, and of the need to defend what we already have, that there are now seven higher education institutions in Wales.

I do not ignore the material benefit that we also derive from membership of the EU. It is no source of pride to me that we get convergence funding because our economy is on a par with some parts of the former communist states in eastern Europe. We get that money because we are a poor country with some extremely poor regions, one of which I represent. At least the EU has a policy of convergence funding for which Wales qualifies—alas—and our institutions derive great benefits from that funding.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman knows that the UK is a net contributor to the EU, so that anything that comes back in regional funds is a loss. However, when we break the UK down into its regions and countries, only Northern Ireland and Cornwall are net beneficiaries. Will he accept that Wales loses out by the European funds in net terms, rather than gaining from them?

Hywel Williams: I would be much more prepared to accept that argument if the Government here in London had a similar regional policy, so that when we leave the EU one could be guaranteed that the money that comes from Europe will come from London instead.
When David Cameron was Prime Minister, I repeatedly asked him to guarantee that this funding would continue post-Brexit, but he refused to give such a guarantee. I doubt that it is in the power of the Minister today to make up for that failure, but I look to him for at least some reassuring indication that this issue is actually on the agenda.

I will refer very quickly to cross-border programmes. In the first year of the Horizon 2020 scheme from 2015 to 2016, Welsh university staff have already succeeded in securing £25 million of funding. Those programmes help Welsh students and institutions to compete on the world stage, which surely must be our ambition. Identified research funding to Wales suggests that Welsh institutions received some €183 million between 2002 and 2013, and it is estimated that Wales received at least £29 million from lifelong learning funds, including Erasmus, from 2007 to 2013. Those funds are vital to encourage joint working and collaboration between academics and students in different EU member states and further afield.

I will briefly refer to my own university of Bangor. There are 2,000 international students in Bangor; the total student population doubles the city’s population, so the university is vital to the local economy. Can the Minister assure me that the UK Government are giving due consideration to the disproportionate effects of post-Brexit immigration controls on small university towns or cities, of which Bangor is one? That is a particular issue. Bangor University also has widespread international links, which I referred to in the debate on higher education the other day, including a site in China, so we are worried and concerned. Moreover, Trinity College Dublin has a site in Bangor for Japanese students to learn English. It is an excellent institution, but I think the staff there are also worried.

To cut a much longer speech short, the HE sector in Wales is one of the keys to unlock the doorway to our prosperity—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): May I say that speakers have about nine minutes each, so you are okay?

Hywel Williams: I will conclude, as I have reached the last page of my speech. As I was saying, the HE sector in Wales is one of the keys to unlock the doorway to prosperity. Both the UK Government and the Welsh Government have a duty to protect and advance the HE sector in Wales, and we will scrutinise the way in which they do so very closely indeed.

9.55 am

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) for securing this important debate. I know this subject is very close to her heart, given her work as a university lecturer before her election to serve her constituents here in the House. This subject is also very close to my heart. As an NHS scientist before I came to this place, I worked in a field that thrived on collaboration and recognised no boundaries.

Our universities are rightly held in high esteem worldwide. We have 18 of the top 100 universities in the world, including four in the top eight. Globally, Britain represents only 0.9% of the world’s population, but we have 3.2% of global research and development expenditure and 4.1% of the world’s leading researchers, producing more than 15% of pioneering research papers.

It is well known that British science punches above its weight in the international university league tables and does so mainly thanks to EU grants. British science is not awash with funding; in fact, Britain has the lowest per capita spending on research of any G7 country. Sadly, Brexit and the Government’s handling of the referendum outcome have shown their inability to lead and to quash uncertainty over what Brexit will actually mean for the higher education sector. Brexit just adds more uncertainty, and uncertainty breeds insecurity.

There are two aspects of the human and intellectual cost of Brexit for universities. The first is the brain drain and the second is the potential restrictions on overseas research students. The brain drain is nothing new. Many senior figures in British universities remember the lack of support from the Thatcher Government in the 1980s and the exodus of scientists abroad. It is ironic that the four recent British Nobel prize-winners—Duncan Haldane, David Thouless, Michael Kosterlitz and Sir Fraser Stoddart—are all based in the US, having been forced out of Britain during the 1980s brain drain. British research scientists are worried that the Prime Minister’s mantra that “Brexit means Brexit” will lead to a lack of funding and grants for British science, and has the potential to create a modern-day brain drain.

Dr Huq: I neglected to say something in my own speech. As a scientist, is my hon. Friend aware of the Science and Technology Committee’s report last week that says that the future of EU researchers and scientists in this country should be guaranteed, because otherwise we would imperil our science research base here?

Liz McInnes: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and yes I am. I was briefly a member of the Science and Technology Committee and I try to keep on top of the work that it produces. I fully support its call for EU funding to be replaced in some way by this Government, and I hope that we might get a response from the Minister today on that subject.

Graham Stringer: Is my hon. Friend aware of the previous Science and Technology Committee report that pointed out that the EU is inimical to UK science? The clinical trials directive has destroyed much research in this country; the EU’s ban on genetically modified food has destroyed much of the chemical-agricultural industry in this country; and the arbitrary sacking of the Commission’s scientific adviser was destructive to science. We have example after example of how the EU has damaged British science.

Liz McInnes: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am not aware of that report. I do not know when it was published. It certainly does not echo the views that I am expressing in my speech or the views of eminent vice-chancellors and scientists who work in the UK today. Perhaps if he can send me a copy of the report, I will look at it at a later date.
As well as the potential for a modern-day brain drain, we have the very real potential of UK universities becoming less attractive to international research students. Indeed, the vice-chancellors of LSE, King’s College London and Bristol have already voiced their fears for the recruitment of international students and how that will have serious financial and human resource consequences for our universities. The vice-chancellor of Cambridge University, Professor Sir Leszek Borysiewicz, is a stalwart remainer, but he recognises the result of the referendum and he wants Cambridge to get the best out of Brexit. He says that to achieve that, the Government must provide some basic clarity on what Brexit actually means. He asks for three things from the Government: clarity on the national status of university staff; a recognition of the collaborative ideal implicit in EU projects; and a Government guarantee of vital university budgets. I hope that his requests will be listened to and heeded by the Government.

Some people might regard the vice-chancellor of Cambridge as something of an expert, and although the people of this country were urged not to listen to experts during the referendum, it is vital that, on this subject and the many others that are affected by the Brexit negotiations, the Government take note of our finest minds and our experts. They are not asking for a running commentary, but for clarity and a coherent, informed plan as to the exact nature and manner of our departure from the EU.

The EU makes substantial financial contributions to research in UK universities. Research funding from the EU amounts to some £1 billion a year, while Britain’s national research budget, as I alluded to while discussing British science, is below international averages. The EU’s contribution to the income of UK universities has risen by more than 30% in the past five years. I represent a Greater Manchester constituency, and universities across our region have more than 4,000 EU students currently on their campuses. That equates to spending of £90 million a year—that is not just tuition fees, but expenditure in the local economy. Manchester University has received £48 million in research funding in the past two years alone. The loss of such substantial funding and the failure to attract EU students could not fail to have a detrimental effect on our area.

I have spoken about the economic positives and security of funding, but the academic, scientific and higher education sectors are not merely about money. Education at its core is about collaboration, common understanding and continual progress. Education has no boundaries and no borders, and science knows no country. We must decide where Britain’s place post-Brexit is going to be. I hope that it will be not in isolationism and introversion, but that the Government will set out a clear plan for diversity, collaboration and funding and for our universities to maintain their place and their standing in the world.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I have got five Members on the list to speak by half-past 10, so I ask them to keep their remarks down to just below five minutes. I invite Jim Shannon to give us an example of that.

10.4 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank you, Mr Davies, for giving me the opportunity to speak on this issue. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on setting out the case very well. It is no secret that I was very much in the leave camp. [Interruption.] I am surrounded by many people who have a different opinion, but I still look upon them as my friends and colleagues, and that will not change, no matter what happens. I am proud to speak on this matter, because it is of some interest to many of my constituents, and I want to bring a Northern Ireland perspective to the debate. These are important issues, as the Minister and shadow Minister know.

I attended a grammar school, where I did my O-levels, but at that time it was clear that I would not continue to university. My father had a shop and that is where my intentions were and where they ended up, at the beginning at least. I did not enjoy academia as much as I enjoyed the jingle of cash in my pocket. When there was a chance of getting a job and moving on, that is what I thought I should do. I have a high regard for all those who prioritised education and for those who knew they were called to those vocational jobs that are so essential to all. Society could not function without a broad spectrum of people with skills to fill the jobs that need to be done.

The hon. Lady indicated that we have dropped to sixth in the world. I would be happy if the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland was in sixth place, because we would still be strong. Unemployment figures are decreasing. We have a good and strong economy. I have every confidence in Brexit and where we are going.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that while there is difficulty with unsureness about funding, there is a danger of talking ourselves into depression and sending out a negative message to students who want to come to the United Kingdom to learn? We will work together to resolve the issues, and I think that is the way forward.

Jim Shannon: Quite clearly my hon. Friend, like me, sees the glass as half full. We believe in the future and we have confidence in the future, and we look forward to that. We know we can deliver.

I am beyond proud of the universities in Northern Ireland: Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University. We have tremendous courses that produce highly recognised degrees. I have met many politics students from Europe and the USA who made the choice to study in Northern Ireland because universities in the UK are so highly regarded. We have a legacy of high-class institutions in this country, and we must build upon and jealously guard that legacy. Queen’s University Belfast is made up of 32% international students. It is essential that our campuses retain the ability to access the international market. There are partnerships at Queen’s University and the University of Ulster with companies and students from overseas for new research into medicines.

There is no need for a knee-jerk reaction. The Government have made it clear that EU students applying to study from 2017 to 2018 will not only be eligible for the same funding and support as they are now, but their eligibility will continue throughout their course, even if the UK exits the European Union during that period. That is the Government’s commitment, so let us be clear where we are. We have time to consider the best
way forward. We can all still be assured of that. The Minister in his response will reaffirm that position, and it is important that he does so.

We are all aware of the issues regarding visas for those who are not from the EU and who want to study here, and we must be aware of the statistics. Non-EU students contributed £3.5 billion in 2012-13, £3.9 billion in 2013-14 and £4.2 billion in 2014-15. It is clear from those stats that we are still able to attract international students without the benefits of EU membership, but I am certainly not saying that no thought should be given in the Brexit negotiations to reciprocal incentives that our former EU partners could avail themselves of in the short term. Let us ensure that we keep the co-operation with our EU partners that we have at the moment. The value and the importance of our EU and international students and their role in our economy should not be underestimated. Indeed, I believe that the Government are not underestimating them.

It is absolutely clear that we benefit from having universities that people from around the globe want to attend. In 2013-14, there were some 125,300 EU students at UK universities, and in that year £224 million was paid in fee loans to EU students on full-time courses in England. That was 3.7% of the total student loan bill. The higher education sector contributes a massive £73 billion to the UK economy, including £11 billion of export earnings. The latest available figures show that in 2011, EU and non-EU students in higher education contributed an estimated £9.7 billion to the UK economy through tuition fees and living expenditure. The publicly funded higher education sector currently receives 2% of its total income from the fees of EU students, with some individual institutions receiving higher levels of funding.

I will conclude, Mr Davies, because I am aware of the time restraints. International students want to study here; the universities want them to study here; and our Government are aware that in Brexit we must facilitate and foster this educational relationship in every way possible. The value of sharing educational findings and research grants is another issue that I know the Government are very aware of, and I know they have confidence in our ability to continue funding projects such as those that take place in Queen’s University in Belfast and at Ulster University, which have resulted in ground-breaking innovation. This must continue; I believe it will.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I call Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods. You have five minutes.

10.9 am

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I, too, want to start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) for calling this extremely important debate. I think we would all agree that higher education and research must be at the forefront of the Government’s mind as they start to make preparations for leaving the EU. The HE sector has become so internationalised and collaborative that the UK’s leaving the European Union will hugely impact on how the sector will operate in future.

Let me say to Government Members that this debate is not about trying to talk down the higher education sector; it is about trying to highlight for the Minister the action that needs to be taken to protect this hugely important sector as we move forward.

As chair of the all-party group on universities, I met university vice-chancellors last month who shared with me their key concerns about higher education in the Brexit process. Their concerns centre around four core issues: student recruitment, staff recruitment and retention, research, and upholding the global profile of our universities, which will be especially important once we leave the EU. They want to see the importance of the sector recognised more by the Government in their negotiations. As I pointed out to the Minister earlier this week, the sector contributes a massive £73 billion to the UK economy and needs to be at the front of the Government’s negotiations.

As we have already heard, some of the world’s leading universities are found in Britain, and I am pleased that the UK is now the second most popular destination for international students. However, that position could fall if action is not taken by the Government, particularly given the period of uncertainty following the referendum result. We have already seen a decline in the numbers of EU students applying to study in British universities—for example, in medicine and dentistry at some of our leading institutions. Figures last month showed a 9% drop in the numbers of EU students applying for those courses, so we need to do more not only to protect the 185,000 EU students currently studying in the UK, but to continue to attract them to this country. They amount to quite a large proportion of students in universities, varying from about 5% to about 25%. Overall, about 30% of our students are international.

The Government need to ensure that they do not send out the message that international and EU students are not welcome here. They need to radically and quickly reform the immigration visa system to ensure that the message is that international and EU students are welcome here. The same needs to happen for staff. About 28% of staff working in universities are from the EU. About 40% of new academic posts created since 2004 have gone to EU nationals. They are a really important resource in our universities. They drive forward research and are involved in international collaborations. Again, we need to hear more about that from the Minister—not only how the research they are involved in will be protected but what will happen to their immigration status. That is urgent and needs to be resolved immediately by the Government.

The Government also need to say more about research funding itself. This is not just about Horizon 2020—that is important and we need to hear from the Government that they will continue to support it. We know that about 22% of the research in this country is funded through European projects and European-led collaborations. Universities need certainty that they will be able to continue to be involved in collaborations and to drive forward research in this country.

I have two quick questions for the Minister. I do not doubt his commitment to the sector, but we have not seen it reflected across Government. I am not sure where universities are on the international trade agenda, and he needs to answer the question of why education is not represented on the Exiting the European Union Committee or sub-Committee.
10.15 am

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Davies. I had already cut my speech, albeit not in anticipation of the time limits, but to try and get through it—my throat may stop me, but hopefully I will get to the end. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing today’s important debate. She is obviously well versed on the contribution that our universities make from her time lecturing at the University of Manchester and Kingston University. I very much enjoyed her contribution and the perspective that she brought to the debate today.

Shelby Foote once said: “A university is just a group of buildings gathered around a library.” I suspect he was being a tad facetious, as the truth of the matter is that universities are so much more than books, the imparting of knowledge or certificates. Our universities are a cornerstone of the British economy. They provide stability in times of economic downturn, they give direction to young people searching for opportunities and they provide a second chance to mature students looking to better their lives for themselves and their children. I should probably declare an interest: my wife is one of those mature students looking to better our lives and the lives of our children.

Jim Shannon: She is young; not mature.

Gavin Newlands: I should point out that she is not so mature—I appreciate that sedentary contribution from my friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Students internationalise our communities and attempt to provide answers to some of life’s greatest unanswered questions, such as: how in the name of all that is holy can somebody like Donald Trump be elected President of the United States? It is in the acknowledgement of the overwhelmingly positive contribution that universities make to our economy and wider society that we should consider the effect that Brexit may have on our universities.

According to Professor Sir Timothy O’Shea, the principal of Edinburgh University, the potential impact of Brexit on HE “ranges from bad, to awful, to catastrophic”. Despite what the Government may sometimes suggest, people like Professor O’Shea are not political figures looking for an axe to grind. They are experts in the field whose views should be listened to and respected.

To compound the Brexit issues, the plan to prevent universities from recruiting international students—this would be based on an obscure and superficial quality mark decided by the Home Office—would be deeply damaging. All of Scotland’s 19 HE institutions reject the introduction of any restriction on their ability to recruit international students on the basis of a supposed differentiation in quality. All of Scotland’s universities are already routinely assessed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and routinely audited by the Home Office. When all is said and done, the Government seem to be saying that the institutions that do not receive the higher mark will be deemed not good enough for international students, but good enough for ours. Is that really the message the Government feel comfortable in sending out?

The University of the West of Scotland is going through an exciting period of growth. They ask their students and staff to dream, believe and achieve. Their global reach enabling plan is an ambitious plan to deliver an academic portfolio that provides...students with globally relevant skills, is internationally attractive and contributes to global reach.”

UWS is vital to Paisley and Renfrewshire. Some 15,500 students study there and 25% come from SIMD 20 postcodes—those ranked statistically under the Scottish index of multiple deprivation as the most deprived 20% in Scotland. UWS employs more than 1,500 people and helps to support 4,500 more. The Biggar Economics report noted: “UWS has [the] potential to significantly increase its economic and social impact in the future through the delivery of its Corporate Strategy, which will transform both the University and the communities that it serves.”

The principal of UWS, Professor Craig Mahoney, has explained that expanding the university’s international presence, increasing the international opportunities for domestic students and growing the number of international students on their campuses are key to achieving the vision set out in its strategy and realising the potential set out in the report.

The truth of the matter is that Brexit, combined with the anti-HE policies of the Government, seriously risks damaging the operations and future plans of all our universities. Universities across the UK generate more than £73 billion each year for the economy. Their position in our society, the direction they provide to students, the jobs they support, the research opportunities they deliver and their importance to our national economy means that the Government cannot afford to undermine the sector, which deserves answers to the many questions about the Government’s approach. We need clarity, before the Government permanently damages our HE sector. We are at grave risk of being perceived as an unwelcoming location that does not value the contribution of international students, colleagues and partnerships. I sincerely hope that the Minister can provide some reassurance to the HE sector today.

10.20 am

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve for the first time under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) for securing this debate. If the tactic of flattering the Minister brings answers, we are all going to have to start being slightly nicer to Government Ministers. I wait with bated breath to see if the tactic works.

This is an incredibly important debate. Most of the issues being discussed will be repetitive, because we all represent university cities and are concerned about the impact of Brexit on what is happening in our universities. It is not just Opposition politicians who are concerned—vice-chancellors, principals, students, student bodies, academic staff and those involved in research are constantly knocking on our doors at advice sessions. They are watching debates such as this one, and want their questions answered, not just for their own personal needs, such as their academic careers or their passion for higher education and research, but for the wider higher education sector and the economy. We should bear that in mind. I hope the Minister will tell the Secretary of State for Exiting
the European Union how important it is that he has a seat at the table to champion the cause of higher education in this debate.

In the short time available, I want to concentrate on Edinburgh University. It is in the heart of my constituency and epitomises the issues being discussed around the country, such as in Oxford, Cambridge or Loughborough, or in the west of Scotland, as we have just heard from the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands).

Edinburgh University is unique. It is one of the world’s top universities and 25% of its academic staff are from the European Union. That is higher than the average of 21% for Russell Group universities or 15% for universities across the UK as a whole. Some 14% of all students at Edinburgh University are from the EU, almost 5,000 in the last academic year, which is double the average for Russell Group universities. The figure is only 5% for universities across the UK. Some 10% of Edinburgh University’s entire total research income of £226 million in 2015 came from EU sources, with the largest proportion going to research in the College of Science and Engineering. The driver of innovation for the future needs of our country and economy. Figures up to February 2016 ranked Edinburgh University as the most successful Scottish higher education institution for Horizon 2020 funding, ranking sixth across the EU, gaining nearly £60 million in funding to date.

I hope the Minister realises how concerned we all are about Brexit and its impact on not just EU nationals but research funding and, critically, collaboration. Some 30% of the entire output of research from Edinburgh University, one of the world’s key research institutions, is from EU collaboration, co-authoring with other EU nation states. Anecdotal evidence, and some factual evidence that we have heard from my hon. Friends this morning, tells us that universities in the UK are still involved in those collaborative projects, but they are being told not to take the lead, not necessarily because of their skills or what they can bring to those projects, but because of the uncertainty about the impact that leaving the European Union will have on the projects. The Government have to reflect on that point seriously.

Having universities in this country that are at the cutting edge of technology, research and development but which are unable to take the lead in big co-authored projects across the European Union diminishes our ability to run other major projects in the future and diminishes our higher education and research sector. To put the 30% into context, the figure is only 18% for co-authoring with the United States; collaboration with the EU is almost double, and that is why it is incredibly important.

I will not rehearse the arguments that my colleagues have already made, but I will re-emphasise the points that we need addressed. We need to maintain UK university access to EU research programmes. We need to seek income, partnerships and influence and make sure that outputs are collaborative, with UK universities right at the top of those collaborations. We need to continue UK contribution and access to EU research infrastructure, such as CERN. We need to preserve research excellence across the university sector. We need EU nationals to be told that they can stay and continue to work here. We need to continue to make sure that free movement, both EU and non-EU, is prioritised for our university sector, so that it can attract the very best, very highly skilled researchers. We need early clarity over the rules that will apply to tuition fees at Scottish, UK and EU level, so that we can make sure that future funding for universities is secure. We need continued access to Erasmus schemes. That is what universities are telling us they want. The Government have to deliver.
There are three basic overall concerns. The first is about the access that foreign students—particularly EU students—have to the UK. It is interesting to note that only 5% of students in the UK are EU students. Some 10% are non-EU foreign students, who pay full fees, whereas EU students do not. It is actually going to be an advantage to the universities sector if we can charge EU students full fees. At the moment, the British taxpayer helps to fund those students. What is more, we are obliged to offer them loans, and the default rate among EU students is higher than that among UK students. There is talk in the Treasury about universities having to pay the cost of that default. We can resolve that issue by leaving the European Union.

The second concern is about access to EU funds. Table 9.9 of the Pink Book has become famous in the debate about leaving the European Union, but nobody disputes that we are one of the largest net contributors to the European Union. No Government in their right mind would use the pretext of leaving the European Union to cut the funds that universities receive, just because they get some of their money from the European Union. Let us remember that the money universities get from the European Union for research grants comes from us taxpayers. We put money into the European Union and we get only half of it back. We should be able to afford to pay more into our universities to fund more research and support our universities more effectively as a result of leaving the European Union, because we will no longer be forced to pay to subsidise universities elsewhere in the European Union. I acknowledge the concern that universities need certainty now and year on year into the future, but my hon. Friend the Minister should be able to give them a long-term assurance that we will fund research programmes in our universities as generously, if not more generously, in the future.

Finally, the idea that we are no longer going to collaborate with other universities in the EU is about as potty an idea as could be imagined. First, there are non-EU countries that participate in EU schemes. CERN, for example, is an international project. Let us have confidence in our universities. We have the crown jewels of scientific research in the EU in our universities. If I am correct, we have four universities in the world rankings top 10. We have 10 of the top 50 universities in the world—more than any other country outside the US. Two are in London—the same number as are in the entirety of the rest of the EU. It would be perverse if the EU wanted to cut itself off from UK universities, so we should approach the negotiations and future collaboration with universities with confidence. We have what it takes to promote successful collaboration with countries across the whole of Europe, whether they are in the EU or not. Outside the EU, our universities have as great a future, if not a greater future, than they would if we remained in the EU.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Talking of cuts, the Front Benchers have nine minutes each.

10.33 am

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing this important debate.

I have been thinking about what the big asks are for higher education as we move towards Brexit. There are three things that are going to be affected by Brexit. The first is the collaborations that take place across Europe, which draw in not just funding but people and are extremely important for the quality of higher education in the UK. The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) talked about the concerns in the Welsh higher education sector about the threat to its EU funding as we move towards Brexit.

The hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) highlighted the position of EU students. Both talked about the need to collaborate with EU partners to ensure we continue to attract EU students, and they raised the economic benefits that those students bring.

Of course, the EU also draws in funding. A recent Scottish Parliament report suggested that Scottish universities and institutions have received more than £200 million in Horizon 2020 funding, which has helped to fund research in disease prevention, improve our ability to tackle cyber-security issues and increase our understanding of climate change and how we can build a greener economy. That funding has been key for all those projects, so we need assurances about what will replace it in the future.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) said that leading universities such as Edinburgh may find it difficult to lead collaborations. We need to be aware of the damage that will be done if universities that are currently leading collaborations are not able to continue to do that. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) raised the issue of the University of the West of Scotland. It is currently in a period of expansion, but that could now be under threat.

Horizon 2020 is not an abstract research fund. It affects all our lives and helps us address challenges. Without EU membership, we will have very little influence over how that research funding is allocated in the future. I hope the Minister will be able to explain to universities what will happen in the event that they are not able to apply for Horizon 2020. I know that he knows that that fund has helped to support research work in higher education. What assurance can he give to the researchers whose research grants are being pulled because of Brexit? What certainty can he give to academics at the start of their careers, who are expected to collaborate internationally?

Secondly, given the reputational damage caused by Brexit, the lack of post-study work visas and the Higher Education and Research Bill, higher education in the UK is being viewed now internationally. The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) mentioned the lack of preparation before the vote to leave the European Union and the uncertainty that caused for our universities. It is also causing uncertainty across the world, and we need to be aware of the difficulty that is causing for institutions.

Thirdly, there is the effect of Brexit on people. The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton talked about the need to stamp out intolerance on our university campuses. I would widen that. We are in a dangerous worldwide situation at the moment, and we all need to be aware of the rise of the right wing. People feel that such views are legitimised by the recent election results.
Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. Does she agree that one benefit of being in the EU is Erasmus, which enables students from this country to go to other European countries to study and learn more about other European cultures? Given that xenophobia and the views that she spoke about are on the rise, cultural understanding is more important than ever.

Carol Monaghan: I agree completely. Going to university is not just about learning; it is also about diversity and experiencing different cultures. My son has just started at university, and one of the things he looked at when he chose his university was whether it participated in the Erasmus scheme, which is now under threat. He is not alone. Many young students thought they were signing up for something, but will potentially have it taken from them.

Sticking with people, the brain drain of the 1980s was considered by the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). She suggested the potential for its repetition, which could be one of the most dangerous aspects of Brexit. We need to work hard to ensure that that does not happen.

The recent report of the Select Committee on Science and Technology was mentioned by the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton. The report called for the Government to make an immediate commitment to researchers already working in our universities—not a reciprocal agreement, not a “If you let ours stay, we’ll let yours stay”, because those people need certainty, and they need it now. The position of our universities worldwide is under threat if we do not get that right.

The biggest damage and the biggest threat to our higher education is the threat to freedom of movement. For Scottish universities, freedom of movement and talent is the most important aspect of being a member of the EU. I am sure that that is the case throughout the UK.

The existing visa restrictions and the removal of the post-study work visa have taken on new significance as we move towards Brexit. How will EU students be viewed? I do not share the opinion of the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) that many are from the EU. Their future is uncertain and, under the sort of regime that the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) talked about, many are unlikely to come to the UK.

We are not talking only about EU students. In a survey taken before 23 June, one third of non-EU students said that they would find the UK a less attractive destination if we exited. The worst outcome, therefore, might be that we lose half our international students—billions of pounds and hundreds of thousands of jobs, not only in universities, but across sectors that serve students in communities throughout the country.

We might imagine that the Government would seek to mitigate such risks by setting out a clear strategy to maintain our position as a destination of choice for the world’s students, but sadly not. Instead, the Home Secretary has put international students at the centre of her plans to cut net migration, making a bad situation worse. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton was right to highlight that net migration point.

The question of staff was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray). Because our universities are so good, they attract great staff from all over the world: 28% of academics are non-UK citizens, with more than 15% from the EU. For key research staff the number is much higher, accounting for more than half in some STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—subjects. Those of us who represent universities have already heard stories about job offers refused and those here now questioning their future in the UK, because the Government will not give the assurance this House asked for in July on the position of EU nationals.

I join others in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing the debate and for making a characteristically powerful and entertaining speech to set the context. She was right to highlight the absence of a Brexit Minister from the debate today, because that team is leading the negotiations. I join in the plaudits for the Minister who has joined the debate, and we are all reassured by his views on the issues, but we need to know that those views will be reflected in Government.

This is a hugely important debate about a vital sector, and I welcome the many contributions from all parts of the Opposition. It is disappointing—I am sure the Minister is disappointed—that so few Conservative Members are willing to speak up for our universities in such an important debate.

Our universities are a great British success story. Higher education exports are worth almost £11 billion. The wider value was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods). Hundreds of thousands of jobs depend on universities’ success, and they provide the high-level skills that our economy needs. In a world in which our success as a country will be determined by our ability to innovate, the research capacity of our universities is central to economic growth, as my hon. Friend highlighted.

All of that is potentially at risk if the Government get Brexit wrong. What would getting it wrong look like? What are the risks? Let us start with students, who after all are the bread and butter of our universities. International students, as many have pointed out, are hugely important. About 185,000 of our 500,000 international students are from the EU. Their future is uncertain and, under the sort of regime that the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) talked about, many are unlikely to come to the UK.

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If we leave the EU with no deal on the future movement of workers, we will fall back on existing immigration rules, and for universities that will not work. Tens of thousands of early-career academics and researchers will not meet the tier 2 income threshold, creating a potential crisis for research and teaching.

Let us talk about research funding and the collaboration that goes with it, as my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) did so ably. Because our universities are so good, we do disproportionately well from EU funding. EU programmes provide almost 15% of university research income, and with that money comes critical collaboration across countries and disciplines. All of that is at risk if research is not put centre stage in the Brexit negotiations.

What do we need from the Brexit negotiations? First, we need a plan. It is all very well for the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex to say that civil servants are playing catch-up, but the problem is that Conservative Members and Ministers at the heart of Government seem unable to agree on what that plan should be. As they struggle with each other, in the policy vacuum the tail is increasingly wagging the dog, giving rise to increasing talk of hard Brexit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton is right: this debate is a microcosm of a wider one on many issues. For universities, what would hard Brexit mean? Hard Brexit would mean losing students and staff, and cutting research—it would be a disaster. So we need reassurance from the Minister that the Government—not just him and his Department, but the Government—recognise the problem, and that they will put the continuing strength of our universities at the heart of the negotiations on exiting the European Union.

Among other key issues, we need clarity on fee levels and access to funding for EU students considering coming here until we leave the EU. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, we have that for next year, but frankly that is not good enough. What about 2018-19? Will the assurance apply to postgraduate students as well as undergraduates? What about the future? Will the Minister confirm his views on the immigration status of existing and prospective EU students and their right to remain in the UK after graduation for work or postgraduate study? Will he support the benefits accruing to UK students from the Erasmus programme by confirming that the Government intend to seek continued participation in it?

On staff, will the Minister press for the earliest confirmation that EU nationals working in our universities will be able to stay for the indefinite future on existing terms without having to apply for leave to remain? Will he go further—this is crucial—and extend that right to those who join our universities in the pre-Brexit period until 2019, because that will be critical for the ability of our universities to continue to recruit? What representations is he making about future visa arrangements post-Brexit, so that our universities are in a position to continue to enjoy the benefits of securing the services of the most talented academics from the EU and the rest of the world?

On research, will the Minister give a clear commitment that the Government will prioritise research and innovation in their negotiations, with a view to ensuring continued UK participation in EU research programmes not just for the full duration of Horizon 2020, as he has assured us in the past, but in all its successor programmes? Will he outline, beyond the announcement that we expect from the Chancellor this afternoon, what plans the Government have to strengthen support for research and innovation more widely to mitigate the potential damage from leaving the European Union?

One vice-chancellor recently described to me the challenge that our universities face as “existential”. If the Government get this wrong, it will be a calamity for the sector. If it is a calamity for the sector, it will be a calamity for the economy and the country. So will the Minister, by addressing the points that my hon. Friends have made and the questions that I have put to him, explain just how the Government will avoid that potential disaster and ensure the continued success of our university sector?

10.51 am

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): It is a pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Happily, it falls to me to congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing this debate. I am glad that it falls to me rather than a colleague in another Department, because this is an important issue on which I am happy to represent the entire Government’s position.

The debate is timely, because the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union and its possible effects on higher education affect all Members in the Chamber and institutions across the country. This matters is of great importance, and the Government are giving considerable thought to its management, as hon. Members would expect. Higher education is clearly one of our great national assets. Hon. Members who served on the Higher Education and Research Bill Committee will be aware of how keenly the Government feel about this question and how strongly we want to help the sector through these times so we can move to calmer waters and continue to strengthen what is undoubtedly a world-class system.

In global league tables, four UK universities are in the world’s top 10 and 18 are in the world’s top 100. Those universities are home to world-class teaching and research, and we want that to continue in the years ahead. I am sure that hon. Members will have welcomed the Prime Minister’s announcement at the CBI conference on Monday that the Government plan to commit an extra £2 billion a year by 2020 to support research activities across the country in our university system. I hope that hon. Members will acknowledge that that underscores this Government’s determination to put science and innovation at the forefront of the new industrial strategy. We promised that we would do that, and we are delivering on that. I hope that in his speech this afternoon, the Chancellor will provide further details that will give hon. Members even greater confidence that the Government are clearly putting their money where their mouth is—behind our universities.

Research and innovation are key drivers of this country’s global competitiveness and key sources of economic advantage for us. Our HE sector can be proud not only of UK science: the universities across our nations are also leaders in social sciences and the arts and humanities.
But we are not complacent about our success. We recognise that the EU referendum has brought uncertainty for our universities and their students and staff, particularly the non-UK EU nationals among them. We have taken steps to mitigate that uncertainty where we can, be it in relation to the terms on which EU students can access finance or the terms on which we can underwrite research funding.

I will come back to those points shortly, but I want first to reflect on the UK’s knowledge landscape. As I said, our science system is one of the very best in the world. It is highly efficient, competitive and internationally successful. Among the G7 countries, we have stand-out impact rates; ours is perhaps the most productive science base when measured by papers or citations per unit of GDP. We punch well above our weight, and we want that to continue. We recognise that our universities’ world-class academic staff are central to that outperformance and our extraordinary bang per buck.

Mr Andrew Smith: Is the Minister in a position to confirm reports that the Home Secretary is reviewing and revising her previously proposed limits on universities’ visa powers in relation to students who want to stay to work?

Joseph Johnson: In her party conference speech, the Home Secretary announced that she was conducting a review and would be consulting on arrangements for non-European economic area migration, including the study route. The process leading up to that consultation is still under way.

Ian Murray: What representations has the Minister made to the Home Office and the Prime Minister to try to win the argument that we should be taking students out of the immigration numbers to resolve all these issues?

Joseph Johnson: It is important for hon. Members to recognise that we already have a strong offer. We are second in the world after only the US in terms of the number of international students who come to study in this country—according to Home Office figures, the number of students coming here has risen by 14% since 2010—and we continue to be successful in attracting international students. We should not create an impression that we have closed off as a country, because that is clearly not borne out by the facts. It is not borne out by the successful recruitment of many institutions in this country. I would not want to create an impression that we were closed, because we are not; we welcome international students and we want to continue to do so.

As I said, the quality of the staff at our institutions is central to the UK’s outperformance, and we want them to feel welcome and that the Government appreciate their contributions to our institutions. We want to give them the assurances that they need to feel confident that they can continue to embed the richness that they bring to our institutions.

We also derive benefits from EU students. Hon. Members have referred several times to the contribution that EU students make to our institutions’ health. We want those students to continue to study here. We are extraordinarily successful in that respect. In 2013, 20% of EU students who chose to study overseas chose the UK—the greatest proportion of any country. We also welcome those who choose to study for a short time under the Erasmus programme. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) asked what the Government’s plans were for future involvement with Erasmus. Post-exit access to Erasmus will be a matter for the negotiations that he knows will follow the triggering of article 50. We will work through the implications for future years as part of those wider negotiations.

I completely share the determination of the hon. Members for Ealing Central and Acton and for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan)—and I underscore the Government’s absolute determination—to show that we are welcoming and will not tolerate hate crimes of any sort in our universities or our country. Since the referendum, the Government have worked closely with the police to monitor hate crime and ensure that local forces have the necessary assistance and guidance to respond, and police forces are responding robustly to incidents. Ministers and officials have also met ambassadors and high commissioners from EU states and offered them reassurance and a single point of contact to raise concerns on behalf of their citizens.

In the remaining minute or so, I will skip forward to deal with the points that were raised about research, which is clearly of great importance. My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) and the hon. Member for Sheffield Central asked what relationship we will have with future Horizon 2020 programmes. The short answer is that it is too early to speculate about the UK’s future relationship with those programmes. There are already several models for co-operation by non-EU countries on research with the EU and EU member states, and there may be areas where the benefits of collaboration to both sides provide a case for ongoing co-operation. Again, that will be a matter for the negotiations about our future relationship. We are keenly aware that the matter is of great importance to the university sector, and it is fully represented in the thinking of the Cabinet Committee on Brexit, on which the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy sits.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Clinical Commissioning: North Durham

11 am

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered changes in clinical commissioning group commissioning practices for GP referrals in North Durham.

I asked for this debate as a result of a development that affects many in my constituency and other constituencies covered by the North Durham clinical commissioning group. I was made aware of it not by the clinical commissioning group but by “BBC Look North”, which received a tip-off from a GP about an upcoming change to the way GPs refer patients to a specialist. The change made by North Durham CCG fundamentally alters the way in which a GP refers a patient to a specialist.

It was always the case that if a GP saw a patient and considered that their health condition needed further investigation, they would be able to refer that patient directly to a specialist. The scheme introduced by North Durham CCG adds an additional layer of referral: if a GP wants to refer a patient, they must send a letter and medical records explaining why to a private health company called About Health, which will decide whether a patient should be referred to a specialist. That means that, in effect, a private company that has never seen the patient can overrule the decision of the patient’s GP to refer them to a specialist in a hospital. Conditions that would be referred under the new system include cardiology, physiotherapy services when they knew that treatment would not help before they could refer to a specialist in a hospital.

I was also contacted by a GP in the area covered by North Tyneside CCG who said that he had referred a patient to a specialist for a skin condition but the referral was overruled by the new scheme, which is called the referral management system. The skin condition turned out to be cancer, but that was not discovered until months further down the line, which meant that far more radical surgery was required than would have been the case if the patient had been seen by a specialist when the GP first referred them.

I therefore have a number of serious concerns about the referral system and the way in which the decision to implement it was made. My first concern is the possible negative impact on the health of my constituents and other people who live in areas affected by the new patient referral management schemes. I am concerned because whether a referral to a specialist goes ahead or not could have a long-term impact on the health of the patient or even result in something more serious, especially if decisions are overturned by About Health. A patient might not receive the treatment they need early enough.

I am also concerned about the financial impact of the decision. I understand that the NHS is under considerable financial pressure, but I doubt whether the scheme will end up saving money in the long run. That is because, as I just set out, in many cases where referrals are rejected the problem does not go away and patients return to their GP or even go to A&E with far more serious problems, which take up more of the NHS’ time and resources. About Health, the private company deciding on referrals, will be paid a basic fee and an additional £10 for each referral letter, which in itself will incur a significant cost. I am therefore not at all sure that the scheme is cost-effective.

My final concern is about the lack of public consultation and information on the decision to implement the scheme. Last October, the Secretary of State for Health announced plans to rate CCGs to make “the most patient-focused NHS culture ever”, which would be “much more accountable to their local population than previously.”

The decision made by North Durham CCG to change completely the way in which GPs can refer a patient to a specialist without any consultation flies in the face of CCGs being accountable to the local population. How are people supposed to hold a CCG to account if they are not aware of changes that are being made?

The North Durham patient reference group meets monthly in Durham city to discuss patients’ points of view and give feedback to the CCG about proposals and issues. The group, which is drawn from members of each GP practice forum across Durham, was informed of the new referral scheme only as it was about to be introduced, and it was not given any opportunity to give feedback on proposals. Despite meeting monthly,
members of the group had not even heard about the plans before they were presented with them and told that they were to be introduced imminently.

Similarly, members of patient forums at local GP practices were informed of the decision, rather than consulted on it. I am told that patient forums and the North Durham patient reference group were concerned and opposed the immediate implementation of the proposals, but North Durham CCG decided to go ahead and implement the new scheme immediately in any case.

This is a really important point for the Minister. If a patient goes on to the CCG's website, what they see does not tell them that their details will be given to a private company; they are simply told that a referral system is in place and that referrals are to “consultants” or “specialist GPs”. I think many patients would conclude from that wording that their medical information is to be sent to a specialist at a local hospital rather than to a private company.

I have written to the CCGs in the north-east to invite them to meet me and other members of the northern group of MPs to discuss this issue. It has been extremely difficult to get them to come to a meeting with us or indeed to get any information from them at all. I have some questions, which I will put quickly, to give my

[Dr Blackman-Woods]

What is the legal position on the giving of my private medical information, and that of my constituents, to a third party? Who is responsible for ensuring that it is secure? Do I have a right, given that it is my personal medical information, to withhold permission for it to be passed to a private third sector organisation? I certainly do not think that patients in North Durham are being told that that is happening. As my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham said, the website does not give the impression that the information is being given to a third party.

The way the decision was taken was shameless. As my hon. Friend has already said, we met the CCG in September and there was no mention of the contract at all. I want to ask why. One of my constituents, Keith Johnson, raised concerns and the CCG responded:

“GPs have responsibility to make best use of NHS resources and need up to date evidence and advice to be able to treat patients in practice or to refer on appropriately. Unnecessary outpatient appointments are a large cost to the NHS.”

I do not think anyone would disagree, but that is the job of GPs; it is not up to a private sector organisation, or anyone else who has never seen the patient, to decide whether they should be referred to a specialist.

My concern is not just the way the decision is being implemented, but the fact that it fundamentally breaks down the trust that we all value, and the confidentiality between us and our GP. I am also concerned that the more articulate constituents and patients will insist on getting care; some others will not. There will be rationing of care, depending on people's ability to make their case. That goes to the principle at the heart of the NHS—care being free at the point of need.

I have questions about the way the contract was let. We have had no information about how that happened. Was it by competitive tender? Did any individuals employed by the CCG have any pecuniary interest in awarding the contract? How will it be evaluated? What ability will patients have to say whether they agree with the outcomes? The way the decision was taken was shameless. As my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham said, the website does not tell patients what is happening. As my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham said, the website does not give the impression that the information is being given to a third party.

The decision of the North Durham CCG raises some fundamental questions about how the NHS is run in North Durham, and our constituents’ relationship with the NHS. As my hon. Friend described, there was no consultation with my constituents about the decision, which was taken in secret. There was no transparency at all, nor any consultation with Members of Parliament in the CCG area or any local elected officials. The decision changes the fundamental relationship of trust between a patient and their GP. My constituents have never been asked for permission for our private medical information to be passed to a private company—and neither have I or my hon. Friend. We have not been asked whether the company has our individual permissions. In many cases I do not think constituents have even been told by their GPs that the information is being passed to a private company.
be answered. The whole thing is cloaked in secrecy. There is an underhand feel to it. It is important that we get answers to a lot of questions. Can the Minister tell us who decided that what is happening was okay? Why has there been no public consultation or transparency? Where is the risk assessment? Why were patients not informed that confidential information about their health was being shared with a private company? How much is the company paid for its role? How much has been saved? How many referrals have been cancelled? We need the answers because what is being done is rationing by the back door, with the potential to compromise patient safety.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Davies. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) on obtaining the debate, and I congratulate the other hon. Members who spoke too. It is good to have a chance to discuss the matter and weigh up the pros and cons of what is being done.

The context is the CCG in the hon. Lady’s area, which consists of 31 GP practices. It has been rated as a good CCG by the Care Quality Commission. Its treatment referral time is above the national standard, at 92% within 18 weeks. I want to talk first about the policy area, and then about the specifics of the decision to employ About Health in North Tyneside and North Durham.

The first thing to say about the policy is that referral management is not a new area. In 2007, something like 70% of primary care trusts had a type of referral management system in place. The intention is fairly clear: when a GP is making a referral, it will be absolutely obvious in many cases that it needs to happen. In many other cases it will be clear that a referral is not needed. There will also, frankly, be a grey area in the middle—that will happen in any profession.

Dr Blackman-Woods: Will the Minister focus on this specific referral system, under which, we understand, all referrals to specialists from GP practices in the CCG area are subject to private company screening and there is also a target to send back at least 50% of all referrals made?

David Mowat: I was explaining the purpose of the policy and the fact that this referral mechanism was used widely in 2007. A King’s Fund report from 2010 sets out the pros and cons of using referral management—I suggest the hon. Lady reads it.

These things are not new. They are a mechanism by which a consultant, or a GP with a specialist interest in the area of what is being referred—there are six areas of referral in this CCG, as the hon. Lady said—has two to three days to either accept that the referral goes on to the secondary system, or to contact the GP and have a discussion about what the best alternative pathway might be. There is an appeals process if the GP does not agree with that decision.

The hon. Lady asked where else such referral management was being done across the NHS in England. It was introduced in 2007, as I said, and it is being done very commonly. It is being done in Bromley, Cambridge, Peterborough, Imperial in London, and Southampton. I saw a similar system in Tower Hamlets to the one working in her area—indeed, the GP was very proud of the way they reacted, with an email referral system, when there was every possibility of things not going ahead.

This is not rationing. It is completely wrong to say that. It was brought in by the CCG, which is GP-led. If the GPs in the CCG do not agree with it, they have the mechanism to replace the chairman of the CCG.

Mr Kevan Jones: I understand what the Minister is saying, but what about the patient? Where does the patient come into this? If I go to my GP and he says I need a referral, that is between me and my GP. If it was not for my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) or the BBC raising this, none of my constituents—or myself and my hon. Friend, who are patients of the CCG—would have known about it. Will the Minister please answer the point about the patients?

David Mowat: The point I was in the middle of making—which I will finish making—is that if the GPs in the CCG have difficulty with the scheme, they have the mechanism to replace the CCG chairman and therefore not to go ahead with the scheme, so the GPs in his area are presumably content with it.

Mr Jones: The patients are not being consulted.

David Mowat: The fact is that the GPs vote for the head of the CCG who has put the scheme into place. On the patient issue, which is a fair one, if the patient expresses a preference to go to a secondary or an acute hospital and have an appointment, which could typically be six to eight weeks away, of course that is part of the process, and of course the referral management schemes will take that into account.

Mr Jones: I am sorry, that is not the case. In North Durham, patients have not been told about it. If I went to a GP who said I needed a referral, I would not be told that. What the Minister is saying is in complete contrast to what he told me during a debate on coeliac disease a few weeks ago, in which he condemned CCGs for not consulting people before awarding contracts.

David Mowat: We are moving around a little bit here, but I will come to the point about consultation. The GP that the hon. Gentleman refers to is a part of a CCG that has made the decision to extend the North Tyneside pilot to North Durham. All I am saying is that those GPs are part of the CCG and that presumably the CCG is doing this because it believes the clinical out-turns are right. We have a locally driven system. I will make some progress; I have a lot of interventions.

Julie Cooper: Will the Minister give way?

David Mowat: I will make some progress: I have taken a lot of interventions.

The benefits to patients are that a consultant will review their case within two or three days of a GP referral and a decision will be made on the appropriate pathway. That is why the King’s Fund recommended these sorts of systems in 2010—in terms of patient out-turns—and that is why it is of benefit to patients.
One example that the hon. Member for City of Durham talked about was a skin case that resulted in cancer. That is a very serious situation, and if it happened in the way that she says, it should be investigated. Another example is when a patient with acne was referred to a dermatologist at a hospital. The referral system said, “Why have we not tried a cream for this first?” That process was put into place two or three days later, as opposed to having an eight-week wait for a specialist appoint. That is of benefit to the patient.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister give way?

David Mowat: I have given way a lot; I want to make some progress.

That is also of benefit to GPs, because they can quickly validate decisions on the best pathway for those grey areas that may or may not require a referral with a consultant who knows more than them about that particular discipline. Of course, it is of benefit to the providers because it takes away something like 20% of unnecessary outpatient appointments. Indeed, one of the providers for the scheme in North Tyneside has asked for it to be extended to an additional discipline, because they feel that some of the referrals they receive are unnecessary and that the referral management system—in the way we have been doing it in the NHS for the past decade—is a mechanism for preventing that.

Dr Blackman-Woods: The only information that North Tyneside CCG has put into the public domain is how much money it has saved through this system. It has not made an assessment of clinical outcomes for patients at all.

David Mowat: I am going to talk about the About Health situation and the people who have been awarded the contract in North Durham. It is a one-year pilot that builds on the one-year scheme in North Tyneside. I think it started last month; it covers six disciplines and it does not cover urgent referrals, in particular cancer. All the national requirements for referral-to-treatment times still count in exactly the same way. The local CCG performed a risk analysis before it decided to take the scheme forward and build on what happened in North Tyneside, and the scheme is monitored.

I have been told that a very important feature is that there is a clear GP appeals process. If they are not happy with a decision that has been taken, that process can happen very quickly.

Mr Kevan Jones: What about the patients?

David Mowat: The GP represents the patients in the health system; that is the fact of the matter. If there are out-turns that are detrimental to patients, as the hon. Member for City of Durham implied, that is a serious situation and should be investigated.
It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. It is also good to see the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), in her place; I served under her chairmanship when she chaired the Select Committee on Science and Technology. I intend to use this debate to consider what can be done to accelerate access to new, innovative diabetes technologies.

This is a complex subject. I know there are patients who would benefit from technologies such as insulin pumps and glucose monitoring systems but are not able to access them. For many, access to diabetes technologies will have a transforming effect on their lives, enabling them to live full lives, be economically active and reduce the burden on primary and secondary care.

First, I recognise that progress is being made in this area. The intention behind the debate is to highlight the opportunity we have dramatically to transform people’s lives by accelerating access to diabetes technologies. I am here not to criticise but to say, because I believe we can in this area. Secondly, I want to use this opportunity to pay credit to the work of the all-party parliamentary group on vascular disease, and in particular its inquiry into patient access to technology last summer. The APPG recognised that access to technology facilitates the earlier and more accurate identification of people at potential risk of diabetes-related complications.

I want to refer to three of the 12 recommendations listed in the APPG’s report. The first is that the NHS must consider steps to become more flexible when commissioning or supporting the commissioning of new technologies designed to improve patient outcomes. Its second recommendation is that the NHS and industry should work together to harness innovation and promote better treatment for patients. Thirdly, it recommends that NHS England should consider how to introduce measures to incentivise the screening and diagnosis of patients at risk of peripheral arterial disease in primary care settings. Those recommendations help me to impress on the Minister a matter of great urgency, importance and opportunity for diabetic patients in the UK.

I would like us to consider the need to accelerate access to existing technologies; how the NHS can accelerate the development, testing and application of new technologies; and how information technology can be used to inform and educate patients, giving them greater power to manage their condition and lead full and free lives.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will speak later about the opportunity as regards children. If we do not help them to manage their condition, the complications later on are significant indeed.

I do not intend to go over the sheer scale of the problem of diabetes in the UK and its impact on people’s quality of life, our health system, community and social care services and economic productivity. We all know the stats. Despite that, it is my belief that the NHS fails to take full advantage of the latest technology available to patients, including flash glucose monitoring technology, known as FGM. That issue is being targeted by NHS England via the national obesity and diabetes prevention programme. The programme is a joint initiative between NHS England, Public Health England and Diabetes UK, and it aims significantly to reduce the 5 million people in the UK expected to have diabetes by 2025.

Flash glucose monitoring technology is available to support the NHS and NHS England to achieve their objectives related to diabetes. Today’s debate is an opportunity to see how the Government might take full advantage of that and other technologies in the future. It is timely therefore to concentrate our minds briefly on the benefits of technologies such as flash glucose monitoring. Just a few years ago, who would have thought that someone with diabetes could turn their back on routine finger pricking to test their glucose readings and instead rely confidently on readings taken via a small sensor worn on the body?

Just a few years ago, diabetes must have dreamt of a day when they could take a glucose reading as many times a day as they liked, without having to worry about pain, discomfort, inconvenience or running out of test strips. Imagine a world where schoolchildren or people in full-time employment avoided the interruption of finger prick testing and the stigma of testing in public. That world exists, and accelerated access to FGM, which delivers those benefits, could help to improve people’s health, avoiding the need for people who are in work to take extra sick leave by simply enabling better management of their condition.

Flash glucose monitoring provides a current glucose reading, an eight-hour history and information about the direction glucose is going in. That allows people to monitor whether their glucose levels are rising or falling quickly and can support them to take action before their condition worsens. That can only be a plus for patients, GPs and the wider health system. Furthermore, long-term accurate data on glucose levels must be invaluable for clinicians and patients as they make choices about how they manage diabetes.

I would like to ask the Minister a few questions. How confident is she that patients are accessing the treatments and technologies that are available today? What action is required of the Department of Health to ensure that the patient pathway is smooth, well signposted and not too long? Are clinicians fully aware of what technologies are available and how to operate them? Are they equipped to train patients to operate these technologies and make the best use of any data provided? What more can the Minister do to apply pressure to clinical commissioning groups to make diabetes technologies such as insulin pumps and glucose monitoring systems available? I know of patients in my constituency who have waited...
and waited before getting an insulin pump. In the meantime, their condition has been unbearable, and living any sort of normal life has not been possible. I am glad to say that once they get the insulin pump, their lives are transformed. However, I know others who still wait.

I want to move on to the opportunity we have to embrace emerging technology. One of the greatest developments in healthcare and public health must be the availability and use of emerging technologies. In 2004, Derek Wanless described the NHS as a “late and slow adopter” of innovation. I know that the Government are committed to improving that and to taking advantage of the opportunities on offer from innovative technologies. An excellent example of that is the commissioning through evaluation programme, launched in 2013, which was an innovative solution to the problem of developing real-world data to support the use of innovative medical procedures. I would like the Minister to shed some light on where we are with that programme.

I recognise that CTE set out to accelerate treatments for a far wider group of illnesses and conditions and should be a subject for another Westminster Hall debate. However, commissioning through evaluation is an example of good forward thinking that has been successful in accelerating access to treatments for patients and is the perfect tool for accelerating diabetes technologies and treatments. The reality is that patients, the NHS and UK plc will see the benefit if we find ways quickly to develop the technologies and give patients accelerated access.

Finally, I am keen to know what role the Department believes information technology has in informing and educating people so that they can play a greater role in managing their condition. If a diabetic only gets to see a specialist once a year, can online information help to close the gap? What responsibility does the Department of Health have to ensure that patients with diabetes are signposted to reliable, safe and helpful information? Should the Department actively back charities such as Diabetes UK, so that people have confidence about to whom they should turn? I would also like the Minister to outline what role she believes information technology can play in informing and educating people with diabetes.

I am glad to have secured the debate. This is one of the most pressing issues facing us today, and there is a great opportunity ahead of us. It is an opportunity for patients, because if we get this right, they will be able to manage their condition much more effectively and will be much more likely to be active in the world of work. We will be able to hold off lower limb amputations and sight loss and offer a much brighter future for people with diabetes.

There is also an opportunity in relation to health and social care. One in five hospital admissions for heart failure, heart attack and stroke is of a person who has diabetes, so by getting this right and ensuring that patients have access to advanced technologies, we can reduce the burden on primary and secondary care and reduce the £14 billion spent annually on diabetes in the NHS. The savings potentially from further when we consider the costs associated with adapting people’s homes and workplaces following amputations or sight loss, for example.

There are also opportunities for UK plc. If we get this right, the UK will be seen as the place to do research and development, and manufacturing. It must be the aspiration of the Government for the UK to become a hotbed of innovation, and I am certain that the NHS could exploit its sheer size and buying power much more effectively, giving UK patients the best access to the latest treatments.

2.41 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) both on raising this very important subject and on the constructive and helpful manner in which he raised it.

I intend to confine my remarks to type 1 diabetes and, in particular, type 1 diabetics. I should say that I am indebted to both Diabetes UK and the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation for the very helpful briefing that they provided and for the important work that they do on behalf of people with diabetes.

Diabetes, whether type 1 or type 2, is a life-changing condition regardless of the age at which it is diagnosed, but for young type 1 diabetics, it is also a lifelong challenge. Young type 1 diabetics face a daily and lifelong routine of monitoring glucose levels and administering the appropriate doses of insulin. It is not insignificant that one quarter of hospital admissions for ketoacidosis are of 16 to 25-year-olds; that is quite a shocking statistic.

At the same time, dealing with the transition to adulthood, with all the attendant biological, psychological and physiological changes that occur, can be even more challenging for young diabetics and their families. Many young diabetics face bullying. The hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) referred to a problem in schools. Quite often, because of the misconception about what type 1 diabetes is, young diabetics will face taunts: “Well, it’s your own fault because you don’t eat properly”, “You’re overweight” and so on. It is bad enough that young diabetics face bullying in school. Very often, as the hon. Gentleman signified, schools simply do not know how to deal with this issue.

One thing about being a type 1 diabetic is that because their blood glucose levels can be very unreliable, they sometimes need to take glucose, which means that at a certain point their absolute priority is to eat something. They have to be able to eat something to even out their blood sugar levels, yet all too often teachers will not allow them to use the classroom in those circumstances.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood) indicated assent.

Mr Howarth: I see the Minister nodding. This really is a problem. Schools need to be advised on how to deal with these situations, so that in every classroom the teacher is aware, whether or not they have a type 1 diabetic in their class, of what they are supposed to do in those circumstances. The lack of understanding in many schools—not all of them, as some deal with the matter very well—must be tackled.

However, I do not want to be overly gloomy about the problem. Organisations such as the JDRF and Diabetes UK, in conjunction with others, including the all-party parliamentary group for diabetes, of which I am a member, are both raising the profile of the way
type 1 diabetics are being failed by the healthcare system and suggesting constructive ways of improving the situation. Later today there will be the launch of a report, not specifically on type 1 diabetes but on how services can be better organised. That is the result of many months of taking evidence from expert organisations. I hope that Ministers will study that report closely.

With regard to progress, scientific research is making great headway. The hon. Member for St Ives, who opened the debate, highlighted some of the scientific research going on and the technologies that are available. It is in my view highly likely that a cure will be found well within the lifetime of today’s young diabetics. Building on the technology that already allows automatic continuous glucose monitoring and automatically pumped insulin, an algorithm for combining the two into an artificial pancreas already exists. The hope is that it will not be long before that technology becomes the norm.

More development work is going on, but the research and tests that have been carried out indicate that that system works and can bring about a massive improvement in the lives of young people and others who suffer from diabetes, because it enables them to keep their blood glucose at an even level.

I want to say a few words about a particular problem that some young type 1 diabetes sufferers experience. As we know, as a society we face a problem—particularly, although by no means exclusively, among young women—as regards body image. The media, magazines and society in general put forward an idealised view of what a woman or, for that matter, a man should look like. We know about eating disorders that arise from that wholly inappropriate promotion of a “perfect” shape. I do not profess to be an expert on this issue, but my experience of life is that human beings come in all shapes and sizes, none of which is more acceptable than another—but that is just a personal view. However, some young type 1 diabetics discover—this is easy to find out through social media—that by manipulating their insulin intake, they can achieve rapid weight loss. To some young people, that sounds like a great thing to be able to do. Someone can lose perhaps half a stone in a week simply by not taking the amount of insulin that they require. Of course, the problem is that it leads to major medical complications and, in some cases, can end fatally.

Those who do fall into the habit, which amounts to a highly specialised eating disorder, need to be able to access support from diabetologists and from either psychological or psychiatric specialists. All too often, though, that support is not available—at least not in one place—at the time when the young person needs it most and they are left trying to negotiate a sort of medical specialists ping-pong game between, on the one hand, diabetologists, who do not understand the psychological problem that the young person is experiencing, and on the other hand psychologists or psychiatrists, who do not understand the psychological problem of young diabetics. Profoundly distressing medical complications are properly integrated so that the medical ping-pong is overcome?

I hope that I have not gone on for too long. Knowing you as I do, Mrs Gillan, I know that you would have told me if I had. Again, I thank the hon. Member for St Ives for giving me the opportunity to say the things that I wanted to say. I am sure that the young diabetics around this country who have the opportunity to do so, will be glad that at least their plight has been raised by at least one Member of this House.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Unless any other Members are seeking to catch my eye, we will move to the wind-ups. I call Mr Martyn Day.

2.52 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mrs Gillan. I thank the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for bringing forward this interesting debate on diabetes technologies. I thank him for his explanation of the position, and would like to publicly agree with him that we need to accelerate access and that we could do better. I am also grateful to him for informing us of flash glucose monitoring—FGM. It is a new technology that I must admit I am not familiar with, and I would have guessed completely wrong, based on its initials, as to what we were discussing.

There can be little doubt that diabetes is the fastest growing health threat of our time and a critical public health matter. It is estimated that more than one in 10 people across the UK has diabetes—be that diagnosed or undiagnosed—and it is worth remembering that around 80% of diabetes complications are preventable, or can at least be significantly delayed through early detection, good care and access to appropriate self-management tools and resources, of which access to diabetes technologies is a fundamental part. With that challenge of the increasing numbers of people with diabetes, access to the technology to help those living with the disease becomes yet ever more important. We can learn much from the different approaches to this issue throughout these isles, and we have heard examples today that are both good and bad. The right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) informed us of the problems faced by many young people and their experiences at schools. That is a very good example of how we could do better.
Much of the debate centres around the two main technologies: insulin pumps and continuous glucose monitors. It is, unfortunately, fair to say that at present the challenges facing sufferers in Scotland in obtaining them are greater than for those in England and Wales. However, much progress is being made and the Scottish Government are committed to ensuring that people living with diabetes have access to the best possible care.

Since 2010, the Scottish Government have set and met targets to increase insulin pump therapy. In Scotland, we have already made good progress in its provision, and by the end of the current Parliament some 6,000 adults—more than 20% of the type 1 diabetes population across Scotland—will have access to insulin pump therapy; currently, the figure is around 9.5%. In 2010, the diabetes action plan called for NHS boards in Scotland to introduce plans to make insulin pump therapy available for patients who would most benefit from it. That was followed, in 2011, by the target that 25% of under-18s with type 1 diabetes should be on insulin pump therapy; that was met by December 2014, and the figure had reached 31.2% by the end of 2015. Good though this progress is, we must still do better.

This form of insulin delivery has made a big difference to those who have received it; however, it is worth remembering that is not always appropriate for everyone. To be successful, insulin pump therapy requires intensive work by the patient in association with the local diabetes team, and requires self-management and monitoring.

Continuous glucose monitoring devices can be extremely useful in helping sufferers to manage and monitor their glucose levels. The Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network—SIGN—guidance recommends that CGM should not be used routinely for people with diabetes; however, it may be considered for women with type 1 and type 2 diabetes, as it may be beneficial during pregnancy. As a result of that, provision through the NHS in Scotland is limited. Earlier this month, Shona Robison, the Cabinet Secretary responsible for health, wellbeing and sport in Scotland, confirmed that a national approach is being developed, stating:

“Work is currently on-going to develop a national approach for the use of Continuous Glucose Monitoring (CGM) devices in Scotland, as we recognise the speed of development of this technology.”

Best practice on provision of CGMs and insulin pumps will continue to evolve with developments in technology. Innovative new approaches to healthcare may prove key to improving the treatment of conditions such as diabetes. The Scottish Government, in partnership with Scottish Enterprise, has funded a £500,000 competition to develop a new technology to help with the management of type 1 diabetes. To supplement existing education programmes, competition entrants have been asked to develop a mobile health product, which could be an app, a new interface or a new device, to assist people in dealing with their condition. The competition is a good example of working with partners across private, public and third sector organisations to develop a new and innovative solution. At its launch, Dr Lena Wilson, chief executive of Scottish Enterprise, said:

“The economy grows faster when companies embed innovation in all they do. Scotland operates in an increasingly competitive global market so developing and maintaining competitive advantage is imperative. The work underway with NHS Scotland on solutions to the challenges Type 1 diabetic patients face offers an opportunity for more of our SMEs to embrace innovation.”

Of course, the potential benefits of that are not just with the businesses that take part. Managing diabetes accounts for about 10% of the annual NHS Scotland budget—almost £1 billion a year. When 80% of NHS spending on diabetes goes on treating avoidable complications, potentially significant savings can be made through better self-management and use of technologies—and that is before we consider quality of life for the actual sufferers who benefit.

In conclusion, we can do much to improve diabetes education and care for both type 1 and type 2 diabetics, and diabetes technologies have a key role to play in that process. The challenge is to find effective ways to overcome barriers to implementation, and to facilitate greater access for those who would benefit. I am thankful for the opportunity to take part in today’s consensual and informative debate.

2.58 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship today, Mrs Gillan.

I welcome today’s timely debate on access to diabetes technology, which falls in Diabetes Awareness Month. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this important debate and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Mr Reed), who is not present today, for all his campaigning, work and efforts on the subject over the years. I also thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who spoke for the Scottish National party, and I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) on his excellent contribution on young people with type 1 diabetes, and for highlighting the worrying danger of abuse by young people who skip insulin in order to lose weight. I had heard of that before, but I am grateful that he brought it to our attention today, so that the Minister may respond. As my right hon. Friend said, it is often due to the pressures of society and body shaming and it can, sadly, often be fatal. It is yet another pressure on these young people: aside from having the diabetes diagnosis in the first place, it is something else that they have to deal with.

I also want to disclose from the off that sadly I was diagnosed as a type 2 diabetic just a year ago, but through getting control of my diet and achieving weight loss, which is still ongoing, my diabetes is thankfully very well under control. This debate is therefore very close to my heart.

More than 4 million people and counting in the UK are now living with diagnosed diabetes. Some 400,000 live with type 1 diabetes, and 29,000 of those are children. I am hopeful that in the future, artificial pancreas technology, which we have heard about today, will be effective, safe and accessible to patients, and that eventually, thanks to important research undertaken by the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, Diabetes UK and others, we will create a world without diabetes.

However, until that time comes, it is paramount that we do all we can to support adults and children living with the condition. Patients need accessible and high-quality education and support, and access to technology that
will allow them to manage their condition and to achieve positive outcomes. Not only will that have a positive effect upon the lives of those 4 million people, especially included, but it could also reduce NHS spend on diabetes-related complications.

There have been significant advances and improvements in care for people living with diabetes over the last 15 years or so, but it would be an enormous mistake for us to believe that the job was done. It is far from done and a significant amount of work needs to be undertaken to improve diabetes outcomes. That is because more than 24,000 people a year currently still die from a complication or condition related to diabetes, and many more will encounter life-altering, non-fatal complications. It is worth noting that diabetes-related complications account for a staggering 80% of the £10 billion annual NHS spend on diabetes.

Worryingly, there is also a regional dimension to the challenges presented in relation to positive diabetes outcomes. According to the national diabetes audit 2012-13, diabetes education courses are not being commissioned for people in more than a third of areas in England. Moreover, gateway treatment for both type 1 and type 2 diabetes is undertaken through primary care. However, with a GP shortfall of 40% across the north of England—my region—it is clear that accessibility is limited in certain parts of the country. Meanwhile, some CCGs have particularly large concentrations of people with type 2 diabetes and, it has to be said, there are correlations between those areas and socioeconomic disadvantage. The Government might well approach funding allocations with that in mind.

However, the issue we are discussing, which must be considered alongside the aforementioned points, is supporting patients to access technologies easily that will better help them to manage their condition, from insulin pumps to continuous glucose monitors, to flash glucose meters—a lot of them were spoken about by the hon. Member for St Ives. The technologies to which I refer make monitoring blood glucose more convenient for people than a standard blood glucose meter does, and in turn, those technologies can transform peoples’ lives. Continuous glucose monitors—CGMs—such as the Dexcom device, and flash glucose meters, such as the Abbott FreeStyle Libre device, are considered by many to be a less invasive technique than blood glucose meters for measuring blood glucose. They work 24 hours a day and CGMs can include alarms to indicate when glucose levels are too high. That is particularly important for people who do not know that they are experiencing hypoglycaemia, and children who may be unable yet to communicate it.

It is critical that the House understands the importance of blood glucose readings for people living with diabetes—both types—but it is of essential importance for people living with type 1. With type 2 patients, as I have found, blood glucose is usually monitored and controlled over a long period of time and the scope for immediate blood glucose correction is limited. For people living with type 1—people whose control depends upon the use of insulin delivered through an injection or a pump—accurate, real-time data are essential for blood glucose control.

To put it simply: better blood glucose control will result in better outcomes for people living with type 1 or type 2. It will relieve significant pressure on the NHS and result in a significant and positive long-term financial gain. Access to CGMs and flash glucose meters is limited on the NHS, and National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines do not recommend that CGMs are offered routinely even to adults with type 1 diabetes, but funding should be considered in a small number of specified circumstances. Meanwhile, children and young people must either have frequent severe hypoglycaemia, impaired awareness of hypoglycaemia associated with adverse consequences, or the inability to recognise or communicate about symptoms of hypoglycaemia in order to be eligible for a CGM at the moment.

The guidelines, which can be difficult for health professionals, adult patients, and parents alike to navigate, are an obstacle to accessing life-changing technologies for people living with diabetes. As such, I hope that the Government will take steps to encourage CCGs to increase the take-up of CGMs—I apologise for all the acronyms—and flash glucose meters, and that eventually work will be undertaken, in conjunction with NICE, to look at increasing and improving access to diabetes technologies at a faster rate than patients currently experience.

The running cost of a CGM is around £3,000 to £4,000 a year, whereas a flash glucose meter costs around £1,300 a year. That represents a significant personal cost to many of those who are unable to access these technologies through their CCG, and who therefore have little choice but to self-fund. Lots of parents do this for their children especially. In considering the financial impact of diabetes, we must recognise that diabetic technologies should not be available only to those who can afford to self-fund. Allowing the continuation of the disparity between people with diabetes who can afford to make use of life-changing technologies and those who cannot undermines the principle of a truly national health service.

It is also important to consider that investment in the new technologies could save the NHS vast amounts in the long term. That is because they can help to avoid severe night-time hypos, and severe hypox costs the NHS £13 million a year. In addition, as I have mentioned, diabetes-related complications account for 80% of the total NHS spend on diabetes, and supporting patients to better manage their condition through access to CGMs and flash glucose meters will inevitably seek to reduce that cost. That is a significant saving, before we even begin considering the impact of hypoglycaemia on the UK economy as a whole.

Finally, during Prime Minister’s questions, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland, the Prime Minister stated:

“There are many youngsters out there, from tiny tots to teenagers, living with type 1 diabetes. It is important that we send a message to them that their future is not limited: they can do whatever they want.”—[Official Report, 20 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 821-22.]

I am sure that all of us in the Chamber today very much welcome her comments. I hope that they represent a forthcoming commitment by the Government to improve access to life-changing technologies for adults and children to reduce any obstacles that they might otherwise face.

I ask the Government to commit to working to improve access to diabetes management education, support, and access to emerging technologies. We must ensure that emerging technologies reach the public in a timely manner.
manner, and that innovation, to make them even more user-friendly and to encourage take-up, is also supported and encouraged by the Government.

A national focus on access to diabetes technologies has its roots not only in clinical, but in financial arguments, as well having national support. So far, more than 26,000 people, from every single constituency in the UK, have signed a petition initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland calling for CGMs to be made available as a right on the NHS to adults and children living with type 1 diabetes. Moreover, 25 cross-party colleagues have signed an early-day motion in a similar vein. I extend my support to those cross-party calls to ensure that such technologies become accessible to adults and children living with diabetes—especially type 1—so as, ultimately, to improve the lives of those who need those technologies.

3.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for giving us the opportunity to have such an important debate. This timing is impeccable, as always, as I found on the Science and Technology Committee, of which he was such an excellent member—we exist in a mutual admiration society. This debate follows on from world diabetes day last month. I want to add my voice to the tributes already paid to the all-party groups on diabetes and on vascular disease and to Diabetes UK for the work they do on this issue. It is invaluable, as we have heard from the very high quality and personal contributions this afternoon.

As the shadow Minister says, diabetes is one of the biggest health challenges facing this country today. The figures are truly sobering. Almost 3 million people in England are currently diagnosed with diabetes and we estimate that a further 940,000 remain undiagnosed. Furthermore, around 5 million are at high risk of developing type 2 diabetes. If nothing changes, by 2025 more than 4 million people will have the condition. As the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) said, type 1 diabetes affects 400,000 people in the UK and its incidence is increasing by about 4% a year. It is not preventable, so the emphasis is on improving the lives of people with type 1 diabetes and helping them to manage their condition.

I absolutely associate myself with the words of the Prime Minister: the message should be that people are able to live full and active lives, and the Government are there to do whatever they can to support them to do so. I shall certainly undertake to study the upcoming report mentioned by the right hon. Gentleman and consider its proposals carefully.

Type 2 diabetes is much more common. Diabetes as a whole is a leading cause of preventable sight loss in people of working age and is a major contributor to kidney failure, heart attack and stroke. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives said, diabetic foot disease, including lower limb amputations and foot ulcers, account for more days in hospital than all other diabetes complications put together. We are determined to change that.

According to Public Health England and Diabetes UK, 5 million people in England are at high risk of developing type 2 diabetes, and one in 10 will develop the disease if current trends continue. Type 2 diabetes is largely preventable and manageable through lifestyle changes, as the shadow Minister has testified—I was very impressed by her testimony today.

There is also a huge financial cost—as well as a personal cost—to diabetes and its complications. It already costs the NHS in England more than £5.6 billion a year, and that continues to rise. In addition, the annual social care costs associated with supporting people with diabetes are estimated to be £1.4 billion. Managing the growing impact of diabetes is one of the major clinical challenges of the 21st century. That is why preventing type 2 diabetes and promoting the best possible care for all people with diabetes is a key priority for me and for the Government.

It will not surprise my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives to hear that, as the Minister for Public Health and Innovation, I believe he is absolutely correct to highlight the role that modern technologies, properly used, can play in the care of people with diabetes. We are extremely fortunate to have a thriving, world-class life sciences industry in this country—it is one of the jewels in the crown of our industrial sector. That is why we are investing an extra £2 billion a year in research and development by the end of this Parliament to help put post-Brexit Britain at the cutting edge of science and technology, as the Chancellor announced today.

The development of new, innovative technologies is continuing at pace and is revolutionising health systems throughout the world. However, that will not help if patients do not benefit from it, so we want to make sure that patients here benefit as quickly as possible. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives said, we can do better. That is exactly why we commissioned the accelerated access review to support the NHS to become a system that embraces innovation and works in collaboration with innovators to get products to patients more quickly.

The review was published last month. We are carefully considering its recommendations and will respond as soon as we can.

It is not surprising that we are seeing the emergence of technologies that have real potential to improve the lives of people with diabetes in the context of such a thriving life sciences sector. As many colleagues have mentioned, key to managing diabetes is monitoring and controlling glucose levels. Various technologies are available. Insulin pump technology is prime among these and is recommended by NICE as an option for people with type 1 diabetes. Many people are already benefitting from blood glucose monitoring with testing strips and a machine to read blood glucose levels, as well as continuous glucose monitoring. The shadow Minister went into great detail about how that already provides hundreds of readings a day to provide a clear picture of people’s glucose levels.

People also benefit from flash glucose monitoring, where the glucose concentration and trend is shown when the monitor is waved over the sensor. Other devices are also available; I understand that many people are already finding them useful in reducing hyperglycaemic and hypoglycaemic attacks. In some cases, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives said, such devices can offer life-changing support to patients living with diabetes.
They can play a particularly valuable role for certain patient groups, including children and teens, when they are properly managed, as the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson)—who is not in his place—said earlier.

Clinical commissioning groups are responsible for commissioning diabetes services. In doing so, they need to ensure that the services they provide are fit for purpose, reflect the needs of their local populations and are based on the available evidence, taking into account national guidelines. In the end, none of the guidelines can supersede the best judgment of clinicians, formed with their patients, about the best treatment option for them. I know that NHS England is actively investigating the potential of technologies for use within the NHS with manufacturers and patient groups to understand and identify areas of need and barriers to adoption so that they can improve access.

Looking to the future, artificial pancreas technology, as was mentioned, continues to be developed. One system has recently been approved by the US Food and Drug Administration, and a European licence is being pursued. Large randomised clinical studies of similar systems are now beginning, and several are expected to come to market in the next five years. Teams in the UK, including in Cambridge and London, are leading on some of this work, but these technologies need to be used optimally as part of holistic treatment pathways so that we get the best patient outcomes from them. That is exactly what the NHS innovation accelerator aims to deliver.

The NHS innovation accelerator is supposed to realise the commitment in the five-year forward view to create the conditions and cultural change necessary for proven innovations to be adopted faster and more systematically through the NHS for the benefit of patients. This is being delivered in partnership with all 15 academic health science networks. AHSN initiatives are patient-facing. Monster Manor, for example, is a free app launched by the Oxford AHSN—which I mention very selfishly—diabetes clinical network to encourage children with type 1 diabetes to track their blood glucose readings and become more engaged in their diabetes management. By logging readings, players earn rewards that help them to advance through the game.

The Yorkshire and Humber AHSN is implementing a locally developed set of tools to support general practice and community pharmacy in fostering greater self-care and health literacy among patients with diabetes and encourage them to do something to prevent severe hypoglycaemic episodes. A particular benefit of the AHSN network is the best practice sharing system, which is now in place, to ensure that improvements in one area can more quickly spread across the whole country.

Another example of accelerator innovation is the internet of things innovation diabetes test bed, which is funded by the Department. This enables people with type 1 or type 2 diabetes to do the right thing at the right time in self-managing their condition. It can be difficult to manage any long-term condition, so help is particularly valuable. People get a real-time view of their own data so they can take prompt action to prevent their condition from getting worse. This also encourages more timely and appropriate interventions from healthcare professionals. It is hoped that using technology in this way will also create genuine partnerships between patients and their healthcare professionals.

Realistically, the only way we are going to make measurable progress in halting the diabetes epidemic is to put strong measures in place to prevent those at risk from developing type 2 diabetes in the first place. Healthier You, the diabetes prevention programme, is the first type 2 diabetes prevention programme of its kind to be delivered at scale nationwide anywhere in the world. By 2020, the programme will be made available to up to 100,000 people at risk of diabetes each year across England. Those referred will get personalised help to reduce their risk, including education on healthier eating and lifestyles, and physical exercise programmes tailored to the individual. Building on that, NHS England is investing an additional £40 million each year to support CCGs in promoting evidence-based interventions to improve the care that all people with diabetes receive. In line with the points that my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives made, NHS England is encouraging GPs to refer people who are at high risk of diabetes into the national diabetes prevention programme, although referrals also come through the NHS health check, so there are two routes.

The role of structured education is widely recognised to be hugely important. The Department, NHS England and Diabetes UK are working together to improve the take-up of such education, including through digital and web-based approaches. Furthermore, NHS England is planning to make additional investment from 2017-18 to support the expansion of structured education to help patients to understand their condition better and manage it themselves more successfully.

The right hon. Member for Knowsley made some important points about the interaction of mental health services and diabetes provision. There is already significant activity to tackle the challenges of negative body image, and the Government announced a body image taskforce in 2010. It reports annually and is led by the Government Equalities Office. Simultaneously, in response to the priorities put forward in the five-year forward view on mental health, we are currently significantly improving care pathways for eating disorders. I have not so far investigated the specific challenge of how young diabetic patients interact with that context, but as a result of the right hon. Gentleman’s comments I undertake to do so.

I hope I have demonstrated not only the Government’s commitment but my personal commitment to harnessing new and innovative technologies as part of our drive to improve outcomes for the millions of people already living with diabetes and the many others at risk of developing the disease, as well as to sending out the clear message that diabetes does not in any way limit the ability to live an active life and to contribute well.

3.22 pm

Derek Thomas: I am grateful for the opportunity to have this debate under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan; I think I have 37 minutes left.

I thank the Minister for the information she has given today. I have learned things, and the challenge now is for us to make sure that patients and clinicians will also know what is available to help them. We want acceleration in technology and the integration of services so that patients can be diagnosed as early as possible, have reliable online information about what is available and how to look after themselves and also get the specialist
[Derek Thomas]
care they need, as well as access to the most appropriate technology. It seems to me that we are all singing from the same song sheet, and I am encouraged to hear that the Government are doing and will do all they can to support patients.

I appreciate that there have been distractions in the House today, but I think this debate has been a useful exercise; I am sure there will be others in future about how to continue with this important matter.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.
That this House has considered access to diabetes technologies.

3.23 pm
Sitting suspended.

Car Parking Charges: Stevenage

[Sir Edward Leigh in the Chair]

4 pm
Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): I beg to move, that this House has considered car parking charges and Stevenage town centre.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I am grateful that the Minister is present to respond to this debate, which is important both for my constituents in Stevenage and nationally. It is clear that excessive parking charges have been a major factor in the destruction of many high streets and town centres. They have forced local shoppers away from their much loved local areas towards out-of-town retail parks and supermarkets offering free parking.

The Minister will be aware of the negative impact a poor local authority can have on standards of living. Such an authority can have a chokehold on economic growth, as it holds small local businesses back. Sadly, Stevenage Borough Council is such an authority and has been holding Stevenage back for years. But we are breaking free from the council’s restrictive grip. Stevenage has become the economic engine of Hertfordshire, and Hertfordshire has taken a leading role in the economic recovery.

Stevenage was the first new town in the country. It was established by the Stevenage Development Corporation 70 years ago. It is home to some of the biggest companies in the world and employs nearly 10,000 scientists and technicians. We have more than 4,000 small businesses. Since 2010, unemployment has fallen from 5.8% to 1.6%. I have launched a variety of apprenticeship campaigns. Before 2010, just under 200 apprentices were starting work every year, which was not bad, but not great either. We now have more than 800 apprentices starting real jobs every year in Stevenage, and we are on course for 1,000. That is an absolutely fantastic achievement that is giving young people a real chance at a start in life.

People say, “It’s not rocket science,” but I actually have apprentice rocket scientists, and I have apprentice accountants, too—you name it, we have them. That is because local employers are working with me and the local community to make a difference. We have amazing transport links, as Stevenage is situated on the A1(M) and the east coast main line. In fact, we are only 19 minutes from King’s Cross on the fast trains.

Since 2010, I have secured from the Government more than £300 million of investment in infrastructure. Such massive investment has transformed public services in the area. More than £150 million of that investment has been spent on rebuilding the Lister hospital, which, although it has its challenges, is fast becoming a centre of clinical excellence. We have had a variety of other new NHS investments, including in GP surgeries. Some of our secondary schools have been rebuilt, while others are being modernised. Some primary schools have been rebuilt, and others have been expanded. In total we have 42 primary and nursery schools in Stevenage, and 40 of them are rated as good or outstanding, with the other two closing the gap quickly.
I have secured the money for the widening of the A1(M) between junctions 6 and 8, which was not easy at £8 million a mile. The technical works have started and the Government will deliver on a campaign that has been running for more than 30 years, because we understand how critical great infrastructure is to releasing economic growth.

Hertfordshire is one of the safest places in the country to live, and a third of Stevenage is parks and open spaces. With such great public services, transport connections, new homes being built and more than 400,000 square feet of office space being converted into residential flats because of permitted development rights—all within 15 minutes of the railway station—it is clear why so many people are moving to my constituency. In fact, many Londoners relocate to Stevenage, because they can get to work faster living in Hertfordshire than when they lived in London.

The Minister can see that Stevenage is taking off. We are breaking the grip of Stevenage Borough Council, which is trying to hold us back, and we are moving forward, but we have a huge problem right in the centre of our town. I love Stevenage, but its town centre is not fit for purpose. It needs regenerating and bringing forward into the 21st century, and it needs to reflect the growing aspirations of the people who live there, but do not shop there.

Stevenage Borough Council is addicted to car parking charges and has a monopoly on off-street car parks in the town centre and at the railway station. Let me put that into context: the council takes more than £3.5 million a year in car parking charges, and just over £4 million a year as its share of the council tax. It is a tiny lower tier local authority that provides services for 60,000 electors, making it the smallest local authority in Hertfordshire and one of the smallest in the country.

A third of the council’s budget effectively comes from car parking charges. In Stevenage, we have to pay almost as much in car parking charges as we do in council tax. That is totally unacceptable. I am sure the Minister will agree that councils should not have monopolies on car parks. Stevenage Borough Council should consider divesting itself of such assets, and it should certainly not use excessive parking charges to make up a shortfall in its budget.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and to be able to speak in this debate with the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), who is my neighbour in Leicestershire. The constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) has many parallels with mine. We have the MIRA business park and we have very low unemployment. I support what he is trying to do with this debate. On Friday, my private Member’s Bill should receive its Second Reading. It has the twin purpose of allowing councils to reduce parking charges without 21 days’ notice, and introducing a proviso that should councils want to increase parking charges, they will have to consult.

Stephen McPartland: That is an excellent intervention. I would be happy to support my hon. Friend’s private Member’s Bill.

Will the Minister clarify whether a local authority’s revenue surplus from off-street car parking may be used for general purposes, or is it restricted in the same manner as an on-street parking revenue surplus? Will he agree to review off-street parking revenues in areas such as Stevenage, where there is such a distorted market due to the council’s monopoly?

I know that the Department does not collect data on high parking charges centrally, and local authorities are responsible for setting local parking charges, taking account of local circumstances. Nevertheless, the Minister wants local authorities to adopt policies that support local town centres, and the Government have recently consulted on that idea, so will he start collecting the data and analysing the effect of high car parking charges on the viability of the economies of town centres such as Stevenage’s?

The Portas review clearly showed that car parking charges were the biggest barrier to the regeneration of our town centres. A couple of years ago, I launched a campaign to protect local people from Stevenage Borough Council’s car parking rip-off, and received the support of the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles). I believe that, by taking more than £3 million a year in car parking charges, Stevenage Borough Council is preventing the regeneration of Stevenage town centre.

My campaign calls on Stevenage Borough Council to apologise and move forward by introducing three hours’ free parking so that more local people can afford to shop locally. On-street parking is free for three hours in the Stevenage old town, and it is vibrant, with the Department recently commending it for coming in the top five high streets in the country.

There is free parking at the Roaring Meg retail park, where Debenhams is currently building a new store. The company has chosen to build there rather than the town centre. Although I welcome the fact that Debenhams is coming to Stevenage, I wish it would come to the town centre and act as an anchor store to kick-start the regeneration scheme. Local people are rightly concerned that many of the fashion shops in the town centre will relocate once the store opens.

I am campaigning for Stevenage Borough Council to match the three hours of free parking at Roaring Meg and stop killing our town centre by ripping off local people. I have spoken to developers, financiers, chief executives and chairmen of leading retailers, and they all tell me the exact same simple facts of regeneration. We have to increase customer footfall and the dwell time of shoppers before they will come, and the quickest way to do that is with an element of free parking. But Stevenage Borough Council cannot give up its addiction to the £3.5 million it receives in car parking charges, which blocks every regeneration attempt.

Thousands of local people have signed my campaign for three hours’ free parking, because we want to see the town centre regenerated. Stevenage Borough Council has launched several regeneration plans over the past 20 years, but they have all collapsed because of this addiction to car parking charges. To put it into context for the Minister, around 40% of my town centre is car parks.

The latest regeneration plan is painful to read. It is a billion-pound joke on local people. The ridiculous proposal involves moving the existing railway station, relied on
by 35,000 commuters a day, and closing Lytton Way, which the council says is redundant, but is actually the busiest dual carriageway in Stevenage, going right through the heart of the town centre. One of the only two custody suites in the whole of Hertfordshire is located off the dual carriageway. The plan also involves demolishing the Gordon Craig theatre and building 1,600 flats on the leisure park to wipe out our community facilities, including the first Cineworld cinema in the UK, which is an 18-screen cinema, with IMAX 3D and 4D. None of this would actually take place in the area that we refer to as the town centre; it would all be adjacent to it.

Stevenage Borough Council has made Hertfordshire local enterprise partnership mislead the Government in its application to the local growth fund and it has also misled the Homes and Communities Agency. I shall explain: Stevenage Borough Council created what it calls a public-private partnership, named Stevenage First, in June 2015 to launch its latest ridiculous regeneration proposals. I opposed the proposals as they are not deliverable and will create massive economic uncertainty in our town and intense disruption for the seven years that the railway station move would take.

Consequently, the only organisations that make up the board of Stevenage First are Hertfordshire County Council, Hertfordshire LEP, Stevenage Borough Council and Hertfordshire chamber of commerce. No private companies will touch Stevenage First, so it is not even a public-private partnership. However, Stevenage Borough Council writes to companies and organisations, including the HCA, asking them to join the board and stating that I am a board member, even though I am not and I actually opposed the creation of Stevenage First. Stevenage Borough Council also states that Network Rail is a board member. I have met the chief executive of Network Rail who explained that Network Rail is not a board member, confirming that in writing to me and the council.

The council and the LEP have stated in their application for Government funding to move our railway station and destroy Stevenage's economy that Legal & General has committed £250 million of private funding. I have met the chief executive of Legal & General and he has confirmed to me and also put in writing that Legal & General has made no such offer of funding and has no desire to see the train station moved.

This disastrous scheme has also seen the new turnback facility for the Hertford Loop line, which we need at Stevenage station, being delayed, and it is now under threat. I secured the agreement for this facility in the last Parliament, because we need it to benefit from the 2018 timetable. This ridiculous regeneration plan is putting them all at risk. If there is any money available for station investment, we should ensure that it is spent only on delivering a new platform five in time for the 2018 timetable.

It is time for radical action and for a new town centre in Stevenage, and the first step has to be introducing three hours of free parking, to help to increase customer footfall and dwell time. I have previously asked the Government to step in and take action. I asked them to establish a new Stevenage development corporation, to regenerate our town centre once and for all. If Stevenage Borough Council is frightened of being side-lined, then it should not have a development corporation. Let us have a development partnership, a super-business improvement district and a whole new model we can invent, which can act as a template for small town centre regeneration schemes. I do not mind—I will work with anyone to deliver for my town of Stevenage.

It is time for radical action and I urge the Minister to help me to create a modern, aspirational and 21st-century town centre in Stevenage. We have a real opportunity and we must take it.

4.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) on securing what has been an interesting and informative debate. It has been important to hear his views and how he wants the future of Stevenage to be shaped. It is also good to hear what a passionate and strong voice he is for his constituents.

This debate also gives me an important opportunity to set out the Government’s vision for the future of parking and town centres. Personally, I am passionate about town centres and the role that parking has to play. Town centres are important for our communities and local economies. However, the huge structural shift in retailing, with the rise of online shopping and out-of-town retailing, which my hon. Friend referred to, means that we are at a critical moment for our town centres. I am absolutely dedicated to giving local authorities, local enterprise partnerships and local communities access to the tools they need to transform their local areas and bring their town centres into the 21st century.

High streets and town centres have the potential to aid job creation and nurture small businesses, and parking plays a major role in providing the gateway to them. To date, the Government have taken significant action to support town centres and drive growth. Since 2010, we have helped to create more than 360 town teams and given over £18 million to a number of different towns. That is on top of a range of other steps, including supporting the phenomenally successful Great British High Street awards, which my hon. Friend alluded to, and the Love Your Local Market campaign. We have also introduced a package of important financial reliefs for small businesses, such as the £1.4 billion package of support for small businesses, which ended this year. In addition, we are bringing forward a significant £6.7 billion
package of business rate relief, which will start next April and which will benefit many businesses on our high streets and in our town centres.

The best retailers, the best high streets and the best town centres are already adapting to change. They are becoming places where people go for a day or night out, to do some shopping—but also to have something to eat or go to the cinema—and to enjoy their leisure time. Achieving such adaptation is not always easy in many places, as I am sure hon. Members will know. The Government are absolutely committed to helping communities to adapt, but we cannot and should not bail out or prop up ailing businesses. We believe that plans and ideas for town centres must come from local areas themselves. It is for councils, businesses and communities in local areas, with the input of excellent Members of Parliament, to decide what they want high streets and town centres to look like and what they want their vision for the future to be.

The Government must support local people, building skills and spreading best practice, while doing everything we can at a national level to support high street growth. The Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy)—who has taken on the role of Minister with responsibility for high streets—is taking forward a strand of work through the Future High Streets Forum. He is working with many people from the industry on how the Government can make it easier for local areas, facilitating them in bringing their high streets up to the standard expected in the 21st century, and how a high street or town centre can be restructured to reflect that.

Let me now turn to car parking. This Government have introduced reforms to make car parking easier, allowing high streets to adapt to the needs of their communities. The previous Conservative-led coalition Government introduced reforms to make it mandatory for local authorities to give 10-minute grace periods for all on-street parking bays and all off-street car parks. This gives town centre customers greater flexibility and allows them to complete their business in the town centre without having to worry about whether they are running over their parking time by a few minutes.

The Government have also been concerned about how councils have used CCTV camera cars, which were being used purely as revenue-generating tools. That is why, in addition to grace periods, we banned local authorities from sending car parking tickets through the post. That means that individuals have a degree of certainty, because if they get a ticket now, they know that it will be there when they get back to their car. They will not receive it through the post a number of weeks later, when they may not recall that particular journey, but can instead corroborate the information given by a parking ticket.

I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage that we are now looking at further reforms to the local government transparency code, which picks up on his point about how car parking revenue is used. Following the recent consultation, we intend to amend the code so that motorists can see at first hand a complete breakdown of the parking charges their councils impose and how much money the charges raise. Since 2014, councils have been required to be more transparent about how much money they raise through parking charges and penalties. Our proposals therefore go even further, enabling drivers to see far more information about the levels of fines imposed, how many were paid and how many were cancelled.

Let me take this opportunity to commend the private Member’s Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick). The Parking Places (Variation of Charges) Bill offers an excellent opportunity for a small but sensible reform to local authority car parks. The Bill would give the Government powers to scrap the bureaucratic requirements on local authorities if they wish to lower their car parking charges. That is extremely important, because it offers a real opportunity for councils to be at the forefront, supporting their high streets. For example, they can respond to the opportunity of a town centre festival or event by quickly and flexibly reducing car parking charges. Where areas can do that for specific events, it makes a huge difference. It often attracts a lot of people into the town centre who may live in the area but who do not necessarily visit that town. They can get a feel for the town centre, and often it reminds them what is there and what they can do while they visit. That is extremely important. It would certainly make it easier for Stevenage Borough Council to implement the policy that my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage sensibly advocates.

The Bill would also provide for a consultation requirement if councils wished to increase the charges. Councils often get to the budget-setting process in the year and decide that they want to fill a hole in the revenue budget. Car parking charges are often seen as an easy fix. It is important for councils to have to engage with their local populations and consult to ensure that they are doing the right thing in taking that approach. Charging levels are often a significant concern to town centre businesses, and we think it is fit and proper that councils listen to those businesses before they set their charges. The Bill is on Second Reading on Friday, and I look forward to colleagues in the House supporting it wholeheartedly.

Turning to other matters, I note that my hon. Friend has been an active supporter and campaigner for three hours of free parking in Stevenage. I take this opportunity to say that I fully support his campaign. Many areas across the country have taken that approach, and it has made a significant and positive difference to the number of people coming into those areas. For example, North Lincolnshire Council has taken the commendable step of offering free parking to visitors to Brigg, Ashby and Scunthorpe to encourage more use of those town centres. The scheme offers one free ticket a day for each vehicle per visit, per site. In Northumberland, the council offers a disk-based scheme. It is good to see my hon. Friend from Northumberland, the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan). She will know that that scheme allows motorists to park at a range of towns across Northumberland.

I encourage other councils to take up that good practice. Where councils do not think about parking charges, it has negative consequences. In my constituency, Labour-controlled Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council regretfully took the step of increasing car parking charges in April, and it has already found that that has reduced the car park income to the council by £200,000. That shows what a negative approach that is and the damaging effect that putting up car parking charges can have on a town centre.
In conclusion, the Government are committed to helping our high streets to adapt to the changing needs of communities and making them fit for the 21st century, but we need to be clear that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Every town is different, but parking has a key role to play in encouraging people to use our town centres. Everyone needs to play their part, with local economic partnerships, local authorities, businesses, communities and local Members of Parliament coming together. It was good to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage make that wide offer to his local area—to say, “Let’s work together to make things happen in Stevenage.” That is absolutely right. Local areas must come together to work on behalf of local businesses, bring local people into our town centres and deliver a package that they can be proud of. As we are seeing, many people are indeed proud of their town centres, because across the country more than 400,000 people have voted for their favourite high street in our Great British high street competition.

Question put and agreed to.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered transport in the North East.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I am grateful for the opportunity to hold this debate on such an important issue for many of my constituents. This is by no means the first time that I have spoken in this House about transport in the north-east, and I start by reiterating what I said on those occasions about the region’s huge economic potential. Nissan’s recent decision to build two new models at its Sunderland plant was a resounding vote of confidence in the workforce and in the north-east economy and a demonstration of what can be achieved when Government and business work together to maximise what the region has to offer.

As the only English region consistently to maintain a balance of trade surplus over the past decade, the north-east is clearly doing something right in developing export opportunities by land, air and sea. One of the most effective ways that Government can help to support those efforts and drive economic growth is through greater investment in transport infrastructure. After all, a 2014 research paper commissioned by the Department for Transport described transport as an “essential input to income generation” that has “positive impacts on a wide range of economic variables including city size and employment.”

Creating better transport connections between the north’s economic centres is also meant to be one of the central planks of the Government’s so-called northern powerhouse scheme. Despite the soaring rhetoric of the northern powerhouse initiative, the level of public spending allocated to the north-east remains very low compared with almost every other region in the country. Government figures show that expenditure has declined by almost 20% over the decade, with the result that the north-east accounted for only 2.8% of overall UK spend on transport last year.

Although other northern regions have also suffered from a decline in central funding in recent years, the amount spent on transport in the north-east last year was by far the lowest of the English regions, and second only to Northern Ireland across the UK. The difference between the north-east and London is especially stark. At £300 a head of population, expenditure in the north-east remains very low compared with almost every other region in the country. Government figures show that expenditure has declined by almost 20% over the decade, with the result that the north-east accounted for only 2.8% of overall UK spend on transport last year.

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I know she is a passionate champion of bus services. Does she realise that bus passenger numbers have fallen by 57.7% in the
Bridget Phillipson: I feel that deregulation has been an unmitigated disaster for regions such as the north-east, where we have had a knock-on effect on fares, falling bus patronage and local communities often entirely cut off from bus services. I know that my hon. Friend faces similar problems in his community in Hartlepool to those I face in mine.

On that point, the people in my constituency are entirely dependent on bus services. There is no other option. It is therefore imperative that the comparatively small amount of money allocated to the north-east for transport is spent on ensuring that local public transport services meet the needs of local people and businesses. Unfortunately, expenditure on local public transport in the north-east has dropped by more than 45% over the last five years, which is by far the biggest decrease in spending on any mode of transport in the region.

I want to take the opportunity to again raise with the Minister my long-standing concerns about the state of north-east local bus services. Over the past six years, thousands of local people have contacted me to express their deep dissatisfaction about the cost of fares and the level of service being provided by private bus companies. That is why I vocally supported efforts by Nexus and the North East combined authority to use existing legislation to re-regulate local bus services, through the introduction of a London-style quality contract scheme in Tyne and Wear. It would have integrated fares and routes and ensured that taxpayer subsidies were used to improve services instead of to increase operating profits. I was therefore sorely disappointed with the quality contract scheme board decision a year ago to reject the proposals, even though it acknowledged that the scheme would offer local people a transport system unrivalled outside London. I still find it incredible that the board believed operators should be compensated for the future loss of potential profits. The people of the north-east should not have to compensate bus operators for what is taken for granted in London.

One year on, north-east passengers are no closer to getting the bus service they deserve. Nexus was clear during the QCS process that if the scheme was not implemented, bus cuts were inevitable, fares would increase and ridership would go down. That scenario is playing out. Annual bus statistics show that bus patronage has decreased by 2.7% again in Tyne and Wear and given the frequency with which operators chop and change services and raise fares, that is hardly a surprise. While north-east bus passengers continue to suffer from the absence of a fully integrated network, bus operators in the region continue to make large profits. In fact, in some cases the profits made by commercial bus operators are even being used to prop up loss-making rail franchises, as David Brown, chief executive officer of the Go-Ahead Group recently admitted. We cannot go on like this.

The QCS board decision last November may have blocked efforts to introduce franchising schemes under existing legislation, but there was much hope that the Bus Services Bill would give us the power to implement the change we so desperately need. Unfortunately, despite sensible amendments to the Bill in the House of Lords on bus franchising schemes, the Government seem determined to ensure those powers will only be available automatically to mayoral combined authorities. It seems as if the region will once again be denied the opportunity to improve services for passengers. The current deregulated system has not only failed to prevent a decline in bus patronage—it has exacerbated it. I ask the Minister to think carefully on the amendments and to give the north-east the powers it needs to implement the urgent, radical change needed to arrest and reverse that decline.

Buses are of course not the only means by which people travel across the north-east, although they are the only mode of public transport for many of my constituents, which is one of the main reasons for the poor connectivity between semi-urban and rural constituencies such as mine and the urban centres they surround. If the Government really want to create better transport links between economic centres in the north, they must provide Nexus with the long-term funding necessary for essential infrastructure works to refresh and expand the metro. With 60 stations, around 40 million passenger trips per year and trains running up to 19 hours a day, the metro has been serving the needs of north-east residents for more than 40 years.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): I am very interested in that point about how busy the metro is. Is my hon. Friend aware that Network Rail maintains the principal part of the rail tracks that the metro runs on, as well as the rest of the rail tracks in the north-east? Does she agree that we should press the Minister to assure us that Network Rail will not be privatised again, as has been widely reported in the national newspapers? It was brought into public hands because of a poor safety record in the private sector. We need an assurance on that today, bearing in mind how dependent we are in the north-east on the railways and the metro.

Bridget Phillipson: I am sure the Minister will want to respond to that point; I am not sure that my hon. Friend will get that assurance, but he has made his point clearly.

The metro, a system that was once the envy of the country, is now in need of major renewal and investment. The metro reinvigoration programme, published by Nexus in July this year, provided a clear strategy for the creation of a joined-up rail and metro network that will make use of the disused former passenger and freight routes that criss-cross the north east, such as the Leamside line. Those plans would provide people in my constituency, as well as those living in Washington, Seaham, west Newcastle, Gateshead, Team valley and elsewhere, with the means to travel much more easily and efficiently across the region.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for giving way. Does she agree that the £500 million required to replace the current metro fleet, which would stop the breakdowns and the unreliability that compounds the problem, is absolutely essential for sustaining where we are at the moment, never mind for moving forward to the phase 3 that she is talking about, and that the Government should look seriously at that?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Minister should look carefully at the business case being put forward and make sure it is given full and proper consideration.
The benefits for economic regeneration arising from the expansion and extension of the metro are obvious. One example would be connecting Sunderland city centre to Doxford park via the former Hetton colliery railway. That would provide access to Doxford international business park, which is currently very poorly served by local bus services. Extending metro-style services to Sunderland’s biggest business park can only help attract new businesses, investors and skilled staff to the constituency and the wider region.

It is no secret that there have been major issues around the metro’s reliability and performance in recent months. If passengers cannot rely on the metro to get them to where they need to be on time, they will stop using it—it is as simple as that. I commend the progress that Nexus has made in carrying out essential renewals over the past six years in the face of budget cuts, but one of the main reasons many people are experiencing regular delays and cancellations on the metro is the deteriorating state of its rolling stock, much of which dates back to the 1970s and has long since passed the end of its design life. That is why I support proposals by Nexus to introduce a new fleet in 2021, which would also make the expansion of metro services much more likely.

I urge the Minister and the Department to make a decision about Government investment for that project as soon as possible so that Nexus can meet the target. The completion of the metro reinvigoration programme is the least that people across the north-east without access to integrated transport links deserve. Will the Minister commit to considering carefully the strong cost-benefit ratio of those proposals and the major economic benefits for the region that they will bring? Can he give an indication as to when we can expect a Government decision? I urge him to make it an early one.

Greater investment in local public transport in the north-east should not come at the cost of much-needed regional and local road improvement projects. The new Wear crossing, which is part of Sunderland City Council’s strategic plan to create a continuous dual carriageway between the port of Sunderland, the city centre and the A19, will not only help reduce congestion but bring sustained economic regeneration and transport benefits to the city and the wider region. However, the cancellation of the central route scheme in 2011 in my constituency remains a source of deep disappointment. There are major house building projects under way, but we lack the necessary transport infrastructure. Large numbers of vehicles on local roads are causing major congestion and problems for residents, as well as pushing up the logistical costs of doing business.

The purpose of this debate is not to ask for special treatment for our region. All we ask for is a fair funding deal that reflects the unique needs of the north-east and addresses the inequality in Whitehall’s transport spending. Although the transport authority and local councils are doing their best in difficult circumstances, they clearly need more financial help and support from central Government. Big ticket projects such as HS2 demonstrate that significant money is available.

I hope that the Minister will reflect carefully upon the issues that I have addressed and make the case for greater investment in the north-east to the Secretary of State. Warm words and platitudes will not cut it any longer. If the Government are as serious about rebalancing the UK economy away from London as the Chancellor claimed in today’s autumn statement, Ministers need to act now.

4.39 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con):

I thank the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) for giving me the opportunity to talk about a different aspect of transport investment in the north-east—that of mostly rural Northumberland.

I thank the Minister for the work that his exceptional team from Highways England is doing. It is rolling out £300 million-worth of investment in the first stages of dualling the remaining part of the A1, which has been untouched by Governments of every colour for many decades. It is very exciting work. I was with the team on Saturday to see the plans for the detailed work that is going on in that rural territory—the farms there have not had a change to their transportation network for so long. I commend the Minister and the team, which is putting a huge amount of work into local communication so it understands how best to create a modern, 21st-century dualled road through Northumberland. It will ensure that livestock can cross that bigger, busier road and that it does not cut through the middle of farms inappropriately. It is exciting to see that activity going on. Doom-mongers in my constituency still say to me, “It’ll never happen in my lifetime,” so it is exciting to be able to direct them to the maps and show them the farms that will see that investment.

We are doing only about a third of what remains of the last stretch of the A1, which, as its name suggests, should be the first road all the way through to Scotland. As the economic case becomes clearer, we will continue to press for dualling to ensure that people are able to drive from London to Edinburgh, through the constituency of the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr), on a modern, dualled and, in large part, four-lane motorway—although not in Northumberland.

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South talked about having an integrated transport system. It is important to understand that we all have to have cars in rural Northumberland because the bus networks are almost invisible, except for those between one or two of the more major towns. That is a real challenge for families, which often need two cars if two members of the family work in different parts of the county or if one commutes to Newcastle or up to Edinburgh.

We want investment in the train network to continue to grow. The train networks in the north-east are pretty much as good as they get. I think all of us who use them weekly are reassured that we get to and from Newcastle and Berwick, and down to London, in a timely fashion, but it is difficult for my constituents. We are trying to develop a better conversation with the Department for Transport about how we can extend the platform at Belford railway station—it is in the middle of my constituency, which is nearly 70 miles long—so trains can stop there. That would open up opportunities for house building in that part of my constituency and help communities to grow. It would also ensure that more
people get on to trains and are not stuck in the commuting networks, clogging up the city centres, which Opposition Members are here to stand up for and defend.

Those are the points that I want to put into the mix. I thank the hon. Lady for giving me the opportunity to talk about the Northumbrian model, which is different from the city models. After so many decades, the Department for Transport must continue to remember that rural Northumberland is a key development opportunity. We have an enterprise zone in Berwick and a growing aeronautical sector in Amble, and we want to ensure that the transport links work so we can continue to grow and invest for the future.

4.43 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I apologise for arriving after the start of the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson).

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Don’t worry. We started early.

Chi Onwurah: Thank you, Sir Edward.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on a subject that is so important to all our constituencies. Transport in the north-east is a critical part of our infrastructure. My time is short, so I want to make four points about roads, rail, buses and industrial strategy.

The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) said that everyone has to have a car in rural Northumberland, but I know constituents of hers who do not have one. The bottom line of a transport strategy should be to have a public transport system that enables ordinary working people to go to work, universities and schools without having a car. The fact that a Member of Parliament who represents Northumberland believes that her constituents have to have a car is significant. It is true that the bus services in Northumberland are often very poor—I have experienced them—but I hope the Minister will commit to delivering transport infrastructure in the north-east that enables my constituents to go about their normal work and leisure business without having a car.

I listened closely to today’s autumn statement, and I did not hear the looked-for and somewhat trailed investment in transport infrastructure. My understanding is that the dualling of the A69 has been replaced by dualling of the A66. If that proves to be the case, I would like the Minister will commit to delivering transport links work so we can continue to grow and invest for the future.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): My hon. Friend set out what she will speak about, but airport passenger duty is also important to the economics of the north-east. Our airports play an equally valid and massive role in helping our economy. We heard nothing today about what will happen with regard to Scotland, but it will be detrimental to our north-east airport if the Scottish Government reduce APD.

Chi Onwurah: Given the interest in and strategic importance of transport, I will focus on the issues I set out, but my hon. Friend makes a critically important point. Newcastle airport is a vital part of our economic infrastructure. Naturally, it competes with airports in Scotland. The lack of a decision today—I am not sure whether it has been kicked into the long grass or into orbit—is detrimental to economic certainty at a time of great uncertainty for many other aspects of our economic future.

Let me talk briefly about rail and the metro. I was nine or 10 when the metro came into being. It was a fantastic, highly advanced network that was ahead of its time—I think it was the first network in Europe or the world to be accessible to disabled people—but 40 years later we are using exactly the same rolling stock. Is that believable? Hitachi recently told me that it can deliver trains that would provide what we have been talking about—an extended light rail and metro across a greater part of Tyne and Wear and the north-east. I hope the Minister will commit to that investment, because we need transport infrastructure and a metro without delays to support the kind of economy we want.

Most of Newcastle Central’s transport is about buses. We have a number of metro stops, but for most of the west of my constituency and parts of the north it is about buses. The failure of bus deregulation in Tyne and Wear has been so patently obvious for so many decades that it beggars belief that we are still debating it today. Outside my constituency office near Central station in Newcastle two No. 1 buses leave in totally different directions, one going north, one south—they both have the same number, because obviously that puts them at the head of some queue. It is totally incomprehensible to those who have lived in the city for many years, never mind visitors.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South discussed, we should not still be debating the lack of integrated bus transport in 2016, when we have seen the success of, for example, the Oyster card and the integrated system in London. I really cannot believe that the Minister will stand up to say that Tyne and Wear and my constituents do not deserve some control over a bus system that is so important to them simply because of the lack of a mayor.

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, for making such an important point, which I will come on to properly later. I agree wholeheartedly with the implication of his comments. The economic contribution of effective transport infrastructure for the north-east is not recognised in the same way as it is recognised in London and other areas of the south. That absolutely has to change if we are to have any hope of rebalancing our economy and making it more resilient and distributive across the country.
and Sunderland South said, transport is important because it is part of our economic infrastructure and the north-east having critical mass.

Julie Elliott: On economic infrastructure, does my hon. Friend agree that given the recent enormous investment in Newcastle Central station, investment in Sunderland station—which is just as large a city—needs to be addressed by Network Rail? The station does not even have a toilet for public use, never mind the rest of the upgrading. Influence from the Government needs to be exerted, because the local authorities and Nexus for the combined authority have put aside a significant amount of money for their part in any investment, but it is up to Network Rail, which is simply not doing anything at the moment. Urgent investment is needed to upgrade the facilities for what is a very large city.

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, which gives me the opportunity to support investment in Sunderland’s infrastructure—[Interruption.] I know I am going into controversial territory, but I shall plough ahead regardless. As she mentioned, investment has gone into Newcastle Central station and, although the work was painful and disruptive, we now have a fantastic gateway to the city, as well as much improved facilities. Sunderland was equally part of the great industrial revolution and the investment in and birth of the railways. For its history, as well as for its present and future economy, it merits the facilities of a great industrial and manufacturing city.

All this is so important because, as a region, we need critical mass if we are to compete effectively nationally and internationally. We need people to be able to travel to work in less time, so that we can benefit across the region from skills in Sunderland, Newcastle or Durham. We are a distributed region, with a relatively low population by comparison with other regions around the country, so an integrated and effective transport system is even more necessary for us. The talents of everyone and all our businesses and working people could then be shared throughout the region. If the Minister cannot commit to the sort of investment that we have outlined, then the whole—of a northern powerhouse spreading beyond Manchester, of rebalancing the economy to support the regions and of delivering some type of certainty post-Brexit to enable business investment in our region—will be nothing against the lack of any action.

4.54 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) on securing the debate.

My constituency, like that of the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Tivelliyan), is rural, although it is not quite as large as hers. She made an interesting point, because in parts of my constituency, too, without access to a car people cannot even get to the public transport system. Many of my constituents travel out of North Durham—as hers do from her constituency—to work in Teesside, Tyneside or Wearside. The important thing, therefore, is to have good transport links to those jobs that exist along the A1 corridor and in areas in the north-east.

Is the answer a metro for my constituency? No, it is not. My hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South talked about quality contracts, but she knows that I disagree with her about that. A quality contract would have done nothing for North Durham or, I hasten to add, for the constituency of the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, because the Tyne and Wear councils would have got control over buses in my constituency. What saddens me a little is that the councils of the north-east, having lost that case—anyone who looked at the finances knew it was going to be lost, right from the beginning—seemed then to park the issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) spoke about Oyster cards and smart ticketing. It is vital that the combined authority and the councils sit down with the bus operators to consider how to introduce things such as shared ticketing and Oyster-style arrangements. Bus companies tell me that they are willing to speak about the situation but that they are not getting a great deal of traction from councils.

We will do the travelling public of the north-east a great disservice if we simply wait for the national Government to come up with something or think that some future regulation will be the answer. The combined purchasing power of north-east councils is strong, given what they put into security services, for example. Leadership is needed, rather than thinking that in future we will somehow get a quality contract mark 2, as though that were the only game in town. I do not think it is.

There are opportunities to make a real difference, such as being able to change tickets between different operators, a smart-ticketing process like an Oyster card, or some agreement on children and young people’s fares, which I know that the bus companies are prepared to look at. Is that partly down to the Government? Yes, but some things are in our hands, and combined authorities and council leaders could act. I press them to start negotiations now to see what can be done, at least in the short term.

We have no large employers in my constituency, which is a former coal-mining area, and many people move out to work around the region. The other main network for my constituents, apart from the buses, is the railway and Chester-le-Street station. It is 10 minutes from that station to Central station in Newcastle. However, trying to get any investment, not only in upgrading the station but by ensuring that the operators stop more regularly and at times when people actually want to travel, is very difficult.

That could be dealt with straightaway by ensuring more stopping services and hourly services not only during the day—that is what we have at times; at other times they are half hourly—but at peak times, to ensure that we have regular stopping services at Chester-le-Street. That would avoid many people having to use their cars to travel into Tyneside, as they do at the moment.

Increasingly, my constituents complain about the poor service that they get from the operators, whether that involves trains being late, trains not turning up or, when they do turn up, trains being frequently very
overcrowded. People sometimes do not even have the opportunity to stand for 10 minutes, because there is not enough room for them to get on at the station in Chester-le-Street in order to go to Newcastle Central.

I ask the Minister to look at the situation. The formidable Alex Nelson, the stationmaster at Chester-le-Street, always argues very strongly when it comes to refusing3 to let the trains stop, but there seems to be a blind spot on the part of the operators and the people who draw up the timetables. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central talked about extending the metro, but I am sorry; I do not think that is the answer, certainly in parts of my constituency and in Berwick and other places. We need investment in rail—whether it be the Blyth-to-Tyneside route, the Leamside line or others—to increase capacity on the east coast main line, but I fear that over the next 20 to 30 years, most of the money will be sucked into the vanity project that is High Speed 2 and High Speed 3.

Some people in the region, including the chamber of commerce, try to lecture us about how important that project is to the north-east, but I do not think it is. It will be a drain on investment—investment that could go into rail projects in the north-east. It is not even a matter of jam tomorrow; it is a matter of the ingredients and possibly the recipe for creating jam. It will have a detrimental effect on some of the small changes that could be made to the north-east rail network that would make a huge difference to connectivity. The one thing that always gets me is how long it takes to travel from Tyneside to Teesside on a track that with some investment could be radically improved. I do not see that happening in the next few years, because, like I say, most of the rail investment in this country will be sucked into HS2 and HS3, which will not benefit my constituents or many other north-east constituents.

We need to put forward doable plans, but we should not think that everything is in the hands of central Government. On buses, there are certainly things that could be done now. The answer to getting people in the north-east out of their cars and on to public transport is not necessarily just to upgrade more roads. The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed has campaigned for many years for the dualling of the A1, but that will not directly improve connectivity in the north-east or the region’s economy. Although that would be a good feather in her cap, it is certainly not a priority when it comes to the sea change in connectivity that we need to ensure happens in what, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central said, is quite a small region. People in the north-east increasingly do not live near their jobs but have to travel around the region, and it is difficult for people without direct access to public transport to get to those jobs.

Mr Jones: I hear what my hon. Friend says, but the quality contract was put up as the only game in town for the north-east bus network. I am sorry, but it never was. Proper regulation is important, but the way that it was done meant that it never stacked up financially. It would have meant that my constituency was more poorly served; for example, Durham taxpayers would have subsidised the Tyne and Wear metro system.

I hear what my hon. Friend says about taxis. I have scars on my back from my time in charge of taxi licensing at Newcastle City Council. May I give him some advice? If the political will is there, the regulation is there to be used; it is a matter of how it is used locally. I accept that that is not easy, because taxi drivers are a vocal section of the local electorate, but we made some major changes when I was in charge of taxi licensing in Newcastle. The regulations are there; it is a matter of how they are used.

Was there anything for the north-east in today’s autumn statement? No, there was not. There is a reason for that: the only bits of the north-east that were ever going to get anything under this Government or the previous Government were those with Conservative Members of Parliament. It is not surprising, for example, that money has gone into the A66 and the A1. Those Governments have made pork barrel politics a new art form. It is sad that people in the north-east are being penalised by the Government and denied any major structural investment just because they do not vote Conservative.

5.5 pm

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): On that bombshell—be careful not to encourage them to do so. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir Edward. You have obviously been a naughty boy; you have been sent here many times recently, by the looks of it. [Interruption.] We can see the connotations the Tories take from the phrase “naughty boy”—I don’t know.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) on securing this debate and her colleagues from the north-east on turning up in numbers to support her. They are clearly all concerned and passionate about the issue, and she gave an excellent introduction, which is so important in Westminster Hall debates. Her plea for the north-east to be given the powers that it requires to meet the challenges that she articulated so well cannot have failed to be heard.

The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) also did well. I see that she now has a friend from the other side of the country, the hon. Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson), so she does not feel quite so isolated. She tried hard and succeeded in making a contribution that was positive about what has been done and at the same time pleaded for much more. I can tell hon. Members that she clearly backs the dualling of the A1, because she gave me a sticker and encouraged me to put it on my car.
The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) makes an excellent contribution to any debate, although I will now be concerned every time I see a No. 1 bus—is it the correct one? Going by his detailed contribution, the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) is quite clearly an expert on buses. He sparked some interesting thought processes about HS2, and I will deal briefly with the challenge of what exactly to spend our money on.

I am struck that the imbalances between Scotland and England that my party is somewhat guilty of always complaining about also apply very much to the regions of England. Those imbalances, and in particular the London effect, make me question why new infrastructure such as HS2 needed to start in London and could not have started in—

Tom Blenkinsop: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Calum Kerr: Happily, yes.

Tom Blenkinsop: As a result of the Chancellor’s announcement today, Scotland will apparently receive an extra £800 million. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that authorities in the north-east should be included in the Barnett formula and get an equivalent sum, which we could use for transport funding?

Calum Kerr: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. I have not given any thought to how money should be allocated. I do not like the phraseology that he uses, but he certainly puts forward an interesting idea. How do we rebalance the economy across England and across the UK? Devolution of power, including spending power, is an important aspect that needs to be considered. As I was saying, if HS2 is indeed so important, why could it not have started in the north of the country? Why could it not be part of redressing the balance between north and south instead of being done in a kind of hub-and-spoke way that reinforces the idea that it is all about London?

I was told that this room would be full of northerners. I do not know whether this makes any difference, but they are all southerners to me. That probably feels like an insult; I assure them that I do not intend it as one. Let me make a couple of points. First, why am I here to sum up, apart from the fact that the third party is asked to sum up in all debates? The reason is, despite being the spokesperson on the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and on digital, I am from across the border. Interesting interventions were made about how we in the south of Scotland work with the north of England. The more we can collaborate and work together, have a collective voice and look at ways in which we can become more connected, the more we can collectively redress the pull of the south to which I referred.

I will touch on an example that may appeal to the hon. Member for North Durham, which is to reference the Borders railway service from Galashiels to Hawick and through to Newcastle and Carlisle, which would create an extra link. That is the kind of project that we should be looking at. That is not necessarily to the exclusion of high-speed rail, but I know which project I would pick if I had to pick between the two. If the Minister could give me any kind of response on that, I would be grateful.

My final point is on pathways. The east coast main line remains an important line for us. The Scottish Government are committed to new stations at East Linton and Reston and a new service with new trains. My concern is that sometimes again we fixate on services to London—Edinburgh to London—which exclude local services, and that means that main lines become less viable. At the moment we are looking at a two-hour service, and once things are made irregular their viability and usefulness diminishes. The Government have a key role to play too in looking at all pathways and the balance between national services serving major cities and local services. I close by congratulating the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South again on securing the debate.

5.14 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) on securing the debate on an important subject for her and her constituents. We have had many good contributions from my hon. Friends. With substantial speeches from the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) and for North Durham (Mr Jones) and a good speech from the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan). We had good interventions within six months. I give that as an example not necessarily of an alternative to high-speed rail but of the kind of projects we should consider.

Mr Kevan Jones: That is a good example of the sort of project that could deliver for the north-east, not to compete with high-speed rail but to bring rail back to communities in rural Northumberland and parts of County Durham, which would be beneficial to local people.

Calum Kerr: I 100% agree. With the fixation on high-speed rail, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, the danger is that that sucks up too much money and prevents other projects that could deliver greater economic benefit while attacking some of the geographic challenges that hon. Members have mentioned. The Chancellor in the Autumn statement today was keen not to mention too many individual projects. Bizarrely, he decided to talk about one country house refurbishment, although it seemed to me that that was more about scoring a narrow political point against the Labour party than anything else, but such is life.

I appreciate that I am going somewhat off-piste, so if the Minister wishes to bat this back to me I will understand, but is there any mention in the Autumn statement or elsewhere on what the Government’s position is on extending the Borders railway through to the constituency of the hon. Member for Carlisle? The Scottish Government have a multi-modal study looking at transport across the Scottish borders and a key ingredient in that is extending the Borders railway service from Galashiels to Hawick and through to Newcastle and Carlisle, which would create an extra link. That is the kind of project that we should be looking at. That is not necessarily to the exclusion of high-speed rail, but I know which project I would pick if I had to pick between the two. If the Minister could give me any kind of response on that, I would be grateful.

My final point is on pathways. The east coast main line remains an important line for us. The Scottish Government are committed to new stations at East Linton and Reston and a new service with new trains. My concern is that sometimes again we fixate on services to London—Edinburgh to London—which exclude local services, and that means that main lines become less viable. At the moment we are looking at a two-hour service, and once things are made irregular their viability and usefulness diminishes. The Government have a key role to play too in looking at all pathways and the balance between national services serving major cities and local services. I close by congratulating the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South again on securing the debate.
from my hon. Friends the Members for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn), for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) and for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop). Given the lack of time, I will try to be as brief as possible.

As others have pointed out, transport in the north-east has suffered from consistent underfunding from the Government. Figures from the Department for Transport show that since 2010 the north-east has received the lowest level of public spending on transport compared with any other region in England. As a consequence of that underfunding, bus patronage in the north-east has declined faster since 1986 than in any other region. It has fallen by more than a half, and is now about 50% lower than before deregulation, declining from 426 million bus passenger journeys in 1985 to just 180 million last year. That deregulation, far from increasing competition and improving services for consumers as the Conservative Government at the time promised, has created damaging bus market monopolies. In fact, recent statistics published by the Department show that in Tyne and Wear just two operators—Stagecoach and Go North East—accounted for 87% of market share. Arriva had a market share of more than 97% in Darlington and more than 91% in Redcar and Cleveland, while Stagecoach has 91% in Hartlepool. Monopolies mean that passengers lack alternatives and have to put up with fares rising faster than wages, while we also see allegedly unprofitable routes consistently being axed.

It does not have to be like that. While in Government, Labour introduced legislation to enable local authorities to re-regulate the bus market in their areas. The Transport Act 2000 introduced quality contract schemes and in 2008 there was an attempt to simplify that process, although it is fair to say that we all now recognise that that legislation was overcomplicated.

As we have heard, the North East combined authority came closest to implementing a quality contract scheme, but that fell at the last hurdle just over a year ago. One of my first trips as a member of the shadow Transport team was to Newcastle to meet key members of that team. I pay tribute in particular to Tobyn Hughes, the managing director of Nexus, and the team who tried so hard, and I remember their account of why they did. They gave an account of a local travel system that had been integrated, as hon. Members have explained, and that was one of the most effective public transport systems in the country—it is still fondly remembered—with the metro opening in 1980, providing a seamless integrated link, and one ticket taking people across the city on bus, metro or ferry. Of course, back then we had passengers and citizens, not customers and commodities.

Despite that, the metro is still the busiest light-rail system outside London and the backbone of the transport system, with the public authority specifying fares and frequencies, as we would like to see for buses. However, as we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central, it certainly needs overhauling. We will support Nexus in that process. It is extraordinary that if a passenger crosses the river and boards a bus, they now need to buy another ticket. Unsurprisingly, the result of all that fragmentation is that despite support from the local authorities—dipping into reserves to try to help—bus patronage is still falling, and the familiar cycle of declining services and cuts to services locks in future decline. The system simply is not working.

That is why we strongly supported Tobyn and his team in their Herculean effort, and we were deeply disappointed by the rejection of their proposal by the board. In fact, we were astonished by the board’s implication that bus operators ought to be compensated by local authorities for financial losses they might incur. We were more than astonished by some of the comments from some of the bus companies.

We hope that the situation is calmer now, and it was a welcome surprise when the Government followed Labour’s lead, recognised the shortcomings of the current arrangements and introduced the Bus Services Bill, which has its Third Reading in the other place today. The Opposition want a constructive relationship with all bus operators, large and small. However, we worry that there is a danger that the Bill will have insufficient impact in the north-east because of the linkage to the demand for a combined authority and a mayor. Of course, discussions are going on in that part of the world, but it appears that with a devolution deal “off the table”—in the Government’s words—local people are to be denied the services they should be entitled to. We worry about the future of bus services, but there is a solution and we hope that the Minister will give some thought to making sure that it is available to those people.

I will turn briefly to roads and finally to rail, where we also feel the Government are also in danger of breaking their commitments. We recognise how important the “laddering” is—the road connectivity between the parallel north-south highways of the A1 and A19—by way of improvements to the east-west A66, and of course the A19 Tees viaduct is currently a key constraint on the strategic road network.

On rail, the Minister said last week that improving northern transport infrastructure is vital to the success of what the Government have termed the northern powerhouse, and that the Government are committing £13 billion to transport improvements in this Parliament. However, it was promised in 2012 that projects that would benefit the north-east would be delivered between 2014 and 2019, such as maximising the value of the north trans-Pennine electrification through capacity enhancement at Huddersfield station. Much of that has now been delayed until after 2020. There were also hopes for improvements to transform Sunderland, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central, and to improve capacity at Newcastle.

To conclude, the recent history of transport in the north-east has been less than inspiring. It is a story of hard-pressed local authorities doing their best for their communities, but in our view they are too often thwarted by rules imposed upon them from the outside. I very much hope that the Minister will confirm today that the Government will give the North East combined authority the power needed to plan its own bus network and regulate bus services, the support needed to continue to improve transport for everyday passengers and the freedom to unleash the full potential of the north-east of the country.

5.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): May I congratulate the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson)
on securing the debate? It has been quite clear from the remarks by hon. Members across the House just how important transport infrastructure and investment is to them and to all their constituents. I entirely buy the case that has been made that it supports growth and business and helps people to get to work, to shops and to services.

We do not have too long left in the debate, so I will scamper through as much as I can, and I will potentially have to follow some of it up afterwards.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend has a brilliant sense of irony. Yes, I will.

John Stevenson: I appreciate the Minister giving way. I apologise for my late arrival, Sir Edward, which was in part due to the machinations of the Scottish Affairs Committee.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Keep it to the north-east, please.

John Stevenson: I appreciate that the debate is very much about the north-east and the transport there, but connectivity between regions and cities is vital. We have heard good news about the A66. Will there be good news about the A69?

Andrew Jones: That was very good timing, from a comedy perspective. I will talk about roads if I get a moment a little bit later.

We are very keen to continue the work on rebalancing the economy. The northern powerhouse is a significant part of Government thinking and has driven much investment over the past few years. We have created Transport for the North, which is a key part of the concept of the northern powerhouse—it is about taking control of one’s destiny. Transport for the North is driving forward transport plans and will support economic growth across the whole of the north. There will be a £13 billion set of investments in Yorkshire and the Humber, the north-west and the north-east during the course of this Parliament alone.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does Transport for the North’s remit actually go any further than the corridor that Minister referred to? I have certainly not seen a great deal of impact or any ideas for the rest of the north, which, if the Minister looks at a map, goes a bit further north than Leeds.

Andrew Jones: Transport for the North’s remit is the north: it is north-east, Yorkshire and the Humber and the north-west. That point needs to be made to it and I will happily make it.

Let me get back to the world of buses. I, too, am a passionate supporter of buses. I know that Nexus and the North East combined authority have been working hard to improve local transport in the north-east, and I applaud their work. The Pop card has been a great success and allows for a seamless, inter-modal shift between bus services, the metro and the Shields ferry. However, we have to go much further.

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South highlighted her disappointment that the traffic commissioner rejected the bid from NECA for the quality contract scheme. It is because of the desire for local areas to have more influence on the provision of their bus services that we have developed the Bus Services Bill. When drafting the Bill, we had clear objectives in mind: to increase bus passenger numbers and improve services. The Bill will have a range of tools to enable that, including new and enhanced partnership arrangements—although that might not be appropriate in all areas—and the provision for local authorities to have franchising powers. Franchising will enable authorities to specify the services that passengers want and to deliver an integrated network.

Our intention is that mayoral combined authorities will have automatic access, with other areas having access if granted with the Secretary of State’s consent. However, we are neutral about the methods that are chosen on a local basis. I do not mind what local authorities choose to do, as long as they achieve their objective, which is to put more passengers on the seats of buses.

The metro is clearly a fantastic asset for Tyne and Wear. I remember its arrival—the home where I was brought up is just to the south of there—and it was fantastic. That is why we are supporting it with a £317 million capital grant to reinvigorate the system and ensure that it continues to provide an efficient public transport system. We are also supporting the day-to-day operational costs of the system with a revenue grant of £203 million.

We have talked a bit in the debate about the business case. Nexus is working up a business case for further investment in the metro system up until 2030. Hon. Members asked whether the Department was open to that. My Department is actually working with Nexus to develop that business case, so yes, we are extremely open to it. I cannot give an indication of the timing of when that will be decided upon; we have to receive the case first. I am also aware that NECA has looked at a wide range of options for extensions, some of which would directly benefit the constituency of the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South. I also very much like the idea of Hitachi providing the metro’s new rolling stock. “From the north-east, for the north-east” is a very attractive message.

Rail has been mentioned, so I should highlight the fact that Network Rail will be spending £40 billion between 2014 and 2019, in addition to the High Speed 2 investments. The key benefits that we will see locally will be in the new franchises: Northern and TransPennine Express. By 2019 we will see brand new TPE trains in service, two new TPE trains an hour between Newcastle and Manchester, an hourly TPE service between Newcastle and Edinburgh and additional services from Sunderland to Middlesbrough and Newcastle.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am grateful for that information, but if those services do not stop at Chester-le-Street, they are not actually going to improve things for my constituents at all.

Andrew Jones: Clearly trains have to stop if people are going to get on them. That argument does not seem to me a difficult one, but it is one that has to be built in
to the franchise arrangements. I will happily take that back. The hon. Gentleman also asked about the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne line. The North East local enterprise partnership has asked us to consider a bid for development funding for the reintroduction of passenger services on that line, which seems to me to be very positive.

There has been some caution regarding HS2, which seems to me to be entirely unreasonable. HS2 will free up capacity on our network, inject capacity to allow more services to be provided and deliver benefits of £103 billion to the UK economy, around one third of which we expect to be in the north of England. Some 70% of the jobs that will be supported by HS2 are expected to be outside of London, so HS2 is an important part of our network.

We have not talked much about roads. Not only will we have a motorway running to the north-east for the first time ever, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson), but there are also schemes to the west of Newcastle. With regard to today’s announcements, I can confirm that we have done five strategic studies in the Department for Transport as part of the road investment strategy. As part of those, the A66 will be dualled and there will be work on the north-west quadrant of the M60. That is part of the road investment strategy from 2020 to 2025, so the idea that the north-west is getting everything and the north-east is ignored is not true. There was a further announcement, which has not necessarily been picked up yet: that the Tees Valley east-west connections are also being approved to take the business case forward to the next stage. That was a further positive announcement today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) talked about people being doom-mongers and wondering whether anything would happen in people’s lifetimes. I was asked by a colleague whether HS2 would happen in anyone’s lifetime and I suggested that, as we were starting to do the build in the spring, it would be quite a good idea to hang on—we do not want a by-election. I agree entirely on the merits of the Borders line. It is one of the most beautiful parts of our United Kingdom, and it is a big success. I will be very happy to see it extended. That sounds like a good idea, but I have not seen anything further on it.

This is my last point. I hope that this quick canter through the various announcements that have been made has highlighted the fact that significant investment is taking place in road and rail. We have seen air capacity increased. We have changes taking place to buses—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. The Minister should please give the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) 30 seconds to wind up.

Andrew Jones: I heartily support all that is happening and the Government’s strong commitment to the north-east.

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the Minister. I look forward to further debates with him on bus services when the legislation returns, and I will hold him to his point about that being open to other areas—I may also be debating that with my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). I will also hold the Minister to his point about the business case for the metro. We need progress, and I hope the Department will consider that a matter of priority.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved, That this House has considered transport in the North East.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
I am pleased to say that the United Kingdom played an important role in the formation of the goals. The former Prime Minister, David Cameron, was appointed by Ban Ki-moon to co-chair the high-level panel of eminent persons on the post-2015 development agenda, which began the work that led to the global goals. The UK Government played a vital role in fighting for the inclusion of some goals that were resisted by other countries. For example, the UK fought hard for the inclusion in goal No. 5, on gender equality, of targets on female genital mutilation, early and forced marriages, and sexual and reproductive health. We can be proud of that.

During the negotiation of the goals, the UK rightly emphasised that the agenda was about leaving no one behind. Such an agenda recognises the importance of closing the gaps between different social groups and ensuring real progress for the most marginalised. There is, therefore, an emphasis on tackling inequality as well as poverty. I commend the Government on the role they played in shaping the future of the global development agenda, as well as on their continued commitment to spending 0.7% of gross national income on international development; however, we now need to see how those commitments are being translated into action.

The global goals aim to solve common problems found in every country to secure gains for everyone. Although they are not legally binding, there is a moral imperative for action to reach the targets they set out. Those targets include eradicating extreme poverty; ensuring equality of opportunity; reducing inequalities of outcome; integrating climate change measures into national policies; and promoting the rule of law. We have a duty to ensure that we are tackling the goals globally and acting as a global leader in their implementation.

In June this year, the International Development Committee released our report on the UK implementation of the goals. The report is the biggest we have published so far in this Parliament. We took extensive written and oral evidence from civil society, non-governmental organisations, academics, the private sector and, of course, the Government. We made a number of recommendations to the Government, but our central finding was that despite the UK’s strong leadership during the negotiation and agreement of the goals, the Government’s response to implementation since their adoption had been insufficient, particularly at the domestic level. There are several reasons for that.

First, it is unclear which Department has lead responsibility for the domestic implementation of the SDGs. Today, the Secretary of State for International Development has written to me to explain matters further, and I am grateful for her letter. She has told me that she and the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General have agreed that Departments will report progress towards the goals through their single departmental plans. The Cabinet Office will continue to have a role in co-ordinating the domestic delivery of the goals through the single departmental plans process.

I welcome that clarification from the Secretary of State, but I have two issues for the Minister to address when he responds at the end of the debate. First, it is still unclear whether the overall responsibility for leading on the reporting of domestic progress lies with the Department for International Development or the Cabinet Office. Secondly, how will whichever of those Departments
is leading ensure that every Department addresses the
global goals in their single departmental plans? My
understanding is that the majority of Government
Departments do not mention the sustainable development
goals in their departmental plans. The Select Committee
outlined clearly in our report that we believe the UK
can be successful in implementing the goals only if
there is a coherent and comprehensive cross-Government
response.

Secondly, we were told in the Government’s response
earlier this year that the forthcoming report on UK
implementation of the goals

“will set out a clear narrative for the Government’s approach to
implementing the Goals both internationally and domestically,
including key principles, flagship initiatives and expected results
and further information on how the government is set up to
contribute towards achievement of Agenda 2030.”

The Select Committee recommended that the report
should be produced urgently, and must equate to a
substantive cross-Government plan for implementation,
with clear lines of responsibility for each Government
Department.

As the SDGs were agreed more than a year ago, it is
deply worrying that the Government have still not
published the report. In her letter today, the Secretary
of State says:

“We are currently working on report setting out the UK
approach to Agenda 2030. I look forward to sharing this with you
once it has been finalised.”

I have three questions for the Minister that arise from
that. When do the Government expect the report to be
finalised? Can he give us a sense of what the report will
look like—how substantive will it be and how much
detail will it have? Will it outline a clear cross-Government
strategy for the implementation of the SDGs? Of the
other countries around the world, 22 have now submitted
voluntary national reviews to the UN, and a further
30—including China, France, Germany and Turkey—have
already volunteered to produce a national report by
2017. There is a real risk that we have moved so slowly
that we will fall behind other countries.

The third challenge is this: for the SDGs to achieve
success both domestically and internationally, clearly
we need to work with a wide range of partners. For
example, our report recommended that the Government
enter into discussions with the London Stock Exchange
and the City to discuss how they might create incentives
for sustainable development in the capital markets. We
also recommended that the Government engage with
the private sector and, through CDC and the Prosperity
Fund, align their work with the SDGs to ensure that
they support progress overseas. I welcome the extra
information on those issues that the Secretary of State
has provided in her letter today.

Civil society has a crucial role to play, both in
communicating and implementing the goals in developing
countries, and in holding Governments both here and
in other countries to account on their implementation.
Therefore, the Committee was particularly disappointed
that the recent civil society partnership review from
DFID did not mention the SDGs. We expect the multilateral
and bilateral aid reviews from the Government very
soon, and I hope that they will use the opportunity that
those reviews provide to lay out exactly how they will
work with civil society here and in other countries, as
well as with multilateral organisations, to support the
achievement of the global goals.

We can learn from the progress that some other
countries have made since New York last year. For
example, in Germany Chancellor Merkel has initiated a
national consultation on the global goals, to develop
a national sustainable development strategy. She has
also set up a ministerial committee on sustainable
development, with politicians, business representatives,
ad academia and civil society, to ensure that all of the
Government in Germany is making progress towards
achieving the goals. In Norway, Ministries have specific
responsibilities for the implementation of individual
goals and each Ministry has to report on progress
preparing towards the SDGs in their annual budget, which is then
scrutinised by Parliament. Finland has committed to
producing a comprehensive national implementation
plan by the end of this year, led by the Prime Minister’s
office, and China has established a domestic co-ordination
mechanism, comprising 43 Government Departments,
to deliver on the SDGs. These countries are pulling
ahead of us in their plans for domestic implementation
of the goals. I say to the Minister that the Government
need to act swiftly and decisively, so that we do not lose
our credibility.

For the International Development Committee, the
SDGs will be a thread through all our work in this
Parliament and we encourage the Government to think
of them in that way. For example, we have recently
launched a major inquiry into DFID’s work on education,
in which we will focus on SDG 4, which is on education
and access to quality education for all. In this inquiry,
the interplay between the different SDGs has already
become clear. For example, an estimated 50% of children
of primary school age who are not in school live in
conflict-affected areas. So, to successfully achieve SDG 4
on education, we need to examine how we can ensure
that children get a good education regardless of their
circumstances, including addressing SDG 16, on peace,
justice and strong institutions, which was one of the goals
for which the UK Government fought very hard.

Our inquiry on education will concentrate on DFID’s
work in three key areas. The first is access—making
sure that the most marginalised children are getting to
school. The second is quality—ensuring that children receive a high standard of education at primary and
secondary level and beyond, with good learning outcomes.
Finally and very importantly, there is lifelong learning,
which includes good quality tertiary education that has
a technical and practical focus, so that children and
young people in some of the poorest countries of the
world are being prepared for the jobs and livelihoods of
tomorrow. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact
is conducting its own performance review of DFID’s
support to marginalised girls in basic education, which
will feed into our broader inquiry.

DFID’s spending on education constitutes 7.7% of
its overall budget; it is the Department’s fourth biggest
area of expenditure, after health, disasters, and government
and civil society. Globally, education has seen a steady
decline in its proportion of overseas development assistance
funding in recent years, both via bilateral and multilateral
donors. At a time when conflict is a major threat, it is
imperative that ODA money is spent, and spent wisely,
to ensure that children get a good education, and in
particular to ensure that children affected by conflict and those who are displaced either internally or as refugees have access to good education.

Let me finish by saying something about the role of Parliament in the implementation of the SDGs, because this House and the other place have an important role to play in ensuring UK implementation. I welcome the close interest that the Environmental Audit Committee has taken in the SDGs and if she catches your eye, Mr Stringer, I look forward to hearing from your hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield, who is the Committee’s Chair, during the debate this afternoon. I also welcome the interest that has been shown by the Women and Equalities Committee; the commitment to gender equality and indeed to other strands of equality within the goals is absolutely crucial.

I also pay tribute to the all-party group on the United Nations global goals for sustainable development, which is co-chaired by a very active member of the IDC, the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), and Lord Jack McConnell. The work that the all-party group has done in raising awareness of the SDGs in both Houses has been exemplary. The continued support for, and interest in, both the domestic and international implementation of the global goals is clear across Parliament, and I hope that it has been noted by the Government.

I also think that it is in the interests of other departmental Select Committees to engage with the goals, in order to assess any potential gaps in progress against the SDGs for which their Department is responsible. For example, the Select Committee on Work and Pensions should address some of the issues of poverty and inequality in our own country, which I hope will enable the other Select Committees to push for ambitious national indicators in a broad range of areas, and to hold the Government to account on any area where there is a risk that we may fall short domestically over that 15-year period.

In our report, the IDC recommended that all House of Commons departmental Select Committees should engage with the SDGs, particularly those goals and targets that are most relevant to their Department. We encourage other Committees to push for ambitious national indicators against the goals; to monitor departmental progress against these indicators; and to use the data produced by the Office for National Statistics annually to hold Departments to account on their performance. In the light of the letter from the Secretary of State today, departmental Select Committees now have a particular role to ask questions of their Departments about the inclusion of the SDGs in the single departmental plans. Ideally, this scrutiny would culminate in an annual session with the relevant Secretary of State in advance of the high-level political forum on global SDG progress each July, enabling an alignment between the domestic consideration of the goals and the UK’s reporting at the high-level forum of the UN in July. We also raised the possibility that the Liaison Committee might wish to question the Prime Minister annually on progress.

For the rest of this Parliament and hopefully all the way through to 2030, the IDC will scrutinise the Government’s implementation of the SDGs. Rightly, our focus will be on global implementation and the role that the UK, through DFID and other Government Departments, plays in overseas development assistance and other forms of development work.

As I have said and as our report set out in detail, so far we are disappointed, particularly with the domestic response. I welcome the clarification that the Secretary of State has provided today, but I encourage the Minister to go further in his response this afternoon. As one of the countries that played a leading role in the development of the global goals, it would be shameful if we failed to meet the goals in our own country. The UK Government need to act, and act quickly, to produce a plan for both domestic and international implementation of the goals. We now have less than 14 years to achieve this momentous agenda. There is no time to waste, and I look forward to listening to colleagues from all parties in the House during our debate this afternoon, and in particular to the Minister, because I think there is a desire to work together to ensure that the great opportunities that the global goals provide are realised, both at home and abroad.

1.49 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the excellent speech of the Chair of the International Development Select Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg). He provides great leadership to our team, and I support everything he has said in this debate.

In September 2015, when Britain backed the global goals, the then International Development Secretary applauded them as “a major landmark in our fight against global poverty”. If I recall correctly, shortly after that a DFID Minister said in reply to a question I asked in the House that each in-country office would be reviewing their in-country plan in light of the goals. It is extremely concerning to me, as a member of the International Development Committee, to know that as of today—more than a year since the SDGs were fanfares—there is still no clear narrative, as our Chairman described it, on DFID’s approach to the SDGs or the practical actions and practical plan for each goal in each country where UK aid is spent. Can I echo his call for a plan to be produced quickly and for that to include specific reference to the SDGs in each country where UK aid is spent? When can we expect that?

I was extremely disappointed that the recently produced civil society partnership review contained no specific reference to the SDGs—I am echoing our Chairman’s remarks. It was long awaited but disappointingly short. If the Government were serious about the SDGs being a major landmark, as DFID has stated, and “a historic opportunity to eradicate extreme poverty and ensure no one is left behind”, the SDGs should be front and centre in such key DFID documents. I hope that that will be the case when we see the multilateral aid review and the bilateral aid review.

DFID made a promise to leave no one behind. That is a key theme of the SDGs, and the UK Government pledged to work together with citizens, civil society and others to eradicate extreme poverty. I was pleased that in DFID’s published promise in November 2015, it made commitments to: “Listening and responding to the voices of those left furthest behind, such as people with disabilities, children, older people and those who face discrimination on the basis of who they are.” I am pleased, too, that in that same promise, DFID commits to “sustainably address the root causes of poverty and exclusion”,
“Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.”

This 21st-century hyper-extremist phenomenon is not a distant threat. It resonates here in the west, where violent terrorist atrocities have been perpetrated in many countries—from Sweden to France to Australia—including 17 countries in Africa. If, as our current Secretary of State has said, UK aid should work in our interest as well as in the interests of those in developing countries who wish to help, surely it is an area that we need to focus on more closely.

How can we do that? Well, I welcome the paragraphs in the letter from the Secretary of State that the Committee received just today. It is hot off the press. I think I was given it two minutes before I walked down to this Chamber. I will refer to one or two elements in it. I am pleased that the Secretary of State acknowledges that she is “concerned about the trend of increasing restrictions on civil society activism, media freedom, social movements and human rights in many countries…As part of the Civil Society Partnership Review I am committed to supporting civil society abroad and to standing alongside civil society against encroachments against freedom of thought, association and expression”, and that that includes working alongside the Foreign Office. She goes on to say that it works on a “case-by-case basis” and adds:

“We work…with the FCO to raise concerns with governments at the appropriate level.”

That is good, and I welcome it, but DFID needs to be much more proactive. It needs not just to stand alongside civil society or deal with individual cases but to take a lead globally and work proactively to prevent these kinds of horrendous civil disturbances in the countries where we work. Ministers should consider how that could be done.

It is critical that we all work to improve interfaith relationships and promote community cohesion, in this country as much as in any other. I highlighted that as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on religious education in a report we produced a few months ago, entitled “Improving Religious Literacy—A Contribution to the Debate”. That was about understanding others’ beliefs. It is in our interests and the interests of developing countries to promote dialogue between people of different faiths and no faith—dialogue about cultural and religious heritage, experiences and religious practices—to bridge gaps in understanding and to help communities to live together in freedom and peace and accept one another. Without that, in a global world of increasing religious intolerance, it will be all too easy for misunderstandings to develop into hatred and for hatred to result in violent action; for intolerance to develop into discrimination and for discrimination to result in persecution. As we all know, the poorest in the world are the least resilient when affected by such issues.

To give just one suggestion to Ministers, we need to consider training teachers in the developing world to conduct classroom discussions about combating racism and inter-religious tensions. That would help young people deal with differences and ensure that potential conflicts can be diffused. It would teach young people to understand the complexities of such situations, in the same way as we are now teaching how important it is not to shut out women and girls from their potential...
leadership positions in society but to give them an equal place and equal opportunities. It is critically important that we teach young people not to shut out those with other beliefs and to combat exclusivism in order to help build a more peaceful and just world.

Through its diplomacy, the FCO has already come a long way on this issue in the last few years. I pay tribute to FCO Ministers; they have frequently attended debates that I have spoken in over the last few years in this House on the issue. However, DFID Ministers have been notably absent, and I do hope that will change. Although through diplomacy the FCO already substantially and increasingly promotes freedom of religion and thought throughout the world, DFID must take action not just to follow that lead but to provide its own lead.

There is a great need to encourage inter-religious dialogue and promote freedoms—religious and other freedoms—in aid work with civil society in-country, at local government and community level and with non-governmental organisations. If religious freedom goes, so many other freedoms fall as a result, such as freedom of belief, thought and expression, as I have said.

Promoting inter-religious dialogue is just one way in which DFID could make a valuable contribution to tackling this 21st-century challenge of hyper-extremism—there may well be others—and I challenge Ministers to consider it. It would go a long way towards attaining goal 16. If DFID is serious about tackling that goal, it must make religious freedom an explicit priority now more than ever.

2.3 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the chair this afternoon, Mr Stringer, and I am equally pleased to follow the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who has established a very doughty reputation in the House defending communities against religious discrimination and intolerance. That was demonstrated straightforwardly and powerfully in her speech.

I congratulate the Select Committee on the production of this very important report. Although it deals with national and global responses to the United Nations sustainable development goals, I want to focus more on delivery. I declare an interest as the voluntary, unpaid chair of Fire Aid, which is an umbrella organisation for fire and rescue services and non-governmental organisations and charities in the UK doing work around the world. I want to discuss their role in the context of two of the sustainable development goals. I make no apology for using this opportunity to unashamedly promote Fire Aid and everything that it does, as I hope colleagues will understand in a few minutes.

There are three basic issues that I want to address, which are relevant to goals 3 and 11: the role of fire and rescue services internationally, the creation of Fire Aid and the connection to and delivery of the UN SDGs, which were considered by the Chair of the International Development Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), in his introduction to the report.

Fire and rescue services have a long history of responding to international disasters. For decades, firefighters have volunteered to go to parts of the world affected by earthquakes and other natural disasters. In the early days, I believe all were volunteers. It was personal, unpaid, informal and sometimes not helped—indeed blocked—by the fire brigade bureaucracy. That has changed. Firefighters now not only attend disasters but are continuously out in countries around the world, being proactive—building safety infrastructure and resilience, and therefore saving lives.

A number of fire and rescue organisations and NGOs emerged from those years of activity and experience and in 2012-13 banded together. I was recruited and invited to assist by Emma MacLennan, director of the charity EASST, the Eastern Alliance for Safe and Sustainable Transport, which works in eastern Europe on road safety matters. I was nominated by Lord Dubs and Lord Robertson from the other place, because of my background of 23 years in the fire brigade, two years as road safety Minister and time as a former member of the Select Committee on Transport, which you served on in a distinguished manner, Mr Stringer, for many years. I was asked to chair that umbrella organisation.

What emerged was the organisation now called Fire Aid. Founding members included the Asian Fire Service Association, whose conference I spoke at in Wembley this morning, Blythswood Care, the Chief Fire Officers Association, EASST, Fire Safety Friends of Russia, Kent fire and rescue service, Operation Florian, Staffordshire fire and rescue service, the United Kingdom Rescue Organisation and the World Rescue Organisation.

We had one-off funding from the Department for International Development to set up our website, which was extremely welcome. In recognition of the vital role carried out by the UK fire and rescue services and NGOs in donating equipment and training for communities and countries in need. We subsequently secured some sponsorship from the Fédération Internationale de l’Automobile Foundation. We have memorandums of understanding with the Institution of Fire Engineers, the Chief Fire Officers Association, and the Fire Brigades Union.

Our founding organisations are working in 30 countries around the world, mainly in Africa, Asia and eastern Europe. Volunteers from our partners deliver equipment donated by fire brigades and fire industry manufacturers. They provide training on how to use the equipment as well as mentoring key staff wherever they go. They instruct on how to build the safety infrastructure, emergency services co-operation and communications that we in the UK take for granted.

Our website provides a clearing house for donated equipment, for which we organise and provide storage. Overseas partners or UK-based organisations can bid for that equipment and we match what is available with identified need and assure transparent and accredited use for those good enough to donate that equipment.

Our organisations have provided the manual for fire safety in refugee camps to the United Nations. Operation Florian was invited to work in the Lebanon for three weeks in August this year to undertake a fire-risk reduction project in a number of informal settlements to improve the protection and safety for Syrian refugees after a series of fatal fires.

That brings me to the UN and the sustainable development goals. The UN declared a decade of road safety from 2010 to 2020, and we have been supporting those objectives. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby mentioned, the 2015 UN summit
admitted a new agenda for the next 15 years. It included 17 goals and 169 targets, several of which directly relate to the work of Fire Aid partners, and therefore we can assist with them. I will mention two in particular. Goal 3 is “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”, and target 3.6 is “By 2020, halve the number of global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents”—we call them crashes in the UK, but the language has obviously not caught up yet. The majority of collisions are caused by people making deliberate decisions to use their mobile phone, to speed, to drink drive, not to wear a seat belt or to take drugs. Most crashes are not accidents, because they could be avoided.

Goal 11 is “Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”, and target 11.2 is “By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons”.

I attended the UN and World Health Organisation’s second road safety world summit in Brasilia last year. Sadly, no UK Minister from DFID or the Department for Transport was available to attend. The UN subsequently adopted the statement from that summit. The targets are as I mentioned, but in real terms they aim to halve the 1.2 million people who die in road crashes around the world every year and reduce the 20 million people who are seriously injured.

As we all know, our roads in the UK are among the safest in the world, and our fire and rescue service has the ability and motivation to play its part in delivering that great record. We can share our knowledge, expertise and abilities with other countries that are not so fortunate. I thank DFID for the support we have received from it so far. We stand ready to assist in realising the international targets.

It to the Government’s credit that they have achieved the 0.7% GDP aim. We are a small facilitating charity, and we are very frustrated because when we approach our embassies and other organisations overseas to try to tap into the DFID money, we are told that it is not worth getting out of bed for less than £1 million. We have only one part-time member of staff, and £20,000 would sustain us for a whole year. It is difficult to get recognition for the role that we play.

When I spoke at the conference in Brasilia on a post-crash response platform, most of the other speakers were bidding for more investment in medical facilities. They wanted trauma centres, better-equipped accident and emergency departments, more neurosurgeons and MRI scanners. Those are all appropriate asks for casualties, but Fire Aid pointed out that the victims need to be rescued from the crashed vehicles first. Without fire engines, cutting equipment and trained crews, they will not need better hospitals and clinical staff because the casualties will not get to the medical facility. Without joint working with the police and ambulance services, the casualties will not reach the hospitals; therefore, they will not need medical assistance. In some eastern European countries, nearly 80% of road crash victims die at the roadside. In the UK, it is about 30%. Some countries do not have a single 999-type emergency telephone number. There are simple things that we can deliver, such as equipment training and facilities. I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate all our volunteers and membership organisations on what they deliver. I hope we can solicit some more support on their behalf.

We have a solid road safety record in the UK. We have great expertise in dealing with crashes, and we have volunteers who want to help less fortunate countries. That could be viewed as soft diplomacy—clearly it is—but morally it is the right thing to do. Organisations such as Fire Aid need resources. I am delighted that the Minister and my hon. Friend the shadow Minister are in their places, and I look forward to their responses.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Stringer, and to follow the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). I was interested that he mentioned Staffordshire fire and rescue service. I shall contact it and ask it about the work it has been doing. It is also a great pleasure to follow the Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who made very important speeches.

The UK has a great opportunity to show leadership in implementing the sustainable development goals. In our report, we have given four or five out of 10 for what has happened so far, but I want to let bygones be bygones and look ahead to the future. We have got a new Minister and a new team, and this is a great opportunity for them and the United Kingdom to show leadership, as the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, showed in developing the SDGs with the two other leaders and the United Nations more generally.

As the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby said, the millennium development goals were, on the whole, a success. They were fairly narrowly focused, but they were all the better for that because we could see that great progress was being made. As the chairman of the all-party group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases, I saw how much the emphasis on malaria in the MDGs meant for countries in which the disease is endemic. Malaria deaths have been reduced by more than half over the past 15 years, with a huge reduction in the number of cases. The SDGs are much broader, but that does not mean that they should not equally be a success. All of us have to work to achieve that.

We must start at home. These are global goals, and they are meant to apply to the United Kingdom. I welcome the Secretary of State’s letter, because it gives a lot more clarity. I have a suggestion for the Minister on something that other countries have not yet done, so perhaps we can take the initiative. Why do we not ask to be marked by other countries—particularly those to which we give bilateral aid—so they can look at what we are doing? We should open the books in the great spirit of partnership and equality so they can see whether we are matching up to the goals. International development should be something we do together with each other, not to other people.
I have five levers—I tried to think of a better word, but I could not—that the Department for International Development can use to achieve the 17 SDGs and the 169 targets to be achieved, and five means by which those levers can be supported. The levers are ways into not just one goal but lots of goals.

The first is jobs and livelihoods, which help to reduce poverty. If someone has a job or a livelihood, they are likely to have access to better health, better education and many other things. It is not just about economic development. Many areas in which jobs and livelihoods are created are beyond economic development. For instance, they will be created in the health and education sectors as countries employ more health workers and teachers.

The second is education, about which the Chairman of the Select Committee spoke at length. Without education, we will not get anywhere. As he said, DFID is already spending more than 7% of its budget on education, but I think we need to up the amount going into all forms of education, because it is one of the great levers for tackling almost all of the 17 goals.

The third is gender equality. If we do not aim for gender equality, we will not reduce poverty as we should, and we will not achieve the health outcomes, education outcomes and all the other outcomes that we want from the SDGs.

The fourth lever is water and sanitation. Earlier this year colleagues on the International Development Committee and I had the honour of going to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to see an excellent project that DFID had funded, providing water to villages for the very first time. We were humbled by people’s reaction. The project was low-cost, only a few dollars per head to provide clean water, but it meant that children and women in particular had to spend far less of their day getting the water that they and their families needed. That brought home to me how cheap it really is to make such life-changing interventions for so many people.

Over the past five years DFID has reached more than 60 million people with better water and sanitation. What has happened is absolutely wonderful, but a lot more can be done—so many more hundreds of millions of people are still without. Over the past two or three years that was brought home to me while most of Stafford was dug up in order to replace the water and sewerage systems. Of course I had plenty of moans about the effect on traffic congestion but, ultimately, my constituents said, “Yes, we know that this has to be done. We know that we have a system that is decades old and needs to be replaced. And we know how vital water and sanitation are to our everyday lives.” If that is the case for us, it is the case for every person on the planet.

The final lever I suggest is that of global public goods in health, climate change and, following on from what my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton said, peace building. Global public goods are, by definition, goods for the benefit of everyone, such as the development of drugs against tuberculosis—we know how far we are falling behind on drugs against TB—or research into antimicrobial resistance, which I raised in the main Chamber earlier today. The Government have taken the lead after an excellent report from Lord O’Neill earlier this year but they need to pursue it relentlessly because, as he said, by 2050, if we take no action, 10 million lives will be lost every year—that is more than die from cancer—to diseases that cannot be cured because of resistance, and that will cost the global economy trillions of dollars.

Global public goods are not only in the area of health, but in climate change. Many communities around the world face the prospect of being submerged, or flooded regularly, and others face regular droughts, even though there are practical, if not simple, actions that we could take on behalf of those communities and of the world as a whole.

Peace building is another area. As my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton said, we need to invest in peace building at an early stage—in inter-faith relationships and dialogue, for example—and, as the Committee has said on many occasions, in training peace negotiators, women in particular. There are almost no women peace negotiators whom I am aware of in the United Nations. Let us invest in that: prevention is so much better than cure or, as Churchill said:

“To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war.”

Those are the five levers that I humbly suggest the Department looks at. It is doing many of those things already, but I wanted to put them in one place. If we concentrate on those levers, we will succeed in addressing the SDGs in the best possible way.

Finally, I will talk about the five means. The first, as our report suggested, is the collection of data, and the UK has a comparative advantage in data accumulation. Earlier this week at our all-party group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases, we heard how an Oxford centre for collecting data has been hugely helpful in identifying which areas have problems with malaria or particular neglected tropical diseases and how to address them. With good data we will make much more progress, and I know that DFID has that as a priority.

The second means we refer to as scale. We hear a lot about pilot projects, some of which go to scale, but many stay as pilot projects and get nowhere. Right from the beginning of a pilot, we have to think how it will be scaled up. The project might of course not work, in which case it can be cut after the two or three years of the pilot, but so often we hear about a successful pilot project only for a hiatus to occur as people think how to get it to hundreds of thousands, or millions of people, as opposed to the hundreds or thousands whom the pilot helped.

Third is the issue of partnership, which has also been mentioned. It is absolutely vital that we work in partnership with NGOs and other Governments. We need to see the SDGs as an enterprise on which we are all engaged together. I come back to the point made by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse about small grants. The idea that DFID will not get out of bed for less than £1 million—I am sure that is not the case—is how things seem to many of us who have met several such excellent charities in our constituencies or are aware of them through previous or current work. They simply cannot get access to funding, even when they have raised a lot themselves. The Department is looking at that carefully, and the Minister has expressed a desire to do more, so it will be good to hear his suggestions when he replies to the debate.

The fourth means is parliamentary scrutiny, and I mean not the scrutiny of this Parliament alone, but that of parliaments in the places where we work. Frankly, if
Members of Parliament in a country where we operate are not interested in the work being done for the development of their own constituents, why should we be? I agree that we have a moral imperative to do such work—I am sure all Members present feel that—but if a Parliament does not look at the kind of things that our own DFID officials look at, we should begin to question whether we are in the right place, because there might not be the right commitment. I urge DFID to help and work with parliaments in the countries in which we are active—through multilateral organisations in those with whom we do not have bilateral relations—to scrutinise the work of their own Governments and of the development agencies there.

Finally, long-term engagement is another point made by the Committee on a number of occasions. DFID has been involved in some excellent long-term programmes. The one I always come back to is the reforestation programme in Nepal, on which we have worked together with the Nepali Government over more than two decades. It has resulted in a tremendous increase in reforestation in that country, which is vital in tackling climate change in Asia and globally. We need to do more, however. Too often, I fear, people involved in a country and doing great work are not aware of what DFID did 20 or even 10 years ago in the same country. It was good to hear the permanent secretary take up that challenge at a recent evidence session the Committee had and suggest the possibility of looking at one or two countries to map what DFID has done, together with the NGOs and the Government of the country, over the past 20 years, so that we have much better understanding of how long-term partnership can or perhaps, in some cases, cannot help us.

It is an honour to take part in the debate. I welcome the Minister’s presence, because I know how seriously he takes his portfolio, and I look forward to hearing his reply.

2.28 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and it is an absolute privilege to follow the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). I also congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), the excellent Chair of the International Development Committee, on introducing this extremely important debate, as well as colleagues from the Committee and from the all-party parliamentary group on the United Nations global goals for sustainable development—I am a member of both.

The sustainable development goals are universal and therefore must be applied both at home and internationally. I do not intend to reiterate much of the information that has already been relayed so well by colleagues today, so I will focus briefly on some issues that have been highlighted in my work on the International Development Committee. A pertinent one on which I will spend more time is data collection and the importance of doing that from a variety of sources.

It is imperative that we collect both governmental data and other data, because we need to ensure objective measurement. We must be able to evidence the implementation of the sustainable development goals and the indicators that we have set. As the International Development Committee has heard in evidence, there are a great many ways to collect informative data. In the many countries where such data have never been collected, we first need a baseline to show exactly where we are now, but we also need data that give us an understanding of the progress towards implementation.

For example, governmental data on child marriage, if they exist at all, may be linked to the legality of child marriage in a particular country. I am led to believe that in countries where child marriage is illegal but still exists, such marriages often are not conducted in registered settings; they may be cultural ceremonies and are therefore unlikely to be recorded. People know that such marriages are happening, but they are excluded from the data. We must therefore collect accurate data, and governmental data by themselves may not be accurate. Household survey data might be required, as might data collected using alternative technologies, such as mobile phone surveys or imaging. That would ensure that the data were accurate, particularly that which came from marginalised people or women, who may feel too vulnerable to provide accurate data to governmental agencies.

Another example is sexual violence, where stigma exists for people who come forward. How will we collect accurate and objective data that do not underestimate that issue, country-by-country? We know that such data are difficult to come by in the UK, as sexual violence, domestic violence and childhood sexual abuse are vastly under-reported. Will the Minister comment on the support that DFID provides for data collection—in particular, the use of technology and collection from multiple sources? What methods do we use to verify statistics rather than simply accepting them at face value?

I turn to another particularly important part of the implementation of the SDGs: the “leave no one behind” agenda. I have been fortunate to visit several developing countries with the International Development Committee, and I must say that I have visited few projects that reach out to and undertake interventions for people with disabilities or mental health problems. Many such groups continue to be left behind and marginalised. Do we have data on their numbers? Such data may vary across countries, but what are we doing to ensure that those people are not continually left behind? Do we think we are doing enough? We are simply not reaching out enough and noticing that those people exist. Ensuring that we identify those who are left behind should be integral to DFID’s programmes.

I was pleased to hear from the Minister yesterday in an informal meeting that the Department may look at support programmes for marginalised groups such as the disabled. Will it also examine key mental health issues to ensure that we address people’s holistic needs—particularly those of refugees and refugee children? It was a privilege to welcome the Tree of Life project to Parliament last month. It presented its work on trauma among refugee children. It takes a reconstructive rather than deconstructive approach to trauma work and is keen to build children’s resilience, which is important in building both people’s lives and peaceful and just societies around the world, particularly where conflict has left its mark.

As we have heard, we must also look at policy in the United Kingdom to ensure that the most vulnerable people, including those with disabilities, are not left behind.
I am particularly concerned by the cuts to employment and support allowance, which helps people to be independent and enables them to get into work. The disability employment gap in this country is shocking.

This morning, I met the National Autistic Society, which indicated that that gap is even higher among people with autism. Will the Minister confirm who is responsible for ensuring that the goals are applied in the UK and that Government policy is underpinned by those aims?

We know that the sustainable development goals will be in each departmental plan, but who will evaluate those plans and who will have key responsibility? We heard recently from the Civil Society Partnership Review, which is linked with the work of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact and the International Development Committee, that non-governmental organisations are disappointed that the sustainable development goals and climate change do not feature highly in those plans. I, too, am disappointed, particularly if they are to underpin our strategy and goals.

I have been particularly struck by the programmes that I have visited that leverage several goals at once; this has already been described to a degree by the hon. Member for Stafford, who has great experience in this area. One area that has already been referred to is sanitation. Refuse recycling in particular addresses health, disease transfer, climate justice and jobs—four agendas in one. I have been absolutely dismayed to see the potential in developing countries for disease transfer via the litter and waste that is often strewn across streets where children play. I am heartened by the potential of waste recycling projects and their ability to address multiple goals, including sustainable development goals and climate change objectives. Are the Minister and DFID addressing those issues in a co-ordinated way and looking at projects that underpin many goals at once? Secondary education for girls is also extremely important. It not only targets education issues but helps reduce incidence of child marriage, overcome cultural stereotypes and promote equality, since it means that families place just as much value on girls as boys. We should prioritise secondary education.

Will the Minister address: data collection; leaving no one behind, particularly those with mental health and disabilities; implementation across the UK; and policy cohesion? The United Kingdom has actively advocated a transparent, participatory and accountable follow-up and review process. We therefore expect commitment to full domestic implementation of the sustainable development goals. We need an outline for how each of those plans and who will have key responsibility? We therefore expect commitment to full domestic implementation of the sustainable development goals. We need an outline for how each of those plans and who will have key responsibility?

The sustainable development goals are such a welcome step forward. They are universal. It is a worthwhile aim indeed to ensure that we implement them at home and internationally so the most vulnerable people in our world are no longer left behind.

2.38 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the Chair of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), for securing this debate. It is always a pleasure to serve with so many other members of that Committee from all parties.

As has been said, the UK’s implementation of the SDGs has been a large part of the Committee’s work in the past 12 months. It has perhaps been one of our biggest inquiries, and the subject will remain very much on our radar. As the hon. Gentleman said, I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on the SDGs, although we now refer to them as the “global goals”, which is a slightly shorter term. Although the International Development Committee has the role of scrutinising DFID’s work, our APPG takes an active interest in the goals and how they are working. We have been able to invite interesting speakers to our meetings and bring together Members from both Chambers. We have covered many aspects, from health to youth engagement and the role of the business sector in leveraging the business community to help on the economic development angle of the global goals. I like to think that we raise and debate issues across the broad base of the goals, and I pay tribute to Lord McConnell for his work on the APPG.

Members of the IDC are fortunate to be able to visit and look at many examples of DFID’s work. I know that other colleagues in the Chamber have seen more examples than I have through having served on the Committee for much longer. That really is a useful source to get a deeper understanding of the work of the Department that we scrutinise, such as: economic development in Nigeria, creating livelihoods and encouraging enterprise, about which my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) spoke passionately; schools in Nigeria, looking at the role of education—as has been said, we are undertaking an inquiry into DFID’s work in education—and healthcare projects and hospitals. That highlights not just the depth of DFID’s work but the breadth of the global goals and their far-extending reach.

In September I was fortunate to visit Sierra Leone with my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford and our party’s social action project. When we were there, we saw some of the work of non-governmental organisations, including some of the smaller ones, and other organisations there in the recovery phase post-Ebola. Again we saw the breadth of work of the international community and why the broad goals are so important.

In the last 40 years, extreme poverty has halved. Since 2000, deaths from malaria have decreased by 60%, saving more than 6 million lives, and UK investment in immunisation saves the lives of children across the world. Therefore, the work DFID does through UK aid does make a difference, and the UK leads the way in working with women and girls, which is at the heart of SDG 5, tackling female genital mutilation and preventing sexual violence against women. The inclusion of goal 5 among the 17 goals was an important step forward. In the Syrian refugee crisis and the Ebola crisis, international development has helped some of the world’s poorest, but it is not just our moral duty to do it; it is in our national interests, strengthening long-term security, protecting our prosperity and tackling migration.

As the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby has explained, the sustainable goals are a global commitment and an ambitious agenda to end poverty and achieve sustainable development and prosperity. The UK took a leading role in developing the goals, which were adopted in September last year, the culmination of
three years of negotiation. We should not lose sight of the fact that there are 17 goals underpinned by 169 targets, a major shift from the millennium development goals but building on them.

The other shift covers domestic policy. Therefore, in reading the letter from the Secretary of State, I note and welcome that she, together with the Minister for the Cabinet Office, have agreed that Departments will report progress towards the goals through their single departmental plans. As a Committee we have focused on and called for that for some time.

I also welcome DFID’s acceptance of our recommendation that, following the multilateral aid review, it should lay out exactly how its engagement with multilaterals will help it support the achievement of the SDGs as well as look at civil society and funding some of the smaller NGOs. It is fair to say that that theme has come out this afternoon, and it is something that we as a Committee have raised on numerous occasions. It is therefore welcome news that Ministers will look at that. As a Committee we recognise the work and value of civil society and why it is so important that it has the space to do the work it does, recognising that it can often reach some of the harder-to-reach groups that others cannot. For example, goal 16 focuses on peace—such areas are very hard to reach.

We should be proud of the UK’s contribution to international development and the work of DFID and its staff, many of whom work in challenging environments. As the hon. Gentleman explained, as our Chair, the Committee’s work on the SDGs will continue. It is important that we maintain an SDG thread running through all the work that we do while continuing to ensure that taxpayers’ money is well spent and used effectively. We must ensure that work continues on implementing the SDGs and embedding them not just internationally but domestically.

We are just past the end of year one of 15. We have made a start, but there are still many years to go. I look forward—assuming I am still on the Select Committee—to working with DFID and playing a part in ensuring that we deliver those goals.

2.45 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and to follow such excellent speeches from the hon. Members for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and from my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). I find myself in violent agreement with everyone but particularly with the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) about her remarks on cycling. As a keen cyclist, I shall don my helmet and dash up to Euston later to conduct a witness session with young people in Birmingham.

I was keen to take the Environmental Audit Committee out of London. We are going to the midlands to listen to what young people have to say about their futures and their involvement in delivering this incredibly ambitious agenda. I therefore give my apologies to you, Mr Stringer, because I will have to leave at 3.15 pm—I thought we were to finish at three o’clock.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on the International Development Committee’s report. I will pick up a couple of the issues it found about the worrying lack of engagement from Departments across Government and how we will achieve the goals domestically and internationally.

I am reminded of when I was out campaigning for the Labour party, when I had just become an MP, to make poverty history. I was in Wakefield city centre giving out leaflets and said, “We’re trying to make poverty history,” and this woman looked at me and said, “Well, what are we doing to make poverty history at home?” Actually, probably all of us have been confronted with that question, and finally as MPs across parties and as Governments of whatever colour we have an answer. It is imperative that we get it right. As I was Labour’s shadow Secretary of State for International Development until 2015, this cause is very close to my heart.

The Environmental Audit Committee launched its inquiry on 25 July. We want to build on the International Development Committee’s inquiry and measure, monitor and—importantly—communicate the Government’s performance and progress towards achieving these goals. I will share a few initial observations on the principles of applying everywhere and to everyone and ensuring that no one is left behind. That is imperative, and that means that we must implement the goals domestically, the second principle is that we must focus on the poorest and most marginalised groups in society.

That presents significant challenges that the Government, NGOs, the Office for National Statistics and we as politicians will have to tackle. I was in our Committee yesterday and I was in Berlin on Tuesday talking about the global goals. If we ask a bunch of 20-something people who work for NGOs—this is interesting—we hear, as a witness said yesterday, “We’ve got to look at all these goals, and we looked at water quality and access to water and thought: in the UK we don’t have a problem with that,” and yet we received evidence a couple of weeks before that nine UK water companies are in water stress. That might be 15 water companies by 2020 and all of them by 2030. The definitions of what we measure are in some way defined by the people we ask. If we put the question to NGOs in this country—which do not normally campaign on water and are not involved in its delivery—they will give a different answer to the people who are actually involved in that delivery.

On data collection, disaggregating the data is really important. A headline goal or target could be on nutrition, but we do not normally campaign on water and are not involved in delivering this incredibly ambitious agenda. I therefore give my apologies to you, Mr Stringer, because I will have to leave at 3.15 pm—I thought we were to finish at three o’clock.
meals a day, but old people might need five or seven meals a day. Are we adapting our services? These goals profoundly challenge us to think about the problems and the difficulties we will have in collecting those data.

The Office for National Statistics says that about 70% of the targets are covered, but it will need to use data partners, such as NGOs, businesses and local government, to make sure the data are of good quality, and it will have to build trust in the information. We hope to inform the ONS’s consultation. It will be published on 29 November, which will be a critical moment in our country’s implementation. We need to engage the public on the goals.

We also heard from businesses yesterday. At the meeting I attended in Berlin, where there were environmental charities that are used to fighting businesses that want to build dams, chop down trees and exploit mineral deposits, it was very interesting that there was a strong reaction against me when I said, “No one is really talking about the role of business in this.” I thought to myself that business has probably lifted more people out of poverty than the combined global aid budgets and everything that charities have done, so it is a question of how we get business to address market failure. If people are hungry or in poverty, that is a market failure. How do we work with businesses to address that? Businesses want well-paid people who are able to purchase their goods and services, whatever they may be. We heard from PricewaterhouseCoopers, which is developing an interesting data mechanism that can be applied globally. We heard about the insurance company, Aviva, which is on the frontline of flooding and climate change issues, and also from Hermes Investment Management.

We also have things to learn from other countries. Wales has a commissioner for future generations. At first, the Welsh Government were going to introduce a sustainable development Act, before realising that no one knows what sustainable development is—it is too abstract, too distant, too out there—so they talked about solidarity with future generations. They had a great programme of implementation and consultation that gave everybody in Wales ownership and understanding of what that Act means.

When we have our data partners and data parameters, we will need some poets to translate it into normal language. Obviously, that is part of our job as politicians—to translate very technical, difficult issues. However, we need to cascade that down. One of my concerns is that a lot of international NGOs came to our inquiry but we did not hear much from UK charities. That is a big problem, and we have a real job to do with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations to get that message out and get those charities to map every activity against the baseline targets.

We will also have to translate those goals into what we do as politicians. How is what we do in the House and every day that we spend as MPs going to end poverty or violence? Every Bill that we pass should be run past that mechanism if we are going to have meaningful action. We have looked at innovations from other countries. For example, Colombia has put its peace process at the heart of everything it is doing, while Finland has developed an online tool so that everyone can put in what they are doing to contribute to the goals and bring them to life. I am afraid that we have not yet seen the same level of enthusiasm from the Government. I will read the Minister’s response very closely in Hansard. I hope we will see a new level of enthusiasm on this.

Dr Graham Long, who is a senior lecturer at Newcastle University, set out some areas of concern in the UK: 40% of homes fail to meet the decent homes standard; 40,000 people die prematurely due to air pollution every year; the Trussell Trust gave out half a million emergency food parcels in the first half of the year, including to more than 180,000 children; we throw away more than 7 million tonnes of food and drink every year; and as I said, nine companies are under water stress; since 2013, the suicide rate has increased to 12 deaths per 100,000 people, which is its highest rate since 2004. On energy efficiency, the phasing out of fossil fuels and non-communicable disease mortality, we have done an awful lot as a country, but we have an awful lot to do.

We need to work with local government, the NHS, schools—I was pleased to see some young people in their school uniforms in the Gallery who had come to listen to the debate—colleges, universities, large and small businesses, local and national charities and trade unions, which realise that there are no jobs on a dead planet. Those organisations will help to transform the goals into action on the ground and to build a community of like-minded people. As I said, I am off to Birmingham this afternoon.

However, we need leadership from the Government. The voluntary sector is waiting for the Government to show leadership; it is a sort of chicken and egg thing: if the Government do not lead, nobody knows about it and the charities feel like they are talking into a vacuum. We heard during our inquiry that the Government’s contribution to the goals is confined to the 2015 Conservative manifesto, but that was published before the goals were agreed and only lasts until 2020.

Perhaps we need to look at fixing this into law, as we did with climate change, and having something that sets the goals on a five-yearly basis—although not to coincide with general elections—and that are agreed by an independent committee and with an independent monitor that is able to look at those things in the round. The area on which I think the International Development Committee report was most damning was the “deep concern” at the lack of a strategic approach, the “deep incoherence across government policy” and the potential for progress made in one area to be undermined by its lack in another. We will look at that in a granular way. This is a 15-year agenda, and the goals are non-binding and voluntary, so we really need to see robust accountability mechanisms in place; we cannot rely only on the Environmental Audit Committee or the International Development Committee, which have very limited resources.

I conclude, Mr Gapes, by saying that ours is the generation that can end extreme poverty, hunger and violence, reduce inequality and tackle climate change. I know that my Committee, and the other Committees of the House, will work over the course of this Parliament to ensure that we live up to our commitments and achieve those global goals. Our constituents, our children and our grandchildren are relying on us to do that. We must not let them down.
2.58 pm

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. Unfortunately, you have missed most of the debate. It has been incredibly interesting, and I am delighted to follow so many hon. Members. From all sides of the House, who have spoken very eloquently about the sustainable development goals. They have not been in existence for that long, but we are making some progress.

I am particularly interested to follow the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), who said, “There are no jobs on a dead planet”, and that the unions understand that. That is actually something I will touch on in my speech. We know that we need better health and education and a reduction in the disaffection of young people with politics, particularly, and with the world. We also know that we need more peace and fewer conflicts in the world. Many of those things affect countries in Africa.

I want to concentrate on jobs, which relates to goal 8. That goal is for “sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”. I will focus my remarks on African countries. Without jobs and economic growth, we cannot have any of the other things in the sustainable development goals. We cannot have better health or better education unless somebody pays for it. Jobs and livelihoods are incredibly important. They help families to educate their children and to have better health.

I have been privileged to travel to many African countries, and they are all delightful. They have very varied landscapes and types of countryside out there. The only thing they have that I hate is mosquitoes and malaria; that is the only downside I can see to African countries, and they are all delightful. They have very varied landscapes and types of countryside out there. The only thing they have that I hate is mosquitoes and malaria; that is the only downside I can see to African countries, and they are all delightful. They have very varied landscapes and types of countryside out there.

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they are not the people who should be targeted. We should target the people who are commissioning this and buying the tusk. I agree with the hon. Lady that they are not the people who should be targeted. We lose potential tourism for many countries. Wild dogs are down to an absolute minimum. The habitats need protection, and the animals need protection.

The ivory trade needs to be stopped, without further ado. We should not consult on it next year; we should stop it next year. We should have stopped it before. We are not leading the world in this. We now face the prospect of destroying jobs and possibilities for people in Africa, because without those livelihoods, which I believe we can and should facilitate, people will be left behind. We will fail on the sustainable development goals. We will not have better education or health, and those people will genuinely be left behind. I urge the Minister to push the Foreign Office and DEFRA to stop the ivory trade, and stop it now.

3.8 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the Chair of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), on securing this opportunity to discuss an extremely substantial and important report.

The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) has had to leave for another appointment. I had to give my apologies this afternoon, as I was unable to attend an appointment at the Malawi high commission, where the Social Work Malawi programme is being launched by the Children and Families International Foundation. The programme aims to bring social work skills and expertise to that country through training, resources and skills sharing. It is a very exciting initiative, which will no doubt contribute to the achievement of the sustainable development goals.

I am delighted to be back here in Westminster Hall talking about this subject because the first debate that I secured as a new Member in June 2015 was on the negotiation and implementation of the sustainable development goals. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby spoke in that debate; I think he was pitching for the chairmanship at that point—clearly a successful pitch. We were also joined by the former Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham. I think it is fair to pay tribute to him. Although we would not necessarily agree on everything, given the different parties that we represented, he spoke powerfully and with considerable experience on matters of international development in his time as a Member of the House.

Since the start of this parliamentary Session, the sustainable development goals have been an issue on the agenda of Members who have continually pressed the Government to make more progress. The target date of 2030 is not a moving target; it is not getting any further away. Every day, every second is precious and the Government need to continue to play the leading role that they played in drafting the sustainable development goals in starting to take forward implementation. The goals are not going away now that they have been agreed. I pay tribute to the work of the all-party group and the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and Lord McConnell for their role in providing ongoing scrutiny.

The new Administration have sometimes been accused of having an aversion to their predecessors’ policies and legacies, but I hope that is not true when it comes to the sustainable development goals.

In summing up for the Scottish National party, I want to look at why the sustainable development goals are important. Themes have arisen from the debate. I want to comment on key points and recommendations from the report, and I have specific questions for the Government, many of which have been touched on by other hon. Members today.

The sustainable development goals are important, as we have heard from various Members. They build on the really important success of the millennium development goals, and the lessons of the millennium development goals, and they start with a very different mandate. They were not cooked up in a basement negotiating room of the United Nations General Assembly building. There was a global consultation and a participative drafting process, which gives them a significant mandate.

The universality aspect is also hugely important. The goals apply equally everywhere. We must work to meet them at home as well as abroad, as almost every Member has said. The hon. Member for Wakefield drove that point home when she spoke about her experience on the Environmental Audit Committee. They also apply to all groups everywhere. They are not met until they are met in every geographic place and for every demographic indicator. That is the whole point of leaving no one behind. That is particularly true of older people and of women, as has been mentioned.

Most importantly, the goals are integrated with the climate change agenda. Climate change threatens to undo the progress made under the millennium development goals framework, so we cannot tackle poverty and instability without also tackling climate change. That relates also to the biodiversity points made with great eloquence by the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham).

The framework provides an accountability mechanism. This Government and Governments around the world, whether they like it or not and whether the party of government changes or not, are committed to achieving the goals. I was interested in the proposal by the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) for a 360° appraisal mechanism whereby countries could make recommendations and monitor the progress of their peers. It would be very interesting to take that forward.

We have had several international examples—the national consultation in Germany, the responsible departments in the Norwegian Government and a programme for future generations in Wales. The Scottish Government have been thoroughly committed to taking forward the sustainable development goals agenda. Even before negotiations had concluded, the First Minister said that she wanted Scotland to play its part in achieving the goals. Work is under way to align the sustainable development goals with the Scottish Government’s national performance framework domestically and also to underpin their international development policy.
The report is a detailed piece of work. It is incredibly comprehensive, and I am happy to endorse pretty much everything it contains. It is important for the Minister to note that it was agreed on a cross-party basis. We have heard from all parties, and I congratulate the Chair on bringing colleagues together to make really useful policy and practical recommendations. The key message is that poverty reduction must be at the heart of development policy; the sustainable development goals provide a ready-made, consensus-based framework to deliver those.

The report touches on various important points. I did not hear much from Members, about tax justice and the importance of domestic resource mobilisation, although they are important. If we ever get to the point where we are able to start reducing aid spending, as some Government Back Benchers—not represented here today—seem desperate to do, it will be because developing countries are able to raise their own funds for poverty reduction work, but that will not happen without an end to tax dodging, which must be stopped. That could be started, as the report recommends, by introducing beneficial ownership registers in UK overseas territories.

There is a role for the private sector to play, as everyone has recognised. In the coming days we will be considering the Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill, which will provide interesting opportunities to explore these issues in more detail. What comes out of the report is that poverty, not profit, must be at the heart of development assistance and development investment.

**Patrick Grady:** Absolutely. Tax treaties were touched on briefly. I think I heard double taxation talked about in the Chamber earlier today, and our hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) will be seeking to build on his predecessor’s reputation with his private Member’s Bill, the Double Taxation Treaties (Developing Countries) Bill, in a couple of weeks’ time.

The report goes on to talk about domestic responsibility. There has been a development today, and I was grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for slipping me a copy of a letter that has been delivered into the hands of the Chair at short notice. I echo the questions that still remain and the disappointment that the sustainable development goals have not so far featured in the single development goals. I hope that Governments need to know where people live and what they need, so I hope that the Government will continue, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow asked, to use capacity building programmes to help countries generate timely and disaggregated data.

It is important that the commitment on gender equality and minority groups continues. The National Committee for UN Women is calling on the Government to commit to the Step It Up for Gender Equality initiative, and I have tabled written questions about that. Can the Minister tell us about the willingness of the UK Government to engage with that initiative?

The hon. Member for Congleton also spoke about religious intolerance. In this very Chamber, earlier today, Aid to the Church in Need issued a report on religious persecution around the world; and yesterday we marked red Wednesday, when a number of landmarks, including Westminster Hall, were lit in red to highlight the persecution of religious communities.

Other hon. Members went into detail on various matters. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) talked about Fire Aid, whose conference Glasgow was proud to host earlier this year. Both the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Stafford mentioned the small grants programme, which, incidentally, the Scottish Government runs very successfully; perhaps the UK Government can learn some lessons from the programme.

On Tuesday the House will consider the Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill in more detail, and I hope that the Government will be prepared to engage constructively with any proposals to strengthen it or to make more explicit CDC’s responsibility to work for poverty reduction and the sustainable development goals.

I hope that the debate and the report will serve as something of a wake-up call for the Government. Despite what may be read in some of the gutter and right wing press, there is consensus across the country about the importance of aid and the need to tackle poverty. We of course welcome the continuing commitment to spending 0.7% of GNI on aid, but there is no point in doing it by going down a completely different track from the rest of the world, or not living up to the existing sustainable development goals framework and ambitions. We hear a lot about how aid should align with the national interest. Surely meeting the SDGs is itself in the national interest.
interest. The emphasis on the national interest implies somehow that previously aid did not work in the national interest, or that we have a deeper interest in aid’s effectiveness beyond what the SDGs are intended to achieve. In that case my question would be what is its purpose? What better or more noble purpose could there be than the eradication of poverty and disease, and the building of peace and equality for all? That is not just in the national interest. It is in the interest of everyone who lives on our shared planet. I hope that collectively we can continue with that attitude.

3.22 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): This is an honour for me, Mr Gapes; I think it is the first time I have spoken in Westminster Hall under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on securing this important debate, and I commend the International Development Committee, which he chairs, on the excellent report that we are debating today.

I also thank all the hon. Members who have contributed to the debate, including the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who spoke about the importance of the use of data, and how that will help with the work that is needed. The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) spoke about his five-lever challenge for DFID, and I look forward to the implementation of his work; I am sure that, as we speak, part of it is already being implemented. It is important to use the information the hon. Gentleman has provided to monitor the sustainable development goals.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for the work that he does voluntarily for Fire Aid. I encourage anyone to read more about the work that it does, domestically and internationally. I also thank the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is not in her place, for her work on peace building and on highlighting the problems of religious intolerance around the world; and the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on her work as co-chair of the all-party group on the United Nations global goals for sustainable development.

I want the House today to think about the day after the Chancellor’s autumn statement, the future of DFID’s ring-fenced budget, and “our promise to the world’s poorest”—[Official Report, 23 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 906.]

which could be broken at the next spending review. The work of the International Development Committee and the timing of the debate are now more important than ever to the insistence that the UK must remain a world leader in our commitment to spend 0.7% of GNI on overseas aid.

At the heart of the Committee’s report is that basic question: is Britain still a world leader on development? Under a Labour Government Britain created a dedicated Department for International Development; helped to negotiate the millennium development goals; trebled the amount that we spent on overseas aid; and put us on the path to 0.7%. In the process, it helped to lift 3 million people out of poverty, get 40 million more children into school and provide millions more people with access to life-saving medicines and vaccines. It is a record of which not just the Labour party but the whole of Britain can be proud. The question today is how that record is being maintained by the present Government in relation to the design and negotiation of the sustainable development goals.

As the Committee says in its report:

“If implemented by governments with appropriate ambition and focus, the SDGs could have a transformative impact on the wellbeing of people all over the world.”

I could not agree more. With the Trump Administration on the horizon and troubling elections ahead in France and Germany, such leadership may be needed urgently. So I am disappointed that the Secretary of State has not adopted all the Committee’s recommendations: she has rejected proposals to provide a coherent administrative and legal structure to co-ordinate implementation of the SDGs across Government; and, despite the Committee’s recommendation that DFID must actively and explicitly apply a test to every investment it makes or supports, to ensure they will contribute to achieving the SDGs, taxpayers’ money is increasingly being used to fund investments such as the oil exploration project in Malawi exposed this week, which have nothing to do with tackling poverty or climate change but are entirely focused on boosting British companies’ commercial interests at the expense of the environment.

It was frankly shameful that yesterday the Government threatened to make up for their own fiscal failure by cutting the aid budget, and to attempt to balance the books on the backs of the world’s poorest. If they follow through on that threat it is not just their commitment to the SDGs that will lie in tatters; any pretence of world leadership on the issues will be at risk. I hope that the Government will therefore reconsider their position, withdraw that threat today, and ensure that Britain can remain proud of the role we play in the world in tackling poverty.

3.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (James Wharton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I normally try where I can to speak without the assistance of notes, but we have had such a wide range of valuable contributions from extraordinarily well informed hon. Members that I have taken the time to note down, to the best of my ability, some of the comments; I shall respond in as much detail as I can.

I congratulate the International Development Committee Chair, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), on his opening remarks and on his part in securing the debate. He gave an effective summary of why sustainable development goals matter, and why the UK, having played a key leading role in developing those important global targets and the structure that will guide development across the world over a 15-year period, must maintain its leading role in driving the agenda forward. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) mentioned the former Prime Minister, David Cameron—I, too, commend him for personally pioneering the UK’s work in the international development space and for being the person who brought in the measure enshrining the 0.7% of GNI UK aid budget in law.

The Chair of the Select Committee asked a number of questions that I want to address directly, including on which Department has the lead responsibility for
ensuring that the sustainable development goals are delivered across Government in the UK. It is DFID, working alongside the Cabinet Office. As the hon. Gentleman has been informed by the Secretary of State in the letter that he received today, that is done through the single departmental plan process, to ensure that every Department recognises that it needs, in the way it manages its affairs and plans its progress throughout this Parliament and beyond, not just to be mindful of but to deliver on the sustainable development goals and contribute towards that delivery. That will be monitored by the Cabinet Office, with the responsibility falling to DFID.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am sorry that I was not able to be here for all of the debate, but I am pleased to have heard what I have. May I ask the Minister, in relation to his last remark, to what degree the Department will also encourage other Departments to learn from other countries' measures to implement the goals? This is not a one-way trade of the UK giving and bestowing aid and advice to developing economies. My experience is that we also have much to learn from both developed and developing economies in the way they apply the goals.

James Wharton: The hon. Lady is of course absolutely right. It is a partnership process, particularly in the international aid space. We deliver long-term and lasting improvements by working together with those countries, with the actors in them, with the civil society organisations and with the people who are affected by and, we hope, benefit from the work that we do. We need to ensure that the improvements last for the long term, and it is through those partnerships that we learn both lessons that can be applied here and lessons that can be applied to other countries in which we seek to drive forward development and this agenda. That of course needs to be part of the process for this Government, as it would need to be for any other. We need continually to learn and review the process by which we deliver on our goals and targets. That will be the case and is, through the departmental plans and the process that I have described.

The Chair of the Select Committee asked about Agenda 2030. I do not want to be drawn into speculating too much on things that have yet to be published, but I will say that the views that he expressed about what he expects to see in due course were heard loud and clear here. They will of course be recorded in Hansard and, I am sure, reviewed, one way or the other, as time passes and things are made known, and made public.

Stephen Twigg: In the letter from the Secretary of State, she says, as I quoted earlier, that they are currently working on the “report setting out the UK approach to Agenda 2030. I look forward to sharing this with you once it has been finalised.” Can the Minister give any sense of timescale? Are we talking this side of Christmas, or is this likely to be in 2017?

James Wharton: The hon. Gentleman tempts me to talk about something on which I do not want to comment, given the risk of misleading the House, because it is information that is not immediately available to me at this time, so I will resist the temptation on this occasion, but I will ensure that the importance that he attaches to it is passed on and is properly understood by the Department.

The hon. Gentleman sent a clear message to other Select Committee Chairs about their role in ensuring, as other Departments take on responsibility for delivery of the sustainable development goals in their plans, that the Select Committees that shadow them and hold them to account focus on this agenda. I wish the hon. Gentleman every success in persuading his fellow Select Committee Chairs to undertake that responsibility. It is a noble suggestion to make and will be a valuable part of the process going forward. I would offer what support I might be able to, but as a lowly Minister, my ability to influence the Chairs of Select Committees is sadly, although perhaps appropriately, limited.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is no longer in her place, spoke about the need for clarity and accountability and particularly about religious tolerance—an issue on which she has a very strong track record and in which she has a longstanding interest. She was absolutely right to say that DFID should and, indeed, must work with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to pursue these issues, which are not just of UK national interest but in the interest of long-term stability and development. That message has been heard, but it was already understood. I am determined and, indeed, the new ministerial team are determined to use every lever at our disposal to drive positive change. That includes the access that DFID sometimes gets, but that other Departments may not get, to the actors in states, and Ministers in Governments in states, where we want to influence behaviour. It is important that we use every tool in our armoury, and the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton is well received and well heard.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) spoke about Fire Aid, which indeed received core funding from DFID. I was delighted to hear acknowledged the range of good work that it does and the impact that that can have. He also touched on the broader challenge of small charities—the organisations that often do great work, but that seek a smaller sum rather than a large amount. It is true that that presents something of a challenge for an organisation such as DFID, which deals with a large budget and which has rigorous requirements on accountability and due diligence. However, I am personally determined—I know that this view is shared by the other Ministers in the new ministerial team—to see what we can do to open up the opportunities for funding to organisations like those that he described, such as Fire Aid and the many more that do not want large sums of money but can do a great deal of good with relatively small amounts.

I absolutely recognise that although we work in this space and have done in the past, that has not always been as easy as it should be. I recognise the challenges in doing it. That is a discussion that I had in an informal meeting with the International Development Committee, in which I said that I would take the issue away and look at it—and, indeed, I am doing so. We must be able to do better and, indeed, we should endeavour and strive to do so. The point that the hon. Gentleman made is well received and very much agreed with.
My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford gave a most persuasive and comprehensive overview of what needs to be done in the international development space—the levers and tools that we can use and, perhaps most importantly, the things of which we must be conscious if we are to ensure that development is effective and lasts for the long term. I thought that his comments, particularly on the peer review of progress, were imaginative, perhaps requiring a level of courage from Ministers that I am not yet persuaded to display on this occasion, but none the less I can see the value of the proposal. Transparency is a good thing. Understanding the effect of the money that we spend, understanding the difference that it makes and learning the lessons from the way we do things, so that we can always improve the outcomes that we deliver, is incredibly important. Having transparency, having peer review and having those who understand the environment in which we are trying to work—and what we are trying to deliver—look at the actions that we are taking, feed back their comments on them and make observations on the impacts that they have can only be to the good, so I am very sympathetic to my hon. Friend’s proposal. Although I am not able to make an immediate commitment to such steps, I recognise the broad thrust of the direction of travel that he is promoting, and it is one with which I agree.

My hon. Friend also said, very importantly—this is something that we must not forget but sometimes the debate that surrounds international development in our media appears to neglect it—that we need to take a broader and longer view. We need to ensure that what we do is sustainable, that we have transitional arrangements in place for projects that we support, and that the long-term impact is good and not just what might be shorter term deliverables or measurables, which all too often can tick boxes but not actually deliver on our goals.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) spoke about data, and I entirely agree with her comments. In my limited time—three or four months—as a Minister in the Department, I have been impressed by the way in which the DFID in the UK leads on the use of data in many respects—to predict disasters that might happen, to identify areas that might be hit by drought, to identify changes in human behaviour and to spot anomalies that might mean that we are missing a small group in a community and not supporting it in the way that we would wish.

The hon. Lady was also right to observe that accuracy is essential. Increasingly, we live in a world of big data; we live in a world where so much of what we do is recorded, algorithms are applied and incredible things are discovered. That can be a real driver for effective delivery, which is what we are about. I am proud to say that this Government and this country are committed to our 0.7% GNI spend. It is none the less incumbent on us to ensure that every pound and penny that is spent delivers the maximum benefit to the people whom it is supposed to help. That is vital, and data have a key role to play in that, particularly when we are talking about using data and the patterns in data to identify some of those marginalised groups about which the hon. Lady spoke so eloquently. I thank her for her contribution and I agree entirely with her observations. We will continue to strive to be a world leader in that space.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who has a longstanding interest in this area of policy and whom I commend for her work as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the United Nations global goals for sustainable development, made a very persuasive contribution, including comments about the value of civil society and the work that it does in many of the countries in which we operate and in which we want to deliver and drive change.

It is incredibly important to empower people to control their own lives—whether that is in the political space or whether we mean individual rights, women’s rights, minority rights, girls’ rights, people who want education or representation, or to stand up for the things that affect them and the communities in which they live—if we are going to embed the long-term change that my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford spoke about. If we want long-term, sustainable development in many of the countries in which we work, a key part of that has to be strengthening civil society. I therefore absolutely agree with the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills and commend her for them.

The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), who is no longer in her place, agreed with a number of the comments that other hon. Members made, including the need for good data, and she applied much of that learning to make observations about the situation domestically. She spoke about the requirement for the sustainable development goals to apply here in the UK, as much as anywhere else and the need to work with organisations such as the Office for National Statistics to ensure that we are able effectively to deliver the policies that will drive the change that we want to put into effect. I commend her for those comments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) spoke most persuasively about the illegal wildlife trade, tourism and the need for development. I could not agree more with her. One thing we need to do—those who care about the contribution this country and its people make to international development for some of the poorest people in the world—is to broaden the narrative and explanation of the difference that the money we spend makes. Too often, too many people think—because of what is presented to them by some of the more nefarious parts of our media—that international aid development is either feeding people and doing basic humanitarian aid or getting lost in Government systems and being stolen.

We do—and are able to do—a wide range of things that people care about, but the message about them is not always communicated. The money that we spend is key to tackling immigration flows and the push factors on immigration. It is key to security and to tackling terrorism. It is key to developing markets that we can access and with which we can trade. It is also key to ensuring that we give the best possible chance of long-term survival to some of the endangered species about which my hon. Friend spoke.

Were we not to do what we are doing—and if we do not go on to do more, which is still a danger—our children, grandchildren and future generations may be unable to read about these species but they will not be able to enjoy going to see them in the way that we do. There is a strong development narrative for tackling the illegal wildlife trade, because of its corrosive and damaging
influence on the judicial systems and economies in the countries involved, and because of the damage that is done when a gamekeeper is shot by a poacher—a person loses their life and a family goes without a breadwinner.

The opportunities for tourism and economic development, when measured against the negative impact of doing nothing, make a compelling case for more to be done in this space. I have had many discussions with my hon. Friend on this topic, about which she is passionate, and I am pleased to confirm that I had a meeting only this week with a range of charities—eight or 10—working in this area. We want to see what we can do to get them to start thinking about working with DFID and applying for funding streams that may be appropriate for the development aspect of their work, so that we can support further engagement and activity in this space.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) summed up well a range of the comments that hon. Members made. He made the undeniably true point that poverty reduction must be at the heart of development policy. Much of what we do is about improving lives, whether that means access to water or education, a humanitarian response, growing economies or tackling the illegal wildlife trade. At the heart of many of the ills of the world is poverty. We have an opportunity through what we do to play a role in tackling that. I therefore agree with the hon. Gentleman and commend him for his comments.

The hon. Gentleman asked specifically about the multilateral and bilateral aid reviews and when they may become available. As I understand it, my Secretary of State said only the other day that it would be around the end of this month. That is therefore as specific as I would dare to be in the current environment, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman with some certainty that he will not have to wait too much longer for those documents to be published. I know that there is much interest in seeing their content.

Finally, I thank the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), with whom it has been a pleasure to work for the short time during which we have faced one another across the Floor of the House. Only recently, we had the opportunity to meet in Malawi, when our trips there coincided. We had a very constructive and productive discussion.

I would not claim to be a parliamentarian of lengthy and great experience—I like to think I am still young and new—but I have seen many Departments and many debates. I have engaged in those debates and have had the privilege of being a Minister in another Department. However, I have never seen a space of debate in which there is so little party politics and in which people can gather because they are like-minded and focused on getting the best outcomes for some of the poorest in the world. Collectively, we want to ensure that we do the best job that we can in using British taxpayers’ money well, to change the world for the better, to secure long-term development, and to improve and save the lives of countless people who would otherwise be left without the support to which they should rightfully feel a certain sense of entitlement.

In the short time that I have served opposite the shadow Secretary of State, I have enjoyed our discussions and dialogue. I welcome the nature of our debate today, with contributions from Members across the Chamber. I absolutely expect that I and other Ministers in the Department will be held to account for the decisions that we make and will be challenged on the things that we do—indeed, that is the role of Parliament and its Select Committees. I hope, however, we will continue to do all that in a spirit of broad co-operation to secure the goals and outcomes that we all want to see delivered, because this matter is too important to be drawn into what occasionally might be characterised as the party politically driven debate style that can take place between hon. Members.

This is an area of policy to which we are privileged to have the opportunity to make a contribution and one which, almost uniquely, draws hon. Members together, regardless of their political differences, in pursuit of a good thing, a shared goal and an outcome that we wish to deliver. I am pleased to be given the opportunity to play my small part and I have been pleased to respond to the debate today. I congratulate hon. Members on their contributions to it, and I thank the shadow Secretary of State for her ongoing challenge and co-operation as we try to make the world a better place.

3.47 pm

Stephen Twigg: I welcome you to the Chair, Mr Gapes, and thank you for your role in chairing the latter part of the debate. I echo what the Minister, the shadow Minister and the Scottish National party spokesperson said: we have had an excellent debate this afternoon. We have demonstrated the significance of the sustainable development goals to policy both internationally and domestically. We are getting some answers to some questions that we raised in our report, and that is welcome, but there is a long way still to go to ensure that we as a country regain—to use that word again—the momentum to move forward globally and domestically.

I intervened on the Minister specifically on the point that the Secretary of State raised in her letter to me today. We very much look forward to the report that will set out the UK Government’s approach. I very much hope that we will see many of the things that the Minister has said in response today, and that we have heard from him and his colleagues in recent weeks and months, reflected in other statements from the Government, so that the sustainable development goals and the focus on the priority of poverty reduction remain absolutely at the heart of Government policies. As has been said, the aid reviews are an early opportunity for the Government to demonstrate that once again.

On behalf of the International Development Committee, I thank all those who participated in the debate. I welcome the opportunity for Parliament to demonstrate its commitment to these important goals.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the First Report of the International Development Committee, UK implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, HC 103, and the Government response, HC 673.

3.48 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 28 November 2016

[PHILIP DAVIES in the Chair]

Child Cancer

4.30 pm

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 162934 relating to child cancer.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Davies. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members present for attending.

The debate arises from an online petition on child cancer started by a couple whose child, Poppy-Mai, sadly passed away after a battle with a very rare cancer. She contracted a progressive and aggressive malignant rhabdoid tumour, which progressed into a metastatic brain tumour. The petition is entitled:

“Force child cancer to the forefront of the NHS and government funding schemes”, and it calls for “more funding” to be made “available in the fight against child cancer.”

It also calls for more to be done “to spread awareness...more genetic testing and research. Child cancer needs to be at the forefront of our minds.”

At this point, it is important that I clarify to the petitioners that, as a member of the Petitions Committee, my job today is to lead the debate and not to take a position on behalf of the Committee. I promise to take as many interventions from as many Members as possible, to involve them in the debate.

One of the charities that got in touch with me before this debate was Christopher’s Smile, whose motto—“coz kids get cancer too”—shows the sad reality of childhood cancer. There is something even sadder when cancer—in fact, any disease—attacks children: they have the rest of their life ahead of them and cannot be said to have caused or encouraged cancer themselves by their lifestyle choices. However, there is a smaller national profile for childhood cancer, with less attention focused on the fact, any disease—attacks children: they have the rest of their life ahead of them and cannot be said to have caused or encouraged cancer themselves by their lifestyle choices. However, there is a smaller national profile for childhood cancer, with less attention focused on the disease.

Child cancer recently hit the headlines when the singer Michael Bublé announced that he was taking a break from performing while his three-year-old son undergoes treatment for liver cancer. I am sure that all Members here today will join me in sending our best wishes to Michael, Noah and their family at this very upsetting time. What they are going through at the moment is unthinkable and there are many families across the UK in exactly the same position, with parents feeling helpless while wanting to do everything possible to protect their children from this dreadful and cruel disease.

Unfortunately, that sad story shows that cancer can strike anyone at any time. More needs to be done to educate all of us on what signs to look out for, so that cancer can be caught early and there is a higher chance of survival. I thank the Government for their response to the petition. I am sure that Members from all parties in the House support the Government’s ambition to lead the world in fighting cancer. More attention needs to be given to the ways that we can become the world leader, so that we can see the number of cancer diagnoses fall and the number of cancer survivors increase.

The cancer taskforce’s five-year plan to achieve world-class cancer outcomes includes many recommendations on cancer in children, including “a possible review of CTYA services”—that is, services for children, teenagers and young adults—“to provide improved integrated care”, and to seek “consent from children and young people for their data and tissue collection for use in future research studies and development of services and...ways in which access to clinical trials for teenagers and young adults with cancer could be significantly increased.”

All these things are crucial to beating childhood cancer and improving the care received by those who contract the disease.

On multiple occasions, charities have raised with me and the Petitions Committee the importance of getting real data to help with future developments in a range of different diseases. I chair the all-party group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions, so I know that this problem does not only affect childhood cancers; it also affects other areas of the health debate. It is potentially even more important when it comes to child cancer, because thankfully child cancer is rare, relative to the population. I urge the Government to look carefully at ways in which researchers can gain access to those important, albeit anonymised data as a priority.

I was pleased to read in the Government’s response to the petition their understanding that “a cancer diagnosis can have devastating consequences for the lives of young people and their families”, and that the Department of Health recognises that the most important thing is that “Care should be built around what matters to the young person and their family”.

The Department is “working closely with cancer charities to ensure patients get the support they need during and after their treatment.”

However, more can still be done to ensure that when a cancer diagnosis is received—especially if, sadly, it is a terminal diagnosis—the child is made as comfortable as possible and is able to spend time with people who love them.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): As a parent who went through this when my son was nine, I know that the news is devastating for parents. What happens to the family around the child and the level of support that is provided are also important. I was an MP at the time, with a good salary, but a lot of people do not have that level of income, or perhaps they do not have other family members to come round. We really need to put in extra support, and not months afterwards but straight away, when parents actually get that news.

Ben Howlett: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. There is a multitude of different organisations out there to help at the point when a diagnosis is received, but of
course that should not distract from the fact that the Government also need to look at early intervention to support the family of a child when the child receives a diagnosis. I hope that the Minister will mention that when responding to the debate.

I am the MP for Bath, which is in the south-west, and I pay personal tribute to the great work done by the Children’s Hospice South West, which serves my constituency and others across the entire region. The hospice’s dedication and the service it provides in the final days of a child’s life is tremendous. I thank the hospice on behalf of my constituents for all the work that it does.

Research and funding are obviously critical. Evidence has been submitted throughout the course of the discussions around this issue. I am sure that all colleagues in this House will welcome the fact that the number of children dying from cancer each year in the UK has fallen in the last 20 years, but one child dying is obviously far too many. Research has been at the heart of the progress made, helping more children to survive cancer than ever before, but as I said, childhood cancer remains the biggest killer by disease of children in the western world.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): My hon. Friend rightly mentions research and progress. I intervene briefly to speak about my constituent, Paula Adair, whose daughter, Katy Holmes, died in 2012 of a diffuse pontine glioma. Paula made the point to me that Katy received the same treatment that Neil Armstrong’s daughter had received nearly 40 years before, showing that there had not been adequate progress on these terrible diseases.

Ben Howlett: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and I pay tribute to her and to other colleagues for championing cases such as that one in their work as constituency MPs. She makes an incredibly important point. Months ago, I took part in another Petitions Committee debate in relation to brain tumours and it is quite clear to me that the rarer a cancer is, the less attention is paid to the funding of research to find the underlying causes. There has been a change during the last few months and years, with more attention focused on some of the rarer cancers, but there isstill a long way to go. I hope that some of the major progress made on the more common cancers, such as prostate cancer and breast cancer, and the evidence gathered can be applied to some of the rarer cancers as medical technology improves.

Approximately 3,800 children and young people in the UK are diagnosed with cancer each year, and approximately 260 children in the UK die each year from cancer before their 15th birthday. For those who survive, there are often lifelong treatment-related health problems to be dealt with. In addition, as the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) made clear, there are also the ongoing costs in relation to the treatment and support for the families as well throughout the entire process. To be frank, we must do an awful lot more.

Mark Tami: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is not only the physical side of the illness that we must address, but what happens to children if they get through their illness—hopefully they do—including all the questions they will have, such as “Why has this happened to me?” and “Why do I look different?”, their reintegration into school and their anger? We might put a lot of money into addressing the illness itself, but we put very little into looking after the child afterwards. It is no accident that children who have had cancer have a higher suicide rate than those who have not.

Ben Howlett: I pay tribute to the work the hon. Gentleman has been doing in this area and I completely agree with him. The health benefit analysis that is at the heart of the Department of Health in a number of areas is under review—it is constantly under review—but it needs a much more holistic understanding of the costs, not just in economic terms but in terms of societal issues, including mental health and ongoing support for a child’s family for, hopefully, the rest of their life.

I welcome the Government’s focus on improving earlier diagnosis, as it makes it more likely that patients, including children with cancer, will receive effective treatment. Additionally, it is good news that the Government have committed to implementing all the recommendations of the cancer taskforce, including that by 2020 everyone referred with suspected cancer will receive either a definitive diagnosis or the all-clear within four weeks.

Michael Dugher (Barnsley East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for setting out the arguments so well. Will he join me in paying tribute to the many good organisations and charities in the field, in particular BeChild Cancer Aware, which does fantastic work on the need for early diagnosis, gives wonderful support to families and runs campaigns, including in memory of my nephew, Oliver Shaw, who died of leukaemia in 2011?

Ben Howlett: I will come on to awareness later. I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating that charity and the others around the country that do huge amounts of work, often with limited resources in these difficult times.

Returning to early diagnosis, I wish to ask the Minister about the four-week all-clear or definitive diagnosis period and whether it is being performance managed and adhered to. I am sure it is. I welcome the good news that NHS England has the funding necessary to improve cancer services over the next five years, including up to £300 million by 2020 to support earlier diagnosis of cancer, and £10 billion of real-terms increases in NHS funding by 2020-21. I also welcome the recommendations in the taskforce report that give direction on where the funds should be targeted. When it comes to NHS England, performance management is crucial, just as it is in the rare diseases space. We need to know that funding will be spent on the ground on the people who really need support, particularly children who are suffering on an almost daily basis. Campaigners rightly point out that significant progress is still to be made on childhood cancer. Will the Minister confirm that the work undertaken by NHS England will routinely be performance managed on the basis of what has been said by many organisations in the sector?

Childhood cancer is, thankfully, not common, with children accounting for only 1% of cancer patients. Unfortunately, that constitutes a tiny market for pharmaceutical companies, so there are often far too few incentives for child drug development. The pharmaceutical industry generally targets the largest markets for its
research and development and it wants its latest drugs to go into front-line use as quickly as possible, to gain maximum benefit from the patent protection. Although many of the genetic abnormalities in childhood cancers also occur in adults and both adults and children can be treated with the same drugs, paediatric drug development trials and availability always lag many years behind. I urge the Government to do more to encourage pharmaceutical companies to invest in research and development for life-saving paediatric drug development. Will the Minister highlight what she will do to encourage NHS Improvement to focus on that market?

Access to cross-border trials is particularly important for rare diseases such as childhood cancers, as there are often not enough cases in a single country to make a trial viable. The European Union’s new clinical trials regulation will come into force in October 2018, and will hopefully make it much easier to carry out cross-border trials, by requiring that a single application be submitted to a central point rather than one in every country. I seriously ask the Government to consider how we can remain party to that system as we exit the European Union.

The overall survival rate for children with cancer is 82% in England and Wales, but the rate varies considerably according to the different types of cancer, and by age and gender. One thing we all know about the chances of survival is that the earlier cancer is caught the more likely it is to be beaten, and the same applies to cancer in children, so I will now talk about the importance of awareness campaigns.

Awareness campaigns can be aimed at and useful to a wide variety of people. It is not just parents and family members who can benefit from improved campaigns. One of the most important things the health system can do is give a child a diagnosis as early as possible, with swift treatment where necessary. However, CLIC Sargent, the childhood cancer charity, states that parents often explain that their journey to diagnosis was far from straightforward. For example, children are disproportionately diagnosed through emergency medical care, with 53% of children aged nought to 14 diagnosed through A&E or emergency referral compared with 20% of adults. There must be something causing that large disparity. I think two issues need to be addressed.

First, there are some excellent national awareness campaigns for many of the more common adult cancers. This month is dedicated to prostate and testicular cancer, for example, not just to raise funds but to highlight what men should be looking out for. There are also multiple campaigns encouraging women to regularly check their breasts and to encourage their friends and family to do so. Those campaigns must be applauded and they should be learned from and replicated for other cancers, including childhood ones. If parents are aware of and sensitive to the various early warning signs, we might see a decrease in the number of emergency diagnoses and an increase in diagnosis by GPs, who often know a child’s history far better.

Secondly, GPs need to be educated about some of the less well known symptoms, so that they can be alert when examining children. CLIC Sargent is working with the Teenage Cancer Trust and the Royal College of General Practitioners to produce an e-learning module on children and young people’s cancers for GPs across the country. I thank those bodies for their work and I encourage other organisations to collaborate similarly, to get the crucial awareness messages out there. I am sure that the Minister agrees that continuing professional development is vital for GPs and all medical professionals. If GPs are more aware and more ready to carry out further tests, we might see an improvement in childhood cancer survival.

Last year, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence addressed non-site-specific symptoms of concern for children and young people, recommending that GPs take into account the insight and knowledge of parents and carers when considering making a referral for a suspected cancer. NICE noted that more lives could be saved each year in England if GPs followed the new guidelines, which encourage GPs to think of cancer sooner and lower the referral threshold. I ask the Government to support some of the excellent childhood cancer campaigns and charities in their aim to achieve national coverage for awareness campaigns and to reach parents and doctors through a variety of means.

Every year in the UK about 3,800 children and young people are diagnosed with cancer, 1,600 of whom are aged nought to 14. For young people, when the doctor says “cancer” normal life stops. It is a devastating experience for the whole family. The petition highlights the huge impact that cancer has on families across the country and the need for more investment, research and awareness. I urge the Government to consider how we can increase engagement with charities to encourage awareness campaigns that garner national attention, develop greater incentives to increase research and development into lifesaving paediatric drugs, and improve early diagnosis for child cancer patients.

I thank colleagues for their attendance today and in particular I thank the petitioners for highlighting this incredibly important issue. I look forward to hearing the comments of other Members and the Minister.

4.50 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) on introducing the debate and on the thoughtful way in which he presented the arguments. I am pleased to make a short contribution. I have come at the urging of my constituent Debbie Moran, whose young daughter Abigail is just five and was diagnosed with a childhood cancer at the age of three. I understand Abigail is in remission, and we wish her and the rest of the family all the best for the future.

The figures I have seen suggest that each year more than 6,000 young people across Europe die of cancer, but by 2020 there will be nearly half a million childhood cancer survivors. I hope we will bear that progress in mind today. I welcome the work of the European Network for Cancer Research in Children and Adolescents, SIOPE—the European Society for Paediatric Oncology—and the European paediatric haematology and oncology community. I particularly welcome SIOPE’s seven-point plan to increase over the next 10 years the cure rate and the quality of survivorship for children and young people with cancer.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I hope that whatever decisions this country makes over Brexit, we will remain an active part of this important European cancer research and treatment community. As the hon. Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) said, we need more innovative treatments introduced into child cancer care. We need
the development of precision cancer medicine to help guide decisions on which therapies to use. We need to increase our knowledge of tumour biology and speed up the translation from basic research to clinical care. As my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) said, we also need to improve the quality of survivorship and address the consequences of cancer treatment, such as the long-term side effects in all their various forms. Basically, we need to understand more about the causes of childhood cancers.

Although there has been significant progress over the past 50 years—the hon. Member for Bath described some of that—it has largely been achieved by using intensive chemotherapy regimens combined with surgery and/or radiotherapy. There is some evidence to suggest that patient survival has plateaued over the past five years, which hastens the demand for more innovative treatments.

The petition focuses on the problems we need to address, such as the lack of sustained and sufficient funding. As has been suggested, there is also poor access right across Europe to new paediatric drugs. Too many countries do not recognise paediatric haematology and oncology as a sub-speciality. For the sake of Abigail and thousands of children like her, and in memory of Poppy-Mai, as a sub-speciality. For the sake of Abigail and thousands who do not recognise paediatric haematology and oncology such as the lack of sustained and sufficient funding. As that patient survival has plateaued over the past five years, which hastens the demand for more innovative treatments.

The petition focuses on the problems we need to address, such as the lack of sustained and sufficient funding. As has been suggested, there is also poor access right across Europe to new paediatric drugs. Too many countries do not recognise paediatric haematology and oncology as a sub-speciality. For the sake of Abigail and thousands of children like her, and in memory of Poppy-Mai, whose parents are the originators of the petition, we need to dedicate ourselves to saying that we recognise the seriousness of the issue and that we are going to do more.

4.54 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I had not intended to take part in this debate, but having heard what I have heard, I am moved to make a brief contribution. One of the most harrowing of the many harrowing things that a Member of Parliament has to deal with, particularly any MP who is a parent, is to be confronted by desperate parents with a desperately sick infant or young adult who are begging for help and are coming to their Member of Parliament as the last resort. In the course of a parliamentary career, I suspect that most colleagues will face that circumstance. If they have not already, they will in time.

Most of us will have been faced with the need or desire to fundraise to send that child to another country, often but not exclusively to the United States, for treatment that is not available here and that may or may not be efficacious. In my case, I experienced that at second hand rather than at first hand, unlike some colleagues present, but those of us who have experienced it know only too well that people will clutch at any straw. I would do the same, and I am sure you would too, Mr Davies. If the chance of success is 10%, they will take it, because 10% is better than 0%.

What grieves me is that so much effort goes into trying to react and therefore relatively little effort goes into trying to pre-empt. There are wonderful children's hospices around the country, and I pay tribute to them. Demelza House in Kent is fantastic—there are many others—but the object of the exercise is to try to ensure that treatment is available so that children do not need to go into hospices at all.

One case that hit the headlines not so long ago was a child who was effectively abducted from hospital care and taken first to Spain and then elsewhere for treatment, because something was not available here and was available somewhere else. That straw was clutched at, and I would have done the same. Looking at what happens overseas and thinking of those hard cases, a couple of things come out from what has been said already today. Thankfully, the scale is relatively small. Equally thankfully, the scale of individual cancers is smaller still, but that in itself creates a problem. The point has been made that drug companies are reluctant to invest in the research and generation of drugs that might not be viable because there is no real market for them.

My hon. Friend the Minister has a background in science, and she will understand the possibilities that flow from co-operation probably better than anyone in the room. Having looked at the matter over a number of years and having seen the work that the Teenage Cancer Trust has done, it seems to me that we need to pull together all the expertise and concentrate on one or two centres of excellence, so that the scale and the ability for young medics to learn are viable. It is very difficult for someone to become expert in something if they do not have a patient to study. I urge the Minister to give an indication that the Government will make a Herculean effort, in a way that there has not been before, to pull together all the strands. We also need to maximise the possibilities of international co-operation, because work is being done in other countries.

Mark Tami: Sorry for talking about my experience again, but my son was very fortunate to find a donor. He had a stem cell transplant in the end. As a parent, that was great for us, but we were with other parents who were not so fortunate and who saw their children pass away because they could not find a donor. The awful thing is that there are people out there who would be a match, but they do not know it. I want to put on the record my support for Anthony Nolan and other charities that have saved so many lives. We really do need to do more. Stem cell transplants offer a great opportunity for not only treating cancer, but other things as well in the longer term. I simply want to put on the record how important it is that very important work carries on and that we do not have the situation in which some are fortunate and some are not.

Sir Roger Gale: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He was also right to pay tribute, as I and others should have done, to the Anthony Nolan trust.

I do not often argue for centralisation, but, in this case, given the scale and the limited resources that are available, it seems that a concentration of effort might deliver more results than a dissipation of that effort.

Finally, I want to endorse what the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) said earlier. There is a crying need for support for families from day one from the moment the diagnosis is made and the family is informed. There is a huge need for support. Some are fortunate in having large and supportive families. Others much less fortunate face terrifying circumstances and isolation.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman and others who have spoken so bravely. He is making a very moving speech. On support for families, I want to bring to the Chamber’s attention my constituent, Allison Barr, who lost her son Jak Trueman.
last year very tragically to cancer. She has worked to fulfill his dream of having a den for siblings, because the siblings of children who are lost are often forgotten. She has done a huge amount of work in the West Lothian community to bring Jak’s dream to fruition. We must remember that many different parties are involved when people lose a child to cancer.

Sir Roger Gale: That point is very well made indeed.

I conclude by saying that co-ordination and co-operation are necessary. International co-operation is necessary, and support for families is vital. In small rural communities and in close families, support may be built in, but in cities such as London, New York, Washington and Berlin, as in any big city in the world, there are lonely people facing difficult circumstances. I cannot think of any more difficult or more harrowing circumstance than the sudden knowledge that your child is faced with a life-threatening disease. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to do everything she can to promote the co-operation necessary to solve these problems.

5.2 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate as we continue the fight against childhood cancer. I am aware that the petition, which is the subject of today’s debate, is primarily written with reference to the NHS in England. As a Scottish MP, Members will forgive me for using the debate as a chance to highlight some of the local champions in my constituency who have done so much to help raise awareness of childhood cancer. Whether we are in Scotland or England, and regardless of our party affiliation, I hope all Members can come together to provide constructive suggestions for the UK Government. I hope too that the Minister is receptive to those suggestions in the spirit in which they are given.

We know that childhood cancer is relatively rare, yet in Scotland around 150 children are diagnosed every year.

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): My constituent Sam Dorrance was five years old when he lost his battle with cancer earlier this year. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating Sam’s brother, Ethan, who has raised £10,000 for CLIC Sargent, and also Sam’s family and friends who have raised more than £65,000 for Super Sam’s fund for research into high-grade brain tumours?

Ronnie Cowan: Absolutely. I had the privilege of meeting the family when they were here for the British Red Cross event a couple of weeks ago. They are an inspiration and an example to us all.

The 150 individual cases that I mentioned mean 150 new families having to deal with the devastating consequences of illness every year. It is not only the health aspect of cancer that families must overcome, but the immense emotional and financial turmoil that the diagnosis can bring. Many parents will face extreme pressure on their relationship, in some instances leading to a breakdown of the family unit. Others will be forced to give up work. Combined with the additional costs of caring for a seriously ill child, it may mean that the family is pushed into poverty.

At this point, I want to address the Minister. In the Government’s response to the e-petition, they say that children and teenagers with serious or critical illness such as cancer are also expected to apply for disability living allowance or the personal independent payment. Is there some way we could have a simple process whereby a diagnosis becomes a tick in a box so that people do not have to apply for PIP or DLA? It should be a given that they need financial support. We know that and we should take one of those burdens off them.

Along with the child and the parents, siblings too will experience disruption in their own lives, including educational difficulties. Although we are able to quantify that there are 150 new cases in Scotland every year, we can never quantify the wide-ranging implications. It is encouraging that survival rates are improving, but I am sure we can all agree that we can always do more.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government are absolutely committed to providing the best possible care for children and young people with life-threatening illnesses in Scotland. I trust that different NHS bodies north and south of the border have a mechanism whereby they can share best practice on childhood cancer. Perhaps the Minister will outline whether that is indeed the case. Let us not stop at sharing best practice north and south of the border: we need pan-European, and in fact global, co-operation. It would be appalling to think that good substantial research anywhere in the world was not shared so that everybody could benefit from it.

In my constituency of Inverclyde, we have a champion who is helping to raise awareness of childhood cancer. Nathan Mowat was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukaemia shortly before his fourth birthday. Since then he has endured hours of chemotherapy treatment and will need at least a further year of maintenance treatment. Chemotherapy can have a harsh effect on the human body. In Nathan’s case, it means that even a minor illness can now have serious ramifications for his health.

Nathan, with the support of his mum Gillian, his dad Paul and his sister Annabel, has managed to rally a huge amount of support within Inverclyde. In September, the Greenock Telegraph, Greenock Morton football club and a range of prominent local businesses and organisations pledged to glow gold and help Nathan raise awareness of childhood cancer. Glow gold was a great success, not only because it rallied community support, but because it made more people aware of the practical issues that people face as a result of childhood cancer. Whether in respect of bereavement, research, diagnosis or resources, we need an open discussion on how we can continue to improve our approach.

Finally, I thank Nathan for all his great work in Inverclyde. I look forward to seeing him fully overcome his illness. He will continue to inspire many people, and I am sure my parliamentary colleagues will join me in wishing him and his family the best for the future.

5.8 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) for opening the debate so well, and I thank other hon. and right hon. Members who have spoken. We are here this afternoon because of Andrew Barnard, who lost his daughter Poppy-Mai to a brain tumour. We owe a particular debt of gratitude to him for the effort that he put into
[Wes Streeting]

campaigning on behalf of so many other children whose lives will sadly be blighted, and even tragically ended, as a result of childhood cancer. The theme of families and the courage and bravery that they show in campaigning, not only for their own children but on behalf of so many others, is a theme I will return to.

I want to raise three issues during this afternoon’s debate: first, the extraordinary courage and resilience of families and the need to support them; secondly, the importance of awareness and early diagnosis and intervention; and thirdly and most importantly, the need for research so that we can reduce and even eradicate the number of children dying needlessly from cancers that will be found to be curable.

I am here this afternoon because of my six-year-old constituent, Kaleigh Lau, and her remarkable family, Scott, Yang and Carson. Like most girls her age, Kaleigh is active and fun. She enjoys dancing, singing, swimming and playing with her friends. In April, things changed for her. She complained of double vision, and her family noticed that there was a problem with her eyes. Fortunately, they took immediate action and took her to Moorfields eye hospital. After some initial checks, there was found to be no problem with her vision, so on the same day she was referred to the Royal London hospital for a CT scan and an MRI scan.

When a lump on Kaleigh’s brain was identified, she was immediately referred to Great Ormond Street hospital, where two days later she was diagnosed with a rare form of childhood brain tumour called a diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma. It is a brain stem tumour that mostly, although not exclusively, affects children. It is estimated that fewer than 40 children a year develop them in the UK and that they account for just 10% to 15% of all brain tumours. They are high-grade brain tumours that are fast-growing and can spread throughout the brain stem. As a result, they are difficult to treat and have a poor prognosis. The main treatment offered is radiotherapy. The tumours are not suitable for surgery because of their location in the brain stem, and chemotherapy has been shown to have little effect, but research in that area is ongoing.

Seema Kennedy: The hon. Gentleman’s constituent has exactly the same brain tumour as my constituent, Katy. Although only 40 children a year develop such tumours, they are primary school children with a whole lifetime ahead of them. Research in that area would pay dividends, because although 40 is a small number, those children could go on to be productive members of our society. The important point is that they have a lifetime ahead of them.

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree, and I will come on to talk about the personal impact that such a diagnosis can have on families.

As the hon. Lady knows, the prognosis is poor. Only 30% of children with DIPG are likely to survive for more than a year after diagnosis, and 90% do not survive for two years. According to the Minister’s response on 13 September to a written question that I submitted, there has been only one UK trial relating to DIPG. Although there are some great initiatives—particularly the INSTINCT project, which brings together experts from Newcastle University, the Institute of Cancer Research, and the University College London Great Ormond Street Institute for Child Health in London—we have yet to find a cure.

Dr Darren Hargrave at Great Ormond Street is leading a new clinical trial to test three new drugs in 150 children affected by DIPG. Professor Chris Jones and his team at the Institute of Cancer Research have found links between the genetic faults in the DNA of children with DIPG and people with stone man syndrome. Lots of work is being done on the links between DIPG and other diseases, but it has yet to lead to a cure. There is some hope that the work being undertaken by Professor Steven Gill, who is leading a team based at the Harley Street Clinic to develop a treatment known as convection-enhanced delivery, may produce a treatment that leads to an extension of life, as some of the initial experiments have shown. It is hoped that CED might lead to a cure, but the overall outlook for those children is not positive.

As the hon. Lady said, the number of children affected in the UK is relatively small, but the impact on them and their families is simply unimaginable. Without being from a family that has been directly affected by a childhood brain tumour or another form of childhood cancer, it is impossible to know what those families go through. I have been given some insight through the work I have done with my constituent’s family—particularly her father, Scott.

We need early diagnosis. The swift response of Kaleigh’s family and the hospitals that she visited enabled an early diagnosis. I pay tribute to the clinicians and staff of Moorfields eye hospital, the Royal London hospital and Great Ormond Street hospital, and, in particular, to Kaleigh’s family. When families are affected in that way, it has an impact on the whole of family life. So many anxieties, issues and day-to-day challenges are thrown up. Is the cough or cold that the child is experiencing simply a winter condition, or is it something more serious? Most parents would not be worried when their child comes home after a fall or a scrape at school—they dust them off and it is fine—but so many of these parents have to worry about what caused the fall. Was it an innocent childhood accident or something more worrying?

There are some fantastic charities that provide support to the families that are affected. In my constituency, Hopes & Dreams provides dreams to children with life-limiting or terminal illnesses. It enabled Kaleigh and her family and friends to go to Center Parcs, which gave the family welcome respite and gave Kaleigh the opportunity to enjoy herself with her family and friends in the way she normally does.

I have also had to see Kaleigh’s family battle for information—in particular, about accessing some of the experimental treatments that are available. They have had to battle on numerous fronts. They have battled against bureaucracy and tried to navigate their way through the system, and getting partners and agencies to work together to ensure their child is at the centre of health managers’ and clinicians’ thinking has been a particular challenge.

There is also the issue of money. Kaleigh’s family raised considerable amounts of money through both the generous support of family friends and members of the public, and their own finances. I am struck by the concern that her father raised about the families who are not in the same position, do not have access to a
network of support and have not been able to find funding. It is simply not right that some families lose out because they do not have the money or are not able to raise the funds needed to access treatments that could lead to an extension of life or a cure. I hope the Minister will address the issue of what we can do to ensure that access to treatment—experimental treatment and clinical trials—is not limited by families’ wealth.

I also want to raise the issue of funding for research. I pay particular tribute to Kaleigh and her family. I am in awe of the fact that, amid all the day-to-day challenges that her condition presents and the battle to ensure that she gets access to treatment that could alleviate her symptoms and extend her life, Kaleigh’s family and Kaleigh herself have engaged so energetically in a campaign for more funding for research into DIPG and other forms of childhood brain tumours. In the past few months, they have engaged a range of celebrities. JK Rowling supported their petition, and for the past two weekends Kaleigh has been touring “The X Factor” studio, signing up a range of the finalists to tweet the petition. She has got members of the cast of “The Only Way is Essex” on board—they are an Essex family, and I am an Essex MP. The cast are supporting our local family, which is fantastic.

I have been overwhelmed by the number of right hon. and hon. Members who have wanted to support Kaleigh’s campaign by having a picture taken with the Kaleigh bear, which has been on tour around Parliament, and by tweeting links to the petition for more Government funding. We have also had great support from our local newspapers—the Ilford Recorder, the Wanstead and Woodford Recorder, the Wanstead and Woodford Guardian and the London Evening Standard. I thank them for their support in raising awareness of Kaleigh’s campaign in search of more funding for a cure.

It is very welcome that the Government have a working group, which we hope will report in 2017, to look at how to increase the impact and quantity of brain tumour research, but however much effort they are putting in, the sad truth is that in the 12 months or so before the report is published and the Government take action, so many children across our country will be diagnosed with DIPG and other brain tumours. The urgency of this task cannot be overstated. A significant amount of money already goes in through the National Institute for Health Research and the Medical Research Council, but much more clearly needs to be done. There are competing demands and pressures on Government budgets, but for so many families in our country today and in the coming days, weeks, months and years, that funding could save a child’s life. I hope that the Minister will make a commitment to see what more she can do within the constraints of the health budget to invest in a crucial area that matters so much to so many families throughout the country.

I urge all right hon. and hon. Members present in the Chamber and throughout the House, as well as members of the public who might be watching this debate, to support Kaleigh’s Trust, to tweet links to the petition and to share it with family and friends, and to continue applying pressure to get more people to understand the impacts of terrible conditions such as DIPG and the urgency to fund and find a cure.

In closing, I again pay tribute to the extraordinary courage and resilience of Kaleigh and her family, and to so many other such families, who in spite of troubling and traumatic times continue to battle on, not only for their children but for others. That should inspire us all to do more individually and collectively.

5.21 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) for his introduction and other hon. Members for their personal and heartfelt speeches and interventions. In particular, I thank the parents of Poppy-Mai, who started the petition and so brought this matter to the attention of the House.

My five asks are clear. First, more units such as the specialist one in Bristol for teenagers and young adults with cancer are needed. The units need to be carefully commissioned so that the maximum amount of specialist clinical knowledge is available to the maximum number of young people.

Secondly, a clear commissioning structure for services for children, teenagers and young adults with cancer is needed, so that everyone knows where the buck stops and who is responsible. Thirdly, the benefit system needs to be adjusted, as other hon. Members have said, so that the families of children and young people are not put into awful financial difficulties such as we have heard about just at the time when they most need to concentrate on their child and nothing else.

Fourthly, Government leadership is needed—I urge the Minister to respond to matters raised by me and other Members—with commissioning guidance, clear priorities and funding for specialist services. Fifthly, the Government need to take responsibility and say how we will go about researching childhood cancers in collaboration with European Union partners after we leave it.

Earlier this year, I visited the specialist teenage and young adults unit in Bristol, accompanied by Christine from the Teenage Cancer Trust, which contributed to the cost of the unit. The unit creates and maintains an environment that provides care for the whole person, helping that young person to cope with the emotional side of their illness, as well as giving them time and space to do school work, to be with friends and family, and to just be a young person not defined by their cancer.

The decor definitely does not make the unit feel like a cancer ward. Yes, per patient, that is more expensive than adult cancer wards. Thankfully, cancer is rare in childhood and youth, but young people have very different specific needs to be met.

Mark Tami: As my hon. Friend is making clear, we have to have specialist centres, but we must not think that we can have them on our doorstep everywhere. That will just not happen, and it would not make sense for it to happen. If we have specialist centres, however, people will have to travel, and families need support and somewhere to stay. I put on record my support for the Ronald McDonald House Charities, which do incredible work providing parents with somewhere to stay. The actual cost burden on parents alone for what can be long treatment periods is astronomical, and a lot of people simply do not have the money.

Thangam Debbonaire: I, too, will be mentioning similar services later in my speech. Absolutely, the last thing parents facing such awful situations need to be
worrying about is where they will stay, how they will afford it and how they will afford even to put petrol in the tank.

My nephew was diagnosed at age 12 with osteosarcoma, a very rare childhood cancer. We were all so focused on getting him and his mum, and his sisters and brothers, though that illness that the longer-term impacts felt very much secondary. Specialist units such as the one in Bristol help the family as well as the young person with cancer to see the whole of life as important, to think about the longer-term implications and to prepare for them. I pay very personal tribute to the teenage and young adults cancer unit in Bristol for its work and to the Teenage Cancer Trust for its support of the unit.

As my hon. Friend said, getting the number of units right is difficult. Given the thankfully low numbers of childhood cancer victims, if the units are to be truly specialist, it will not be an easy matrix. To ensure an appropriate number of specialist units, the Government need to be clear with appropriate commissioning guidance and take responsibility for following it through.

In October when I asked the Department of Health in question 50795 what proportion of specialist units were funded by charitable trusts, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), replied:

“This information is not held centrally.”

For me, that is simply not good enough. Yes, commissioning is done locally, and increasingly commissioning groups and trusts are collaborating, but Government leadership is necessary to work out how many units are needed and how to fund them. Will the Minister commit to gathering that information centrally in order to estimate properly the funding needed to commission appropriately throughout the country? Will she further commit to consulting on and publishing clear commissioning guidance so that the responsibility for commissioning and funding specialist treatment centres for children, young people and young adults is clearly identified, and so that a structure for commissioning across health regions is clear?

On the future of research into childhood cancers, there is clear potential for harm when the UK leaves the EU—I say “potential”, because any such harm can be mitigated, but the Government need to act urgently to address it. Earlier this month in answer to my question 50081 about research, the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation gave welcome assurances about funding. I welcome those assurances, but he did not mention research cohorts. Thankfully, childhood cancer is rare, so it is vital for UK researchers to be able to collaborate fully with their EU counterparts so that they can carry out clinically adequate research with a sufficiently large enough group of children and young people to provide clinically useful and secure results. Yes, funding is vital and I am grateful to him for those assurances, but it is not enough. My next question to the Minister present is this: will she commit to discussing that with her colleagues in the Department for Exiting the European Union, along with research about other rare childhood cancers?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) mentioned, children and young people with cancer and their parents often need to travel long distances for specialist treatment. That might always be unavoidable and, in any case, there are other huge financial costs for parents. In September, I was proud to chair the parliamentary launch of a report by CLIC Sargent, which does so much wonderful work to support children and families affected by childhood cancer. The report shows that the costs of cancer are not only emotional, educational and physical, but financial.

One young person at the launch spoke about how he had to prove repeatedly to the benefits agency that he had cancer and that his treatment was still not over nor his recovery complete. Another young person found that her student loan was stopped because she was deemed to be a student no longer, but her halls of residence still charged her rent. A lone parent spoke of her struggles to manage her finances while faced with losing her income from employment and the increased costs of driving her son a long distance many times each month for treatment, as well as the added costs of heating a home all day for a very sick child, which is often overlooked, and the costs of keeping clothes, bedding and house scrupulously clean, which is so important because the risk of infection is extremely high for those undergoing gruesome treatments such as chemotherapy, as other hon. Members have mentioned.

CLIC Sargent and other charities I know help with all those things and more. I have had the privilege of being shown round the CLIC Sargent house in Bristol, located a few minutes’ walk from the Bristol Royal Infirmary. That house, run by a wonderful woman who knows all too well what childhood cancer means, provides a haven just when it is needed.

Wes Streeting: May I, too, pay tribute to Haven House children’s hospice, which is just outside my constituency and serves many of my constituents? Hospices are often associated with end-of-life care, but as in the case of Haven House, they also provide great support to families whose children may not be near the end of their lives and help them on that journey. They are such a powerful and important source of support, and of course they are all voluntary and rely on the public’s generosity.

Thangam Debbonaire: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are many charities across the country that do everything they can to try to help the families of children and young people with cancer. I pay tribute to them all, even though I cannot possibly know their names.

The CLIC Sargent social worker is on hand in the Bristol royal Infirmary when a family receives a devastating diagnosis and is told that their child needs to start treatment right away. Such families are often many miles from home. They can arrive that night at CLIC Sargent house with nothing and be given somewhere to stay for as long as they need it, clothes and bedding if they have come without them and, when necessary, space for the whole family so brothers and sisters can be with their family and their sibling who is being treated. I am proud to declare an interest in CLIC Sargent: my beloved sister-in-law works for it. She gives her time and expertise to an organisation that has done so much for our family and many others.

Will the Minister commit to discussing with her colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions the financial impact of childhood cancer on families, and will she use the CLIC Sargent report as a reference point? Will she further consider supporting the provision
of such homes for the families of children with cancer? If those homes are essential for allowing children to be treated, we must surely consider prioritising them along with other specialist support for statutory funding, at least in part. I do not believe it is right that such homes, which are so essential, must rely entirely on the generosity of volunteers and charitable giving, although I pay tribute to people who raise money. The Government must consider providing that funding.

As other hon. Members have said, until someone has known childhood cancer in their own family, it can be difficult for them to comprehend its full impact. Yes, there are excellent briefings available from specialist cancer charities—CLIC Sargent, Teenage Cancer Trust, Cancer Research UK and other charities provided briefings for this debate. My family was fortunate. Despite an initially very difficult prognosis, that 12-year-old child is now a happy, well adjusted young man in his 20s with a responsible job and a secure relationship with his partner, but I grieve for those who are not so fortunate. I want to ensure that, whatever the prognosis, no family has to worry about money at that most difficult time. I want us to do everything we can—the Government must lead—to improve awareness, early diagnosis, treatment and support, so that one day deaths from childhood cancer end and we alleviate and reduce, if not completely eliminate, the terrible suffering that it brings. I also hope against hope that one day, no parent will ever have to hear the word “cancer”. I long for that day, as I am sure we all do.

5.33 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) for opening this interesting and emotive debate, which was scheduled by the Petitions Committee. I am grateful to him for clearly explaining the issue and highlighting that unfortunately, the rarer the cancer, the greater the resource challenges it faces, and that development of paediatric drugs lags behind the development of drugs for adults.

It is a pleasure to follow such informative and powerful contributions by the hon. Gentleman and other participants from both sides of the House. I am particularly grateful for a couple of the points that have been made. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for putting this into the European context. Although we deal with small numbers in our country, childhood cancer is a much larger problem across that wider area. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) for illustrating the scale and challenge of the financial difficulties that people face. Unfortunately, the burden of relieving those all too often falls to charitable organisations rather than the state.

I offer my condolences to Mr Barnard and his wife on the sad loss of their daughter Poppy-Mai. I thank them for raising awareness of this important issue with the petition that brings us here. It must be very traumatic for them to relive each moment of that tragedy as they hear this debate. Unfortunately, theirs is not a unique case—such cases occur all too often across our country. We must therefore recognise our shared responsibility to tackle child cancer.

The Scottish National party Government are working hard to improve cancer outcomes for children as well as the entire population of Scotland. As my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) illustrated, cancer is relatively rare in children. Childhood cancer accounts for less than 1% of all cancers in Scotland, with approximately 150 new cases every year. There are approximately another 180 new cases in young adults aged between 16 and 25. An updated cancer plan for children in Scotland was launched earlier this year, which will complement the ongoing “Getting it right for every child” programme to ensure that Scotland’s children have access to the best possible services.

In recent years, the system in Scotland for supporting children suffering from cancer and their families has been reorganised. All cancer treatment centres now work together as one single managed service network for children and young people with cancer—the MSNCYPC, which may be the longest acronym I have ever used. As a result, young patients have access to appropriate specialist services that are as local as possible and both safe and sustainable. The network ensures that the care pathway is as equitable as possible, regardless of where in Scotland people live.

The SNP Government are focused on improving health outcomes for children, which is at the forefront of the SNP’s health priorities. We are serious about improving cancer care and treatment, which is a key reason why the Scottish Government will invest £100 million over the next five years through their new cancer strategy. As well as providing funding to health boards, we invest in a range of areas to support healthier lives for children and families, such as children’s palliative care, the cost of which is rising—delivering lifeline care and support to seriously ill children cost nearly 10% more in 2015-16 than the previous year.

That support for children’s palliative care charity funding is in stark contrast with what is happening in England. Barbara Gelb OBE, the chief executive of Together for Short Lives, says:

“We believe that ministers should follow the example of the Scottish Government, which has recently committed £30 million funding to Children’s Hospice Association Scotland (CHAS) over the next five years. We’re calling on the UK government to re-examine funding arrangements as a matter of urgency and carry out a national inquiry into the state of children’s palliative care funding in England.”

I hope the Minister will address that comment.

I commend the work of the many charitable organisations that are active in this field. For example, as others have highlighted, CLIC Sargent does tremendous work to support young people and their families as they come to terms with cancer diagnoses and journey through their treatment. In Scotland, leukaemia is the most common cancer in children—leukaemia, brain tumours and lymphomas account for more than two thirds of child cancers. The Brain Tumour Charity conducts various research projects and focuses on understanding the causes of childhood brain tumours. I take this opportunity to commend its investment of more than £18 million in its many research projects. Its commitment and work means that a brain tumour diagnosis no longer means a death sentence. Although that is welcome, it is sadly not the case for everyone, as has been evidenced.

Whole communities in my constituency were devastated by the tragic loss of five-year-old Tilly from Linlithgow, whose case echoes the points made by the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale). Tilly lost her brave fight against her brain tumour just a few weeks ago,
leaving her family heartbroken and touching the hearts of entire communities. A family member spoke to the Journal and Gazette, the local newspaper, about the support the family had received from the local community, which included fundraising to send Tilly to the United States, which is all too often the case. They said:

“We really could not begin to thank people enough for the support they have shown Tilly and the family during all of this. It has been overwhelming and we will be forever grateful. To raise such a massive amount of money shows how much people care and how communities come together when people need them. The money that is left over will be given to raise awareness of the type of brain tumour Tilly had and to help families who find themselves in a similar situation so they can get treatment for their loved ones.”

That action shows the strength of community feeling, which is echoed by the sheer number of people who signed the e-petition. It also shows how a child cancer diagnosis, with all its consequent personal and emotional devastation, affects more than just the child and their immediate family; it affects entire communities.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in today’s consensual and informed debate, which I hope and trust has helped to raise awareness among the wider public.

5.39 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. This debate has arisen in response to a petition signed by more than 115,000 people, including 922 from my constituency, following the sad passing of Poppy-Mai, the little daughter of Mr and Mrs Barnard. First and foremost, my thoughts are with that Lancashire family and all the other families who have endured a similar devastating loss of their children. There can be nothing worse than the loss of a child, so this debate is especially important.

It is important that we increase awareness of the scale of the problem facing children and young people who have cancer and their families, and look for ways to tackle the problems. How can we improve diagnosis? How can we improve research? How can we ensure better access to treatments? Ultimately, how can we improve survival rates? The debate, outlined so well by the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett), has given us the chance to search for answers to those important questions.

In the UK every year about 4,000 children and young people under the age of 25 are diagnosed with cancer. Worryingly, research by CLIC Sargent published last year found that 44% of young people and 42% of parents felt that their local GP did not take them seriously when they presented with symptoms, and 53% of young people felt that their diagnosis had been delayed. Clearly that is not an acceptable state of affairs. Inevitably, delayed diagnoses mean delayed treatment, with implications for survival rates.

In an attempt to improve awareness among GPs, CLIC Sargent embarked on a joint project to develop an e-learning module specifically focused on cancers in children and young people. That welcome work will go some way in helping to improve diagnosis and primary care support for children and young people with cancer, but far more needs to be done. It is a fact that children in the UK with a brain tumour can take up to three times longer to be diagnosed than children in other countries, most notably the United States. Reducing the time to achieve an accurate diagnosis improves survival rates and can reduce long-term disability, which is experienced by children and young people diagnosed with a brain tumour currently experience. I hope the Minister can give us some understanding of what the Government intend to do to improve diagnosis times.

Recent figures published by Cancer Research UK demonstrate that in the past 20 years we have seen a 32% reduction in the child cancer death rate. We have also seen five-year survival rates increase from 40% in the early 1970s to 82% today. It is widely believed that those improvements have arisen as a result of more research and better treatments. While they are extremely welcome, they go nowhere near far enough, because the fact remains that cancer is still the leading cause of death among children. Five children and young people die of cancer in Britain every week, and those who survive often go on to suffer long-term side effects from their treatment that can continue into adulthood.

A considerable amount of research is carried out every year in the UK by a multitude of organisations including Cancer Research UK, the Brain Tumour Charity, the Institute of Cancer Research, the Institute for Child Health, Great Ormond Street Hospital and the Teenage Cancer Trust. Last year, Cancer Research UK committed to doubling research spending on children’s cancers. That will go some way in helping to discover new treatments. We all thank it and welcome that commitment, because currently only 3% of UK funding into cancer goes to child cancers.

It is important to remind the Government that many of those organisations are charities, which have relied on high levels of funding from the European Research Council. The Brain Tumour Charity stated that the result of the referendum on EU membership has created great uncertainty for charities conducting research into childhood cancers. Post-Brexit, the Government must ensure that the UK medical research community continues to have access to EU funding programmes once Horizon 2020 has ended. Similarly, I seek reassurance from the Minister that any shortfall in research funding as a result of our exit from the EU will be met by the UK Government. If we are to improve outcomes for children with cancer, it is paramount that we have research conducted to understand further these awful diseases.

Following improvements to diagnosis processes and research, we must ensure efficient access to treatment. Children and young people with cancer face a range of barriers in accessing new and better treatments, including drugs not being tested in their age group or in the cancers they are likely to get, even when a drug may be effective in treating their cancer. Simply challenging the age restrictions set on new trials is already increasing participation rates. That should be done in tandem with the provision of age-appropriate information about trials delivered by skilled, specialist staff.

Currently, the cancer patient experience survey does not collect data on cancer patients under the age of 16, and we have seen a 40% decline in response rates from young people over the age of 16 and young adults in the past five years. It is unacceptable that little or no progress has been made on this issue. Understanding patient experiences is important to improve future services.
The cancer strategy includes plans to deliver a methodology to collect under-16s’ experiences, and NHS England is doing that alongside CLIC Sargent. Will the Minister helpfully update us on that work and tell us when we can hope to see the data being collected?

Achieving viable numbers for clinical trials on child cancers is understandably problematic given the relatively small numbers and rarity of some child cancers. However, we cannot allow that to be used as an excuse for not improving the treatments for children and young people with cancer; instead, it should push us to innovate. Cancer Research UK has led the way in challenging the age restrictions on clinical trials, calling for more flexibility when it comes to age and ensuring that researchers justify age restrictions so that they rethink approaches to include children and young people.

Wes Streeting: Particularly for rare forms of cancer or brain tumours such as DIPG, it is important that clinical trials take place at scale. Does my hon. Friend agree that, after the UK leaves the European Union, the Government should seek to ensure that there is as much alignment as possible in the regulatory framework between here and the rest of the European Union so that clinical trials on the European level can continue to take place?

Julie Cooper: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that important point. It is essential that the UK’s exit from the EU does not negatively impact on further research. We must benefit collectively from work done in other countries. To pick up on the point other Members made, we must pool good practice and ensure that our good practice and successful research are shared throughout the world and that we benefit similarly from experience elsewhere.

In the cancer strategy, there were specific recommendations relating to children, teenagers and young adults’ services and how they can be improved. I was concerned, though, that in September the Government made an announcement on wider measures in the strategy but failed to mention anything about the important issue of seeking consent from children and young people for their data and tissue collection to be used in future research studies and the development of services, nor did they include a requirement significantly to increase access to clinical trials for teenagers and young adults with cancer.

Currently 30% of teenagers and 14% of young people aged 20 to 24 enter trials for common cancer types in children and young people. In 30 years there has been no progress in that area. The cancer strategy set a target for NHS England to recruit at least 50% of children and young people in cancer centres or designated units treating teenagers or young adults. That is welcome, but will the Minister give us a progress report and tell us how long it will be before the target is likely to be met?

I pay tribute to the Barnards, to the other families mentioned today and to the children and families across the UK affected by cancer for their courage in the face of this most awful of illnesses. I ask the Government to understand those families’ need for support. We have heard some moving stories today. They need support in a wide sense—from specialist units and through better access to information. Importantly, they also need financial support. Several hon. Members have powerfully made the point today that the costs of cancer are physical and emotional but also financial. We must do more and better.

I want to hear what specific plans the Government have to improve the speed of diagnosis; I want a guarantee that the Minister will protect research funding post-Brexit; and I want to know what plans she has to increase the number of clinical trials, to ensure that access to life-saving treatments is the best possible. Children and young people deserve no less.

5.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

I begin by acknowledging and thanking the many thousands of people who have supported the petition in memory of Poppy-Mai Barnard. I extend my deepest sympathies to Poppy-Mai’s family and friends. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) for the thoughtful way in which he presented the petition. The debate has been moving. I shall do my best to respond to as many comments as possible; if I fail, I shall write in response.

I acknowledge the success of Poppy-Mai’s family in raising more than £100,000 in her name, with the aim of building a sanctuary for children with terminal illnesses and their families to make memories. I know that they would, in the spirit of the petition, want action to ensure that fewer and fewer children have to suffer from cancers, and that they would want to know that the Government are investing in key research and innovation to that end. I hope that there is some comfort to be derived from hearing of the work of the NHS and its partners to benefit children and their families in the future. I thank colleagues on both sides of the House for their moving and highly informed contributions and all who have bravely shared personal stories. They remind us forcefully of why we must fight harder in the battle against childhood cancer. The importance of that cannot be overstated.

At this point, I want particularly to respond to the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), who made some extremely important and pertinent points, in particular about ensuring that there is the right support for families. They must battle on many fronts, not only at the point of diagnosis but in the longer term. As the Minister responsible for mental health I share the hon. Gentleman’s view that we must do better in taking into account the mental health implications of long-term and critical illness. I shall certainly take up his challenge to consider the issue of higher suicide rates among childhood cancer survivors. At the moment we are in the process of refreshing the suicide strategy, targeting vulnerable groups. I shall consider the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised.

We can take heart from the fact that we are making progress in a number of areas. National statistics reveal a general trend of increasing five-year survival for children aged up to 14 diagnosed with cancer in England. In 1990 only 67% of children diagnosed with cancer survived five years; in 2009 that had increased to 80.9% of surviving children. The figure was about 40% in the 1970s, which enables us to understand how far we have come. However, some types of children’s cancers, as we have heard, remain hard to treat, with longer-term physical and
[Nicola Blackwood]

psychological consequences. In the past few decades we have improved our understanding of the consequences and have been able to manage them better; but we must and can do better. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) said, we need to speed up the translation of basic research into patient care, and to improve the quality of survivorship.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bath said, the five-year cancer strategy for England is at the forefront of our efforts. That was produced on behalf of the whole cancer community by the independent cancer taskforce. It is our aim through that strategy to save an extra 30,000 lives of all ages by 2020. The taskforce, as hon. Members would expect, brings together all the major players supporting people with or at risk of cancer. It includes patient groups and voluntary sector organisations, which we know are crucial to the support of cancer patients. I join colleagues in paying tribute to Oliver, the nephew of the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Michael Dugher), and to Be Child Cancer Aware, Anthony Nolan, Cancer Research UK and many other charities that do so much in this area. Without the outstanding work of many medical charities, our work would be less robust and innovative and there would be less hope of bringing about the step change that we need.

The strategy was published in July 2015 and was followed by an implementation plan to take it forward in May 2016. The first annual report was published last month. The Government accepted all 96 recommendations of the strategy, some of which are directly related to children, including a review of children’s and young people’s cancer services to inform actions. The aim is to deliver improvements across the cancer pathway and to improve the quality of care and survival rates—to make exactly the Herculean effort, and with the same co-ordination, called for by my hon. Friend for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale).

I am relieved that the taskforce found that cancer services for children and adults, and the outcomes in those services, have improved in recent years. The strategy is specifically designed to build on that momentum. Many of the recommendations relate to all outstanding work of many medical charities, our work would be less robust and innovative and there would be less hope of bringing about the step change that we need.

NHS England is leading the health and care system in delivering the strategy and investment is being targeted to support that. Key elements include: investing up to £300 million a year by 2020 to increase diagnostic capacity to meet a new faster diagnostic target—many people have spoken of the importance of early diagnosis —so that all cancer patients will be given a diagnosis or the all-clear within 28 days of GP referral; investing £130 million to modernise radiotherapy across England, ensuring that over the next two years older Linac radiotherapy equipment being used in hospitals will be upgraded or replaced, so that patients get access to the latest leading-edge technology regardless of where they live; establishing cancer alliances throughout the country to drive clinical leadership; and supporting the national cancer vanguard to test new models of care.

A theme of the strategy is the improvement of information on services and outcomes, including, from 2017-18, exploring approaches to collecting data on the experience of care of children who are cancer patients.

Thangam Debbonaire: On the point about upgrading Linac machines for radiotherapy, one of the key problems that Cancer Research UK raised with me was radiographer and radiologist staffing shortages. Can the Minister add anything to reassure us that when the Linac machines are upgraded there will be sufficient staff?

Nicola Blackwood: There is also work being done on making sure the workforce are in place; and there is an overall strategy with Health Education England to do that. I am happy to write to the hon. Lady to give her details. I am slightly concerned that I have a lot to get through and I am going to bore everyone.

The taskforce has also recommended a new drive to deliver chemotherapy e-prescribing, which makes a significant difference to the experience of families who are supporting children being treated for cancer. Providers are working to implement plans for children by September 2017. Under the strategy, proposals will have been developed by March 2017 to improve the transition of young patients with cancer between children’s and adult services. As the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) has said, transitions continue to pose a problem in some areas, with paediatric services stopping at 16 in some hospitals, but adult services not starting until 18. In addition, pathways between specialist centres and shared care units currently cause great difficulty for patients. The strategy says that there is a need to address that, and I hope that the hon. Lady will be reassured that work is being done on it.

An important recommendation of the strategy is that NHS England, the National Institute for Health Research and cancer research charities should work together to consider how to achieve a significant increase in access to clinical trials for teenagers and young adults with cancer—the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) spoke about that. A far smaller proportion of teenage and young adult patients than of younger children take part in clinical trials. There is obviously an opportunity that we need to grasp. The strategy recommends that we explore ways in which clinical trials for children and young adults with cancer could be significantly increased. As the shadow Minister said, NHS England should set an expectation that all centres should aim to recruit at least 50% of their patients for those trials by 2025. That is the target that we are reaching for.

Outside London, only four centres treat more than 100 children with cancer a year, across all types of cancer. The strategy recommends that NHS England, working through the children, teenagers and young adults clinical reference group, should consider whether outcomes could be improved through further reconfiguration of services, as the shadow Minister said. Any review should again be based on patient outcomes, including patient experience, as few centres offer comprehensive specialist services for children at the moment.

Many hon. Members have rightly called for research to be prioritised in that context. It is good that, since 2010-11, we have increased annual investment in cancer research through the National Institute for Health Research, including research into childhood cancers, from £101 million to £142 million. However, we know that a lot more needs to be done if we are to deliver the changes that we want to see. That is why the Government announced the largest ever investment in health research in September—
£816 million over five years from April 2017. Some 20 NHS and university partnerships across England have each been awarded funding through the NIHR, and we expect to see significant research activity in childhood cancers within that programme of investment.

The NIHR is also collaborating with three charities—Teenage Cancer Trust, Children with Cancer UK and CLIC Sargent—to identify gaps and unanswered questions in research into young people’s cancer and to then prioritise those gaps that patients and clinicians agree are the most important. The initial survey opened just last month, so we expect to see progress on that soon.

A new working group has brought together clinicians, charities and officials to discuss how we can increase the level and impact of research into brain tumours, including those in children. The group first met in October and the Government anticipate that it will complete its tasks by September. I will be co-chairing the next meeting in January with the Department of Health’s chief scientific adviser, Professor Chris Whitty, to make sure that we make the progress needed.

Julie Cooper: Does the Minister agree with the important comments made by brain tumour charities that EU funding is fundamental, and will she commit to ensuring that, should we not have access to EU research funding post-Brexit, the UK Government will make sure that that gap is filled?

Nicola Blackwood: The shadow Minister has made some important points about the EU, as have a number of colleagues, and I will come on to them before I finish. First, let me complete my remarks on the amount of funding that we have put into research, because it is important that it is seen as a package. Less than two weeks ago, the Government announced a further £112 million of funding to support the skilled personnel and cutting-edge facilities needed to help at the forefront of clinical research—experimental clinical research in particular, including research into child cancers. I visited one of those facilities myself, and they are an important aspect of the research we are supporting. The Chancellor announced £2 billion additional funding per year for research and development by 2020-21 in the autumn statement, including for scientific research at universities and businesses. That is another part of the picture.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak, who is not in his place, spoke of the importance of precision cancer medicines. The Government agree, which is why we have funded the 100,000 genomes project, to diagnose, treat and prevent rare disease and cancer, including childhood cancers. The Government have invested hundreds of millions of pounds in that project to date and it is already making a difference—the first children with rare diseases have received diagnoses through the project at Great Ormond Street Hospital. The project promises to offer a genuine step-change in diagnosis and precision treatment, which is encouraging.

Ben Howlett: The Minister is being very generous with her time. I am pleased about the rare diseases aspect of what she has just mentioned. However, when engagement exercises are being undertaken with charities, it is often the case that the larger cohorts are focused on. Will she give assurances that in those engagement exercises with charities, some of the rarer cancers will also be a focus?

Nicola Blackwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is important to make sure that all different groups and diseases get the attention that they deserve. That takes me on to the issue of patient cohorts and the importance of collaboration across Europe.

For particularly rare diseases or cancers, it is sometimes necessary to look across borders so make sure that research includes the right numbers of patients. That has been a particular focus of the Department, and I am confident, owing to the work that we have been doing, that international—particularly European—networks and data sharing for research purposes will continue. We need to make sure that initiatives that have facilitated research, such as the paediatric medicines regulations, continue. My noble Friend Lord Prior is leading on that area of policy. I know that he is closely involved in all of those issues, and I am going to ensure that the specific concerns that have been raised today are passed on to him and are not dropped.

I assure the shadow Minister that the Chancellor has guaranteed that the UK will continue to have all of the rights, obligations and benefits that EU membership brings, including EU funding—up until the point that we leave, obviously. The Treasury has also committed to underwrite the payment of awards to UK organisations that make competitive bids to the European Commission—for example, for universities bidding for Horizon 2020. In addition to all of the funding I have spoken of, those moneys are protected.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bath made a couple of points about reviewing the work undertaken by NHS England to ensure that more children receive the treatment that they deserve. We will be working closely with NHS England and all partners to make sure that the strategy we have put in place becomes a reality and that the right performance metrics are in place, although that is a challenging process. Our best measure of success will be the cancer survival statistics. Those are currently provisional, but the Office for National Statistics will hopefully be assessed by the UK Statistics Authority in the future.

We have heard from many hon. Members of some deeply moving cases of young people battling cancer. We have heard of their courage and resilience, and of the fortitude of their parents and siblings.

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the Minister for giving such a thorough and thoughtful response to the debate. As I mentioned, Kaleigh’s family are campaigning on DIPG. It would mean a lot to them if the Minister or one of her Departmental colleagues met them to talk about their experience and their hopes for how research funding in this area might improve the search for a cure going forward. Is the Minister able to make that commitment?

Nicola Blackwood: I am sure that either I or a Departmental colleague will be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman and his constituents. It was moving to hear of their campaign.

Holding the Government and the NHS to account in this way could not be more important. I hope that my response has made completely clear not only my personal commitment but the Government’s wholehearted commitment to funding life-changing innovation and research into cancer, to delivering the cancer strategy in a way that transforms cancer care for current and future
generations and to improving the long-term quality of life of childhood cancer survivors. That is surely the greatest memorial that we can offer to each and every one of those brave children who, like Poppy-Mai, have lost their battle with cancer. That is our task, and as I look around the Chamber, it is clear to me that each and every Member here will work as hard as they possibly can to make sure that they hold us to it.

6.8 pm

Ben Howlett: I thank hon. Members from across the House for their contributions today, including my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) and the hon. Members for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire)—I do not think I have missed anyone out. I also thank hon. Members for their interventions and the Front Benchers from the three main parties. The thoughtful words from the Minister set out what an inspiring campaign many colleagues have seen from their work as constituency MPs and from the 115,000 petitioners, in particular Poppy-Mai Barnard’s family.

Members of the Petitions Committee get an opportunity to speak in this Chamber on a regular basis about some of the really important issues that matter deeply to our constituents. Having a systematic way for constituents to engage with this place in relation to child cancer, brain tumours, meningitis B and a range of other issues has made a big difference. Their continued involvement is incredibly appreciated and has given Members of Parliament an opportunity to shout about some of the great work that local charities, national charities and our constituents are doing to improve awareness and tackle a disgraceful disease. We have heard an awful lot about research in diagnosis, and about awareness, support for families and palliative care.

While I have never had the misfortune of anyone in my family suffering from a childhood cancer, my thoughts and prayers are with those who have. Ultimately, with 260 children dying from cancer every year, I am sure all of us would love a reduction of that number to zero. One death is far too many. I thank all those who contributed to the debate, and give huge thanks to those who led and submitted the petition.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered e-petition 162934 relating to child cancer.

6.11 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Neil Coyle: It is an absolute contradiction. Since 2010, we have seen a shocking rise in homelessness across the country, particularly in my constituency. I did a sleep-out for the Robes Project there last Friday evening, in very cold temperatures, so if Members have not already done so I urge them to sponsor if not me the project more generally.

In the 2015 spending review the Government outlined plans to cap the—

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. He seems to be a bit stuck in a time warp from several months ago. Does he not recognise that the situation has changed and that there is a commitment to a new funding model based on localism, which should help with the allocation of resources so that those most in need will get the most help?

Neil Coyle: I am about to run through how the Government have ended up where they are now, but when it comes to localism, this Government have a record of devolving responsibility without the resources to meet the demand. That point should not be lost, as it is an important factor in how many organisations see the current consultation.

Coming back to last year’s announcement, the Government said that they would cap the amount of rent that housing benefit will cover to the relevant local housing allowance—the LHA—for supported housing, with a top-up paid by local authorities. Initially, they announced that the measure would apply to those who had signed a tenancy since April 2016. There was an immediate backlash, and it was clear that the Government had not properly thought through the plans or considered very well whom they would affect. They then announced a delayed roll-out of the change, initially for one year.

The hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) alluded to the fact that there is now a consultation on further plans for a 2019 roll-out, including of the new funding model, but it should not be forgotten that the cap poses a considerable risk to supported housing as it might be insufficient to cover full costs for the people affected. Management costs for supported housing are significantly greater than generic housing costs. The limbo period has already caused some damage.

Alongside the delays to 2019 for both the change and the proposed new funding model, the Government have announced further damaging changes in addition to the proposals that they outlined last year. They have now included suggestions that will affect all universal credit claimants when the change is rolled out in 2019, not just those who have signed a tenancy since April 2016. There is concern among many organisations that the universal credit system is too clunky and inflexible to take into account what the Government had originally planned. It would be useful if the Minister indicated whether it is a “computer says no” approach rather than the flexible model that perhaps is needed. In another damaging change, the Government are applying a rent reduction to supported housing, with rents decreasing by 1% a year for three years up to and including 2019-20. That was not in the original plans and it has caused much dismay among the organisations and people affected.
Rebecca Pow: I applaud the hon. Gentleman for bringing to the House this debate on a very important subject. Does he not agree, however, that it is local authorities that know where best to place the money and whom to help the most? That is what the new funding model will address. I am a firm believer that money should not come from the top, but locally. That is how best to spend it. I would welcome clarification about whether the funding will be ring-fenced. I believe that the Minister will promise that, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would like to hear that that is the case.

Neil Coyle: I will come on to ring-fencing. The trust that the hon. Lady puts in local authorities is, I am sure, welcome, but often that trust comes without the resources to meet the demand, and that has been a continual problem.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important debate. Does he agree that as part of Government proposals regarding the provision of supported social housing, recognition needs to be given to the best locations, with good access to hospitals and other public services, as many of the people concerned are vulnerable and require care?

Neil Coyle: Location is important, and I will come on to discuss where needs are best met. For too many of the people directly affected, that has been in NHS accommodation, which has been inappropriate and at far greater expense, but the Government’s plans do not address that.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I do not think we should let the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) get away with what she said about passing responsibility on to local authorities. That is a cop-out. Local authorities can do the work with Government resources but if they are not given those resources all that happens is that they get the blame and the public suffer.

Neil Coyle: It is the individuals who need the accommodation who suffer, and also the taxpayer in the longer term, for reasons I will come on to.

I want to give some national and local statistics. It is estimated by the House of Commons Library, which I thank for the figures, that there are 651,000 supported accommodation places across the country. That is not a massive number, as accommodation goes. Across my borough of Southwark, there are 1,200 places in a range of schemes.

I want to flesh out a bit more who is affected, by citing a couple of anonymised case studies from AmicusHorizon. The first is Mrs W, who is disabled and lives on her own in sheltered accommodation. She has no close family, and has mobility problems, a visual impairment and a learning disability. That is who the Government are targeting. She lives in sheltered housing, which means that she is in an accessible and supportive community with unobtrusive support from a scheme manager who operates as a kind of warden. That support enables her to live independently. Her combined rent and applicable service charge is £123.10, which is £57.44 more than the applicable LHA rate.

The second case study is that of Mrs P, who lives in an extra care scheme. She lives on her own and does not have contact with her children. She moved to the scheme after a spell in hospital because of a fall. In the accommodation her health has improved and the staff provide support to ensure that she stays well and is able to get out more and attend social activities. Without that support she would be in residential accommodation at potentially higher cost. Her combined rent and applicable service charge is £174.71, which is £64.04 more than the applicable LHA rate. Golden Lane Housing, which is a Mencap subsidiary, provides homes for people with very complex needs in my constituency, including people with learning disabilities. I visited its accommodation in Rotherhithe, and the people being supported there do not just have severe learning disabilities; they also have communication impairment. One was deaf and could not speak, and that is who the Government are targeting with the change. The wraparound support that those people need is absolutely essential, and by its very nature it is more expensive than routine housing costs.

St Mungo’s is another brilliant local provider of emergency and supported housing in Southwark. It helps people out of homelessness, and helps people with high support needs. In its client group, as it calls them, in Southwark, 53% have slept rough; 73% have mental health needs; 44% have a significant physical health condition; and 55% have or have had a substance misuse problem. As well as providing shelter for those people, St Mungo’s runs workshops that improve life skills and help many residents to avoid more intensive NHS services and to stay out of the criminal justice system.

The Government’s plans from last year and from before that simply do not take into account the broader benefits of supported housing. First, there is the social benefit. Supported housing gives people who would otherwise struggle to live independently control and choice over their lives while allowing them to receive essential support. There is the human, personal benefit of supported housing. There is also a financial benefit. The cost of supporting people in specialist supported housing can be half the gross cost of residential care placements. Lifeways estimates that the average net saving achieved by moving from residential care to supported accommodation is at least £185 a week.

There is a clear cost saving available if we get the policy right, but the Government have failed to do that. The lack of specialist supported housing is pushing people with learning disabilities, dementia and a range of conditions into more expensive residential care, including hospitals. The National Housing Federation states that stable and certain funding for supported homes and services reduces pressure on public services such as the NHS, saving the taxpayer around £3.5 billion a year. That is the potential saving from getting this right.

I thank all the organisations that have given me briefings or meetings on the issue, including the National Housing Federation, Golden Lane Housing, Lifeways, AmicusHorizon, the London Borough of Southwark, St Mungo’s, the Salvation Army, which I think is here today, and London Councils. Their involvement and all the supported accommodation that they provide has built up in the years following the extensive shift in public policy to enable disabled people to live more independently. In particular, that shift was meant to support...
disabled people to live outside NHS accommodation and residential care. That reflects a demographic shift, and we need to be aware that we have an older disabled population. We should celebrate the fact that more young disabled people are surviving into adulthood, but that comes at a cost. They need more support. In Southwark, the fastest growing cost group to social services is 18-year-olds with learning disabilities. Mencap estimates that that group alone requires the provision of 1,000 new places a year in supported accommodation.

There are some worrying statistics on how things will be directly affected by the Government’s proposals. Golden Lane Housing has suggested that 82% of local authorities agree that there is a shortage of supported housing for people with a learning disability. More worryingly, 41% of current schemes could be at risk of closure if the Government do not shift their plans. Some 80% of schemes due to be built to support that group would cease and not go ahead, leaving many disadvantaged people unable to access the homes and support they need and directly undermining Government efforts to provide supported housing in the community as part of the Transforming Care programme.

All of that has been put at risk by the mess, limbo and confusion from Government on the issue. There has been a clear lack of co-ordination across Government, with a rush to continue the squeeze on budgets without thinking more strategically or for the longer term. In September, the new Secretary of State said:

“The Government values the role supported housing plays and is committed to protecting and boosting the supply of supported housing”.

However, DWP policies have put existing and planned supported accommodation at risk. For example, Golden Lane Housing had to postpone a £100 million five-year bond to provide supported housing. It would not have relied on a penny of public funding. It is also likely to have to turn down a £500,000 grant from the Homes and Communities Agency it applied for under the care and communities programme to develop new homes. Accommodation has been put at risk as a direct result of the Government’s confusion on the issue.

Unable to meet higher needs, the executive director of operations at AmicusHorizon said:

“The impact of the cap will be more than £1 million of annual rent and service income being put at risk. It will also have a significant impact on our residents. None more so than those living in extra care schemes. We’ve calculated they will have to fund an average shortfall of £41.00 per week”.

The Government have said that

“from 2019/20 core rent and service charges will be funded through Housing Benefit or Universal Credit up to the level of the applicable LHA rate. For costs above the level of the LHA rate, Government will devolve in England an amount of funding to ensure that the money devolved is sufficient and gets passed on to the right people. People with learning disabilities must not be overlooked.”

Julian Knight: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again; he is most generous. We have had lots of detail from him on what he sees as wrong and so on. I am a member of the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government, and we have heard quite a lot of evidence on this, but I wonder what he proposes to do about the matter. Does he think that the status quo is the way to progress ad infinitum, or does he have any concrete proposals?

Neil Coyle: As I have outlined, if the Government introduced concrete proposals and knew what they were doing, we would not be in this position. I have some specific recommendations for how the Government might go forward, even though I fundamentally disagree that this group of people should be targeted for a reduction in support.

Lifeways has expressed concern about the fact that providers need confidence to invest and build. The Government’s position since September last year has undermined that confidence and caused some schemes to be put on hold or cancelled altogether. Some providers of supported accommodation have said that they will pull out of the sector if the policy is not done in a way that reflects actual costs. The pressure is on the Government to get it right. While it is welcome that the Government have made exemptions for some groups—in particular, people fleeing domestic violence—Lifeways’ concern about people with learning disabilities should not be overlooked. Sadly, there is a clear history in public policy of people with learning disabilities often being left behind or neglected in policy initiatives. It would be useful to hear from the Minister whether there are plans for other groups to be offered specific protections.

Many organisations expressed concern about the difference between supported accommodation and sheltered housing. It would be useful to hear how the Government see the difference between supported accommodation and sheltered housing for older people and the homeless.

As a London MP, I wanted to speak about the higher costs in London. I am grateful to London Councils for the information that they have provided. Its figures are based on applying LHA rates to the current total weekly costs eligible for housing benefit. It should be remembered that most providers cannot reduce rents in reaction to lower housing benefit entitlements set by Government due to the higher cost of provision, because of the nature of the needs of people in supported accommodation. If the Government plans go ahead as on paper, it is estimated that the London Borough of Ealing could have an annual shortfall of £528,000 a year. “Red” Kensington and Chelsea has forecast an annual loss of £440,000 a year. My borough of Southwark could have a shortfall of £167,000 a year. It would be useful if the Minister outlined how the Government will ensure that those additional costs are recognised and met. There is a lack of detail on the local top-up fund that forms part of the consultation. An indication of how the Government intend to operate that would be useful.

Conservative Back Benchers are keen to suggest that discretionary housing payments will always cover any housing shortfall from the Government. I hope that we...
do not hear a lot of that this morning. It is an insufficient answer and only a temporary solution, even when such payments are possible. For Greater London, there was a £23 million cut in DHP between 2013-14 and 2015-16. My borough regularly spends well over what the Government provide for DHP. It would be useful to know how the Minister intends to meet that need without relying on discretionary housing payments.

I have some questions on the operation of the new scheme and funding model. Is there an intention to pilot the new funding model rather than rolling it out nationally? The changes proposed are significant. The National Housing Federation and others are keen to work with the Government to ensure a successful pilot, not just for the individuals but in terms of value for money under any new model.

The Government have suggested an element of ring-fencing, but ring fences do not always work; people are looking for an iron-clad ring fence on this issue. How will the Government give certainty that any ring fence would last in the longer term? If housing associations and others are to be able to plan to meet the higher level of need for supported accommodation that we know we will see, the ring fence must be iron clad, not just for current demand but into the future. The Government need to be clearer about how funding will keep pace with the level of demand. How do they intend to measure and monitor the level of need and the level of funding required?

I conclude by repeating that this policy change is very poorly targeted. It was ill thought-through last year, it has been poorly developed since and the limbo period has caused considerable discomfort. There is still a very poor level of information available on how the Government plan to take the policy forward from 2019.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): I am anxious to get everybody in. I am not proposing a time limit at this point. If Members stick to eight minutes or under, it should be possible to get everyone in who has signalled that they want to speak.

9.51 am

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): It is a pleasure to be able to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing this urgent and important debate.

I agree that it is important that we put supported and sheltered housing on a secure footing for the long term, but I am not comfortable with the idea that we are targeting a particular group. I have some experience in this area and we have not been doing as well as we could have; this is an opportunity to improve the service that we provide for vulnerable people in this housing situation, because it is absolutely right that people deserve to be supported to live independently and with dignity.

There are many organisations and people who support vulnerable people, including older people, people with learning disabilities and vulnerable young people. Examples of all those types of organisations exist in my constituency and I am familiar with them. They need the confidence that any changes that the Government make will ensure that they can continue to deliver those essential services for those who need them and that money ring-fenced for supported living is spent on supported living.

Julian Knight: Will my hon. Friend reflect on the fact that there have been some successes in this area, despite what the Labour party has been saying? Between 2011 and 2015, the Government delivered more than 18,000 new supported homes in England alone.

Derek Thomas: Certainly. I will come to the work that the YMCA is doing in my constituency to increase the amount of housing it provides for vulnerable young people, even in these supposedly uncertain times. There is a real opportunity to do something significant. There is work to be done, but the Government are heading in the right direction. What the people who provide the housing solutions need is confidence and a secure footing, and this is an opportunity to achieve that.

Rebecca Pow: Is it not then important that we commend the Government for opening up a consultation? I have met many housing associations in my constituency, including Yarlington and Knightstone, which build across the south-west. Although one or two of those associations have projects on hold, they have certainly got some good ideas about how we could succeed in this area and make it better for the vulnerable people who need support and who we absolutely must support.

Derek Thomas: I welcome that intervention and completely agree. I delivered supported housing in the past, and there were decisions made, or done “to us”. The current situation is exactly as my hon. Friend says: an opportunity to get the people who understand the situation, the challenge and the solutions to work with the Government to deliver those things. We need confidence in three areas: that we will continue to deliver these essential services, that money awarded for supported living is spent on supported living, and that funding will keep up with demand—that is extremely important.

Long before I came to this place, I worked with people with severe learning disabilities and often with very elderly parents who were looking after adult children. The stress and pressure on the parents were enormous. The worry about where their adult children would end up when they could no longer look after them was significant. They had no confidence that the current arrangements would ever provide housing in the right place that their adult children needed to help them to live full and free lives. It is important that we use this opportunity to focus our attention and to address how we can provide the housing needed to support the whole family as they look to move their adult children into secure, independent housing that looks after them as whole people. We worked hard to do that. Local people put in their money to buy a property where we could house up to five people, close to their families, with the people in place who could support them to live there, but the barriers were so immense that we could not continue that service. The property is not lost because it is supporting homeless people, but we were unable to provide a secure arrangement for those people, where they felt they had a home for life.
Particularly in Cornwall, to which people gravitate because of the quality of living, many people with learning disabilities are living with older parents. We need to meet that housing demand now and in the very near future. We are not discussing the built environment, but it is important that the Government use every resource available to Departments to increase the supply of housing for people who have learning disabilities, to ensure that they are in the right place, with good transport links, close to home, where they can still be in close contact with their families and where they are part of the local community.

Devon and Cornwall Housing run foyers in my constituency, which are places where vulnerable 16 to 18-year-olds with quite horrendous backgrounds are supported. They are invited to live there. Alongside the housing—the roof over their heads—they receive support on growing up and the skills needed to become independent and to live lives that we all take for granted. The YMCA also works in my constituency. Years ago, I was on the board of YMCA Cornwall and sat on a panel that interviewed young people to ensure that the housing we provided was for them and would give them the tools that they needed to move on. They are only ever allowed to live in one of those properties for two years, so it is important that in that time they are supported to learn the skills and have the resources and abilities to go and set up homes of their own.

The challenges facing young people who qualify for such supported services are considerable. For years, both Devon and Cornwall Housing and the YMCA have been influential in helping young people to gain a firm footing in their lives. As I have said, there is good news, despite the uncertainty referred to by the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark. Two weeks ago, I attended the annual general meeting of the YMCA. Bearing in mind that this is a rural, west Cornwall constituency where there are enormous housing challenges, the YMCA is being ambitious and is setting out to build 19 extra units in the constituency—it already has several—to support vulnerable young people. While the Government are focusing on what supported housing looks like and how we can respond appropriately and effectively to that important demand, will the Minister also pay attention to the barriers for young people in supported housing environments? A safe place to live is essential, but so is the right support to help them to move on from supported housing.

I would like to read a letter that I received from The Coach House, a foyer run by DCH in my constituency. It is right that we focus on supported housing, but we should also look at the barriers created by Government policy that hinder young people from getting the skills and tools they need. The letter says:

“Further to our conversation last week”

I went along and sat in on one of the house meetings—

“about the young person I have that would like to do a university course at Cornwall College.”

This gentleman is 19 and has

“completed a level three music course at Penwith college. He completed it with triple distinctions. We went to Cornwall College to talk about him doing the foundation degree and was told that he would have to apply for student finance. I looked into how this would affect his benefits and was told that he couldn’t claim benefits if he had student finance. The rent at the Coach House is £230 per week student finance would not cover this. So he is now in the position that living in supported housing is holding him back. He still needs a lot of support so isn’t ready to move on. I think that if we could support him through the first year of his course he would be more than ready to move on. This would be a fantastic opportunity for this young person. He is more than capable of doing the course.

Since being told that he couldn’t do it because of funding his mental health has spiralled to the point that he hasn’t been getting up, washing, eating properly he is very depressed at the moment. I have just come back from the doctors with him and he has been referred to the mental health team.”

We could do more to help that young person to have a fantastic life—to get the skills and the degree he needs and to find the job satisfaction that we enjoy, but at the moment the system is hindering him from doing that further training. I would be interested to hear what work the Government can do across Departments to remove those unintended barriers.

In summary, can the Minister ensure that money given to local authorities will go in its entirety to supported living? Recently, we have heard about extra money for social care from an extra precept on our council tax. We are a year into that, but in my constituency I have struggled to be absolutely sure that the money has gone to social care. We would not want a repeat of that, so if the Government are to give money to local authorities to deliver locally based, locally driven solutions, we must be absolutely sure that it goes to where it is intended so that the people we are talking about receive the supported living they need and deserve.

What more can the Government do to increase the supply of supported housing for people with learning disabilities? How can we ensure that those homes are in the right places so that tenants can play a full part in local society and, equally importantly, access public transport? Finally, will the Minister address the difficulties faced by young people who want to gain skills but risk losing their support by doing so?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. It would be helpful if Members can now confine their remarks to about six and a half minutes so we can get everybody in. Quite a lot of time has been taken up already.

10.3 am

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) for securing this debate. I intend to speak briefly, as this is not the first occasion since joining Parliament that I have spoken on the subject of supported accommodation, and I suspect it will not be the last. However, I have a few points to make.

When I last spoke on this issue back in April, I welcomed the delay in introducing the housing benefit cuts for those in supported accommodation, and I also welcomed the September announcement to further delay applying LHA rates to the supported accommodation sector until 2019-20. However, it is not enough merely to delay them; the UK Government must exempt supported housing tenants altogether from those devastating changes or find an alternative funding model. The change to housing benefit can undermine the ability of such tenants
to pay their rent, thereby putting their home at risk and threatening their physical and mental wellbeing, as well as posing a genuine threat to housing associations’ financial stability. It could also end up costing us more money in the long term if those people move on to other forms of housing.

In previous debates, I have illustrated my concerns with practical examples from my constituency, and I will do so again. The Open Door Accommodation Project, based in Bathgate, which operates in my constituency, works with vulnerable young people. It has a number of supported flats throughout West Lothian and can accommodate up to 16 young people between the ages of 16 and 21. The flats are fully furnished, and most are shared accommodation. The aim is to prepare young people for their own tenancy. I was glad to hear that the shared accommodation rate will not apply to those residents.

When a young person joins the supported flat service, they are allocated a dedicated support worker who works with them to give personal and practical support and helps them to develop the self-confidence and skills they need to live independently. The young people being supported are already experiencing issues with the time it takes to receive benefit payments. That wait can have a huge impact on the likelihood of their sustaining their accommodation.

Another major concern is that there is no longer a seven-day run-on between accommodation, which means that young people have to move immediately when they sign up for a tenancy. That gives them no time to set up utilities or apply to the social welfare fund for the most basic of necessities. The uncertainty about the reduction of housing benefit further exacerbates those issues and, worryingly, might even put that vital supported accommodation at risk. How will such organisations plan for the future if they are faced with yet more funding challenges and uncertainty, which can only continue to deter investment in new schemes?

An area of particular concern for projects such as Open Door is the impact of the eligibility for the housing benefit single-room rate rising to from 25 to 35. That could make it much more difficult for young people to find suitable tenancies when they move on from the supported projects due to increased demand on single rooms and the difficulty in finding suitable flatmates in areas such as West Lothian and the Falkirk districts that make up my constituency. I do not believe that my area is unique in that respect. Those areas have a very different housing landscape from large cities such as Edinburgh or Glasgow, where shared living is much more common. An additional knock-on effect may be that a significant number of young people will move out of the more rural and suburban areas in search of shared accommodation, which may potentially have a negative impact on local economies and employers, as they may struggle to find young recruits.

I am also aware that the age increase to 35 could mean that a huge range of young and youngish people will be living in shared accommodation, which will lead to a new range of challenges. In particular, I worry about the vulnerability of teenagers who go through projects such as Open Door and then have to move on from supported projects to share accommodation with effectively middle-aged adults of 35.

There is much that concerns me about the UK Government’s proposals. I am, however, glad that there are plans to devolve funding to the Scottish Government for supported accommodation. In my opinion, that is a step in the right direction. It will help to ensure that supported accommodation is supported in a secure and sustainable way for the long term. I just hope that, as with the bedroom tax, Scotland will not have to mitigate the effects of yet another botched Tory attempt at savings that simply moves an increased cost burden on to Holyrood.

10.8 am

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing this debate.

It is fair to say that there was a significant policy vacuum earlier this year, which was causing much concern for those involved in the sector. Credit is due to the Government for coming forward with proposals to fill that void. I particularly commend the ministerial team at the Department for Work and Pensions for the speed with which it responded with its statement on 15 September. It should be acknowledged that, back in July, it was a brand new team. This is not a straightforward matter, and it moved quickly to address the sector’s worries.

I believe that the framework within which the Government are working up their proposals is sensible. They carried out an evidence review, and they have acknowledged that the proposals cannot be worked up just within the confines of the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Communities and Local Government. There is a need to work with other Departments and providers.

The Government are also right not to be rushing to put the new system in straight away. As they move into the consultation and detailed design stages, I have six specific concerns that I want them to address in their work with those involved in the sector day to day. First, there is a widespread concern that the 1% cut in rents to commence from next March will impact on the viability of schemes, in particular those of small providers, and will lead to either a reduction in much-needed services or the closure of schemes altogether. Another worry is that the cut will lead to housing associations drawing back into cheaper, general needs housing.

I acknowledge that the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 provides that social landlords can be exempted from the requirement to reduce rents if that would result in serious financial difficulty or jeopardise their financial viability. The feedback that I am receiving, however, is that so many providers will be adversely affected and the measure is casting such a shadow of uncertainty over the sector that it would be simpler to exempt all supported housing from the provision.

Secondly, there is concern among providers that the Government’s proposed model from 2019-20—in which core rent and service charges will be funded through housing benefit or universal credit, and costs above the local housing allowance rate will be paid from devoted funding—could lead to a postcode lottery. The National Housing Federation expressed that opinion, and Riverside has provided regional maps to illustrate it. Emmaus, which serves my constituency, has similar worries, as
has the Salvation Army, which is concerned that the housing support entitlement of vulnerable men and women will be substantially reduced everywhere except certain areas of London and the south-east. I acknowledge that London has serious homelessness challenges, but so do other cities, towns and coastal communities such as the one that I represent. We need a one nation solution.

Thirdly, it is important that any funding mechanism has the ability to maximise the amount of finance that can be leveraged in from external sources, whether banks or pension funds. Bear in mind that new developments are invariably funded over long periods of between, say, 10 and 30 years, because lenders are looking for certainty that their investments are secure over the lending period. Rents eligible for housing benefit provide that comfort, because that is Government-backed income. The worry, however, is that the local discretionary top-up funding does not provide the secure, long-term solution that investors seek—it is too risky. As the NHF has pointed out, we need to ensure that the ring fence for funding is iron-clad into the long term.

My fourth point concerns mental health. Rethink Mental Illness has expressed serious concerns that the position of those with mental health challenges could be seriously compromised. Housing is the foundation stone for those facing mental health challenges to get their lives back on track, so we need to look very closely during the consultation period and beyond to deliver a solution that invests in the future and addresses particular worries and concerns. Finally, as has been mentioned, this is complicated and not straightforward, so I ask the Government for a pilot project, which is necessary before the scheme is rolled out across the country.

In conclusion, the Government are to be commended for providing a framework within which a sustainable system of funding for supported housing can be delivered. Our challenge is to address the devil in the detail. This is very complicated and we need to work with the sector during the consultation period and beyond to deliver a system that fairly and properly provides for many vulnerable residents.

10.14 am

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth, and it is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who made some good points and struck a better note than some of his colleagues have done.

Repeat debates on the same subject suggest either that someone is going for easy political point scoring or that the matter is one that the Government are continuing to get wrong. In this case, it is clearly the latter, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing the debate.

In a debate last year, I stated that the Government’s housing strategy was a mess, unless we assumed that they wanted to dismantle the entire social housing stock. A year on, my sentiment remains the same. We only need to look at last week’s autumn statement to see that it allocated a further £0.25 billion to the right-to-buy pilot. Given the volume of right-to-buy properties that end up in the private rental market, that becomes a problem pushing up the housing benefit bill. The Government need to consider that, rather than attack supported housing, which provides lifeline services.

Supported housing provides refuges that can end years of hell, save people from domestic abuse, prevent rough sleeping, support people with mental health issues and allow older people to live independently in a safe environment. All those things combined can lead to an offset of savings within the NHS or can eliminate the need for people to be housed in more intensive and expensive residential homes, so helping to prevent bed blocking in hospitals.

My local Kilmarnock Women’s Aid organisation confirmed that it provides “information, support and temporary refuge accommodation to women, children and young people experiencing domestic abuse.”

It believes that the “impact of benefit sanctions and reforms are already having a disproportionate effect on women and lone parents. Universal Credit, which will be paid monthly to one householder, further increases the possibility of financial abuse.”

Therefore, it states: “If refuge services are not exempted from Housing Benefit, a vital lifeline for women and children to find safety from domestic abuse could be lost.”

Against that backdrop, and as proof of a lack of joined-up government thinking, we have had a policy announcement confirming that the Government had no idea of its actual impact, which led to delays—which are welcome, but still only delays—consultation and now loose and woolly ideas for the future. The lack of greater detail from the Minister leaves a lot of uncertainty in the sector. There were some interventions on localism earlier, but the proposals do not offer confirmation that will work; there is still insufficient clarity about what will happen.

In the here and now, we have had confirmation of the 1% rent decrease from 2017 in the supported housing sector, which will impose cuts on supported accommodation. The delay in the introduction of the local housing allowance cap until 2019-20 simply looks like a stay of execution, unless further clarity is provided.

Last year, an Inside Housing survey revealed the stark reality that 95% of providers might close their schemes, and the Government’s proposals have not changed much since then, apart from the possibility of some additional funding. The thing is, though, that we do not know how that funding will work. Will it make up the complete shortfall? I suggest that it will not, or else there would be no point in introducing a more convoluted system. The Government now seem to be hiding behind the discretionary housing payments excuse that they used for the bedroom tax. The Government have been defeated in the courts over the bedroom tax, so who knows what lies in the future for this?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) said, it is a minor comfort that the relevant funding will be devolved to Scotland, although the Scottish Government are already spending £100 million to mitigate other Tory policies, and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations has estimated a loss of funding of up to £14 million per annum. Will the Government take account of real need when looking
at provision of top-up funding? Will the uplifts provided to the fund in future be at a flat rate? We need more clarity.

In a previous life, as a councillor, I was pleased to see the construction of a new development, Lilyhill Gardens, which provided supported accommodation to people with special needs, allowing them to live independently with the support of a telecare package. That project was truly transformational for the tenants, and won several awards. Local authorities and other providers would like to roll out similar models, but how can they do so when future funding is insecure? It is important that the Government provide clarity. In Scotland, we are trying to reshape the social housing model and provide a stock that is better suited to people’s living conditions and demographics, but it is really difficult to do that without clarity about funding. That could lead to bed-blocking and other things that will cost more money in the long run. Will the Minister reconsider this issue, apply an exemption to supported housing and abandon the Government’s penny wise but pound foolish strategy?

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I will begin calling the Front Benchers at 10.30 am. Will the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) bear that in mind?

10.20 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I certainly will, Mr Howarth. I am quite happy to stop at 10.30 am, as you indicated. I am quite happy to be the last to speak in this debate as well.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on setting out his case so well and allowing us all to participate. It is good to speak in this debate. Like other hon. Members, I have spoken before about this issue, which affects some of the most vulnerable people in our society, and we are back here to do so again. We are back here for a purpose: there are quite clearly outstanding issues for us to address, and the matter is worthy of consideration and continued debate until we get it right. We are back here to get it right. I am pleased to see the Minister in her place; I hope that her cold or flu symptoms do not prove too much for her. I am sure that she will be able to respond to the issues that we bring to her attention.

I appreciate the extension until 2019-20 of the introduction of the local housing allowance cap, as that gives short-term relief to supported housing organisations and allows them to organise and work out whether they can continue to provide their valuable service not only to their residents but to the rest of the community. What those organisations do is important. It is estimated that at the end of 2015, there were some 651,000 supported accommodation units in Great Britain. That gives us an idea of the magnitude of the issue. The estimated annualised cost of the supported housing sector covered by housing benefit in Great Britain at the end of 2015 was £4.2 billion. Back home, I get requests about housing benefit almost every day, if not several times a day, and I am sure other Members do too.

It is claimed that supported housing provides a saving of around £940 per resident compared with the cost of housing them in other Government-provided facilities. On my maths—I hope my figures are correct—that is a saving of almost £612 million per year.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The bedroom tax was mentioned earlier. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Northern Ireland Executive made a wise decision not to move forward with the bedroom tax?

Jim Shannon: Yes, absolutely; my hon. Friend is right. That was a very wise decision. It was supported by all and was done for the very best reason: to help vulnerable people in society. I will focus on those people in the short time that I have.

We must surely consider that saving when looking at housing benefit and supported housing schemes over the long term. In March 2016, the Government confirmed that people living in supported and sheltered housing would be exempt from the LHA cap for a year to allow the Government to carry out a proper strategic review of how supported housing is funded. That is good news. Let us give credit where credit is due: that is a step in the right direction. I have been furnished with the results of the consultation carried out by members of the National Housing Federation, which represents housing associations. More than 200 organisations contributed their views to that consultation.

Ms Ritchie: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the best way to deal with the need for supported housing is to provide additional resources for more housing, particularly more specialised housing, for those who are in most need?

Jim Shannon: I could not agree more. That is clearly what we are all trying to achieve, and I hope the Minister will confirm that that is the Government’s target too.

The National Housing Federation says that the following three principles should underpin reforms to the funding of supported housing:

“No-one with support needs will become homeless or end up in unsuitable accommodation...The actual housing and support cost of delivering a quality service will be fully met, and will be flexible enough to meet changing levels of demand”—things change, and we must be ready for that—and the “taxpayer and those living in supported and sheltered housing will have evidence of the quality and value for money of the services being funded.”

That seems a solid foundation on which to build a supported housing policy, and I hope that the Minister will respond positively to that.

We must look at all those principles in the light of what the Government seek to do. The local housing allowance cap will apply to all tenants in supported and sheltered housing from April 2019. Housing costs will continue to be paid through the benefits system up to LHA level. There will be no shared accommodation rate; the one-bedroom LHA rate will apply to under-35s in supported housing. There will be local authority top-ups, and ring-fenced funds will be transferred from the Department for Work and Pensions and allocated by the Department for Communities and Local Government. The 1% rent cut will apply to supported and sheltered accommodation from April 2017.

There are still problems and many issues to be addressed. The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) referred to people with mental health issues, and I want to focus on them, because those issues come up every day in my constituency. I do not believe that the Government’s
aims allow them to follow through on the principles that are in place. Only last evening, before I got my flight to Heathrow to come to the House, I had a young man with mental health issues in my office who was finding it difficult to get housing benefit to allow him to live close to his family. I had only to talk to him to know that he was suffering from severe depression, anxiety and angst and really needed help and support to allow him to live his life somewhat independently. I speak out for him, to ensure that the Government’s proposals do not stop housing associations creating supported housing schemes, which are needed not simply for the elderly but for people of all ages and from all walks of life.

We have had 30 years of conflict in Northern Ireland. We often say that, but that does not lessen the statement. We have acute and complex issues in Northern Ireland; many people from all sides of the community and of all ages suffer from anxiety and depression and need help. It is important that supported housing schemes can be created and sustained. The Government must recognise that need and allow for it in their proposals.

Although the ring fence and the commitment not to use a shared accommodation rate for LHA for people under 35 are most welcome, we must ask how local authorities will prioritise the spending of their devolved funding. For example, will they prioritise people with social care needs over single homeless people? How will the Government ensure that local authorities get the right amount of money and that funding grows in line with need? How will we ensure that services that require relatively little additional funding, such as sheltered housing, are not caught up in complicated administration?

The hon. Member for Waveney spoke about how complex that is both for us and for our constituents. How will we ensure that existing tenants are protected in the transition from one system to another? I know the Minister, and I know that her response will be positive. We want to hear positivity from her when she addresses those questions. I am aware that this issue is out to consultation, but it has surely been considered since the initial review in 2011.

I conclude with this comment. Reform is needed. The present system can be taken advantage of. We speak for the most vulnerable people—those with mental health issues, emotional issues and complex personal issues, who are in situations where they are taken advantage of, not supported—and we must ensure that they are not left alone. I implore the Government and the Minister to consider fully the responses of the bodies that deal every day with those vulnerable people, and ensure that we leave no one alone and vulnerable without the support that they need to live.

10.29 am

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing the debate. This is a timely opportunity to re-examine the issues around the 2015 proposal to cap—in effect, cut—housing benefit for tenants in supported housing, given the Government’s temporary postponement of the plans, their further announcement in September that they were stepping back from the brink of implementation, and the publication of the report arising from their evidence review just over a week ago, which we are still digesting.

We have had insightful contributions from Members from both sides of the Chamber. One of the common themes is that supported housing is a crucial part of the social housing system. It needs the debate on supported housing and the support from older people, people with learning difficulties, and people with mental health issues. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted the impact of the arbitrary age restrictions on disabled young people—those under 35 in that regard. The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) expressed a range of concerns about the financial implications of the proposed changes for local authorities and supported housing providers. He also called for a pilot scheme for any changes that come in, which seems to be a sensible suggestion that I hope the Minister will take on board.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) got right to the heart of the matter when he challenged the Government’s approach to social housing in the wider context of austerity. He also made crucial points about women’s refuges and the role they play in helping people leaving violent home situations. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) focused his remarks on the impact on vulnerable tenants in Northern Ireland, and the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) who, regrettably, was unable to make her own speech in the debate, emphasised the need for investment in the supply of supported accommodation to meet identified demands.

We should remind ourselves that, if we turned the clock back 40 years or so, many people with similar types of disabilities to those who live in supported housing today often did not live in the community. If they could not live with family or, as outlined by the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), their family could no longer look after them, they were moved into large residential hospitals, often out in the countryside away from everyone. There was one in my constituency, and while I do not doubt that the residents had a high standard of professional nursing and medical care, most were not ill and did not need to be in hospital. Most of them were people with learning disabilities. It was an institutional model that cut patients off from wider society and robbed them of their independence. It also cost a fortune, even by the standards of the time. By contrast, there are now real homes in the area for disabled and learning-disabled people, and that is immeasurably better for everyone.

Supported accommodation has developed in the subsequent decades in a far more humane, appropriate and altogether better model of living for adults who
Dr Eilidh Whiteford would struggle to live independently without some degree of external support. However, the proposals we have seen from the Government in the past year to 18 months or so have put real question marks over the viability of that. The hon. Member for St Ives said that there is growing demand for supported accommodation, and I suspect that that is driven by changing demographics, with many members of the baby-boomer generation who were looking after adult disabled children at home no longer able to do so. Many young disabled adults, as we have heard, want to go to college and university, just like their peers. That has to be a good thing in the longer term, but it means that there is still a demand for supported accommodation. It has been a success, so let us not undermine that success with unnecessary cuts.

The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations represents dozens of housing associations in Scotland that provide supported accommodation of one sort or another. It estimates, based on projected turnover of tenancies, that nearly 6,000 new tenants could be affected by the proposed cap if it is introduced—obviously it is impossible to know exact numbers because the cap will affect future, not current, tenants.

The financial shortfall for those people—the gap between their housing benefit and their rent—is likely to add up to between £4.3 million and £5.6 million a year. That may sound like a small sum relative to the debates we were having in this place on the autumn statement last week, but for a tenant in supported housing in receipt of housing benefit the gap between their rent and housing benefit will on average be about £615 a year. That is nearly £12 a week, which would represent a substantial portion of income for, say, an adult over 25 on the new rate of employment support allowance. That would leave them with only about £60 a week to feed, clothe and keep themselves warm. A young person under 25 who has been assessed as fit for work would be left with only about £46 a week for their essential needs.

It is important to understand that many of the people we are talking about in supported accommodation may be on ESA for a lengthy period. Some may be in work or on jobseeker’s allowance, but for many the special needs that make them eligible for supported accommodation also make it difficult to find sustained full-time work. We should accept that some folk in supported accommodation will always need quite extensive support to have a decent quality of life.

We need to ask ourselves what happens when tenants in supported housing cannot pay their rent. The answer is simple. Whether people are in private sector, local authority or housing association-owned property, when rent arrears get out of hand or build up over time their tenancies are put in jeopardy. A rise in evictions and homelessness is not an outcome that anyone wants to see. It is also hugely costly to deal with the consequence of failed tenancies.

There is a real risk to social landlords’ willingness to invest in supported accommodation. If it becomes economically unviable to build and operate supported living, housing associations will not do it. That would be a disastrous outcome for individuals who could live independently in supported accommodation, and it would also leave local authorities with an ambitious challenge of finding ways to meet the basic welfare and housing needs of some very vulnerable people.

In many of the case studies provided by the SFHA of current tenants with similar types of support needs to prospective future tenants, the only alternative safe forms of accommodation would be care homes or long-term hospitalisation. That would make us feel like we were turning the clock back. In my local area, finding care home places is extremely difficult, and I know that that is the case in many parts of the UK. Our hospitals cannot cope as it is with the problems of delayed discharges: having people in hospital who do not need to be there. That would become a hugely problematic issue if we lost the ability to place people in supported living.

The critical point is that either option—care homes or hospitals—is significantly more costly than a measly £12 a week for vulnerable people, which could make the difference between retaining and losing a tenancy. Money spent to keep people living in their community is money well spent and it is a false economy, and quite mean-spirited, to squeeze the already low incomes of economically deprived people, as the Government’s original policy proposed.

Before I conclude, what discussions has the Minister had with the Scottish Government about this issue? I welcome the plans to devolve funding in the area, but I hope she will confirm that it will continue at the current level. I am keen to know what engagement she has had with stakeholders in Scotland, most notably supported housing providers such as housing associations and local authorities but also the organisations that support tenants in those homes to live independently.

It is just wrong to target cuts on some of the poorest, most disadvantaged and, in some cases, very vulnerable people in our communities. It is also extremely short-sighted, economically counterproductive and socially retrograde. I appreciate that the Government are rethinking their approach. Sometimes the best thing is to accept that a previous ministerial team got it wrong and to recognise that the easiest, least bureaucratic and most cost-effective and compassionate way out is to back away from the cuts and exempt supported housing from the cap altogether.

10.39 am

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) for securing today’s debate on an important topic, and for giving such a balanced picture of the impact of Government policy. We have heard important contributions from hon. Members across the House, including the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who spoke of the shadow of uncertainty over the sector—something that I think everyone present will recognise—and described concern about the development of a postcode lottery. He called for a one-nation solution.

We heard contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and from the hon. Members for St Ives (Derek Thomas), for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), for South Down (Ms Ritchie), for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and, of course, for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The hon.
Member for Strangford spoke about the importance of providing appropriate accommodation for people with mental health issues. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) did a good job of summing up the debate, and dealt particularly with the point that the special needs that make people eligible for supported housing can also make it harder for them to find employment. I think that all hon. Members would agree that money spent to keep people living in their constituencies is money well spent.

As has been said, the Government plan to cap housing benefit at local housing allowance levels for people living in supported housing schemes and to introduce a reduction of social rents in England of 1% a year. The housing benefit cap will force the closure of tens of thousands of supported homes for people most in need. The National Housing Federation predicted that 82,000 specialist homes would be at risk of closure if the cap and rent cut were implemented. Why the Government would pursue such destructive policies, which will drastically decrease the amount of supported housing that is available, is a question that still needs to be answered, especially when a number of national studies have demonstrated that supported housing services provide excellent value for the public purse. That is particularly true in relation to keeping the costs of health, care and criminal justice down—something that several hon. Members have mentioned.

Supported housing is one of the fundamental building blocks of independence. It includes a variety of schemes designed to provide both housing and support to help vulnerable people live as independently as possible in their community. Supported housing in the community is vital to the wellbeing of those people, and presents the best opportunity for them to take control of their lives. That is exactly why the Government must ensure that there is good local supported housing. Will the Minister explain what the Government are doing to ensure that the supported housing sector is properly funded to provide a vital service to vulnerable people?

Supported housing is a lifeline for people in vulnerable and sometimes dangerous situations. It is a way for vulnerable people to maintain their dignity and a degree of independence. Those are real people, with real problems, who need our support during these hard times. They are not statistics, or potential savings. They are domestic abuse survivors escaping abusive partners, older people in need of additional support, people with mental health issues or learning or physical disabilities, who need specialist care, or they are homeless people in desperate need of a safe place to sleep for the night. That is just a snapshot of the types of people who rely on supported housing. Anyone who leaves the Palace of Westminster late on a Monday night and walks past people sleeping in sleeping bags in doorways will be acutely aware of how desperate the situation is. Are the Government not ashamed to turn their back on the most vulnerable people in society?

Supported housing is a place of sanctuary and much-needed refuge. For example, the domestic violence charity Women’s Aid reported that 67% of its affiliated refuges in England would face closure if the local housing allowance cuts were applied, while 87% of them would be forced to scale down their operations. With nowhere to go, women fleeing domestic violence would have even more perilous lives. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that there is good quality and properly funded supported housing for those who need the safety and security it offers? Good, well-funded and integrated supported housing makes economic sense. Evidence shows that it delivers average net savings to the public purse of about £940 per resident per year. Does the Minister agree that the cost benefit of supported housing is beneficial to the public purse, and that it should be properly funded?

I am pleased that the Government have finally listened to the Labour party and to housing and community groups, and have decided at least to delay the implementation of the LHA plan that was included in the previous autumn statement. However, the future of supported housing is still not secure. The Secretary of State’s written statement of 15 September promises at column 38WS to make “efficiency savings” to the supported housing sector in the same way as the rest of the social sector. The Government last week published a consultation, seeking views on their plans for a new housing costs funding model for supported housing. Will the Minister explain what exactly those efficiency savings will entail and how supported housing can be expected to make efficiency savings in a housing crisis? Ministers have promised a new, ring-fenced, fund; however, the similar, and once ring-fenced, Supporting People fund has been slashed by 45% since 2010. What guarantees can she give that a new fund will not also be cut?

The uncertainty is having an immediate impact; it has left tens of thousands of the most vulnerable people in limbo. Services coming up for re-tender are at risk of closure, irrespective of the outcome of the consultation. The charity Mencap said that the proposed cap had caused 80% of plans for new supported housing to be put on hold, and 40% of existing schemes to be threatened with closure. Does the Minister agree that the decision on the cap was merely delayed, causing unnecessary anxiety for those concerned?

Riverside has looked at the possible geographical difficulties of the new top-up scheme. I share its concerns about where the line is drawn between housing costs met by DWP through a national benefits system, and additional housing support costs met through locally administered funding pots. With LHA rates more modest in many lower-value areas of the country, significant top-up would be required just to meet core rent and basic accommodation-related service charges. For example, the LHA level for a one-bedroom Riverside home in Hull is £69.73, as opposed to £260.64 in Westminster—a difference of £190.91. In many lower value areas, significant top-up would be required. The local top-up funding allocations will need to perform a very different role in different parts of the country. In my area of the north-west, along with the rest of the north and the midlands, the top-up funding will mainly be meeting core rents and services, compensating for the fact that LHA rates are so much lower. In other areas, top-up funding can support new services.

The Government have committed to continue supporting “specialised supported housing”, but will still impose savings on general supported housing. Can the Minister explain what constitutes specialised supported housing? Homeless Link has said that the definition of “specialist” covers very few supported projects and would protect very few homelessness services. I would argue that any housing
that provides expert support to vulnerable people is specialised and therefore should be protected from the LHA cap. Anyone in the sector will say that shelters and refuges are at capacity. It is already a struggle to provide the support needed to help people live independently. Vulnerable people are being turned away. That is happening now, and I dread to think what will happen when the Government finally announce the outcome of their consultation.

Supported housing is oversubscribed and more units are desperately needed. The Government need to do much more to secure the long-term future of supported housing. People who have fallen on hard times should not bear the brunt of Tory economic mismanagement. They deserve dignity and support. I urge the Government to rethink their position urgently, to listen to the deep concerns expressed by the supported housing sector and to ensure that all supported housing is fully exempt from the cuts.

10.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I add my congratulations to those offered to the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing this important debate. Prior to his election, the hon. Gentleman worked in the field of disability and he continues to be an important campaigner for disabled people in his role as a Member of Parliament. He will know from his experience—we have heard a little of it this morning—how broad the supported housing sector is. He therefore has an excellent insight into the challenges of finding a proposal that will work across the whole sector.

As we have heard, supported housing is vital for many vulnerable groups. Whether additional support is needed for a short time to help someone recover from difficulties or setbacks in life, or whether it represents a longer-term arrangement, the valuable role that such accommodation plays is clear. Last week we published our evidence review of the supported housing sector, which we commissioned jointly with the Department for Communities and Local Government. The review has given us an important indication of the scale, scope and, indeed, cost of the sector across Great Britain. It estimates that there are about 651,500 supported housing units, predominantly provided by housing associations, local authorities and charities. The majority of the units—about 71%—are for older people, and the remainder for those of working age. It is estimated that at the end of 2015, just over £4 billion of housing benefit was being spent annually on the sector in Great Britain. That amounts to 17% of the total departmental expenditure on housing support. The review also provides an indicative estimate of just over £2 billion per annum for additional funding from other sources in addition to housing benefit in Great Britain. That was largely made up of local authority spending.

The focus of debate today is specifically the effect of the Government’s proposals on supported housing. The Government are committed not only to protecting but to boosting the supply of such housing, and ensuring that it provides value for money and works for those who use it, as well as those who pay for it. As Members will be aware, we have announced that a new funding model will be introduced for supported housing when the local housing allowance rates are extended to the social rented sector from April 2019. In future, housing costs up to the level of the relevant LHA rate will be met through either housing benefit or universal credit. Funding for the additional costs of providing supported housing in excess of that amount will be met through local funding, which is to be devolved to local authorities in England and to the devolved Administrations.

Neil Coyle: I think three different Members have asked about the potential for a pilot of the new funding model. Will the Minister clarify whether there will be one?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman must not fret; I will come to that later. Many comments were made by hon. Members and I will try to respond to most of them, but I am conscious that time may not allow for all. I will allow the hon. Gentleman time to come in at the end as well.

As hon. Members have heard, the Department for Communities and Local Government and my Department last week jointly launched a consultation on the detail and implementation of the new sustainable funding model. I welcome this debate as an important opportunity to draw Members’ attention to that. I will turn to the specific points raised by hon. Members in order. I hope to get to every point, but if time does not permit, I will write to hon. Members to clarify a few points.

My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) and the hon. Members for South Down (Ms Ritchie) and for Bermondsey and Old Southwark mentioned local funding and why it is important that local authorities and devolved Administrations are going to be involved. I absolutely believe that local authorities are best placed to make decisions about how to support vulnerable people in their own areas. We heard about location from my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and the hon. Member for South Down, and they are right that it is important. However, it is also about understanding local need and being able to reflect that in the most appropriate type of provision.

The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark mentioned disabled people, and he was right to do so. As he will know, disability spending will be higher every year to 2020 than it was in 2010. He also spoke of the types of people living in supported accommodation and, like me, he celebrates the numbers of young disabled people who are both living longer and wishing, quite understandably, to live more independently. He is right to point out that that is also a challenge, but it is one that we are determined to rise to.

Likewise, we have a growing elderly population. At the start of the debate, the hon. Gentleman outlined some percentages of individuals living in supported accommodation and what their particular needs might be. I emphasise that people do not necessarily have single needs. We have an ageing population, and as people grow older, their needs tend to become more acute and they tend to have more of them. It is important that we have a system that enables those with really quite intense needs to live independently for as long as they can and, indeed, for as long as they wish to.
Under the Care Act 2014, local authorities have a general duty to promote an individual’s wellbeing when carrying out their care and support functions. Through the consultation, we will be seeking views on whether further protections may be required to ensure that all relevant client groups can gain appropriate access to funding, including those without existing statutory duties.

I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that Departments across Government have worked closely together on the proposals and will continue to do so. They include the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Department of Health, the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Education and the Home Office. We are also working with colleagues in the devolved Administrations.

We have to make it clear that this is not about targeting individuals but about ensuring that we have a system in which the quality of services is central and there is a clear focus on outcomes for individuals. Under the current system, effective oversight of quality and value for money is not strong enough. Through the consultation, we will consider new approaches to transparency and oversight. Our aim should be consistent standards for everyone living in supported housing, alongside a clear demonstration to the taxpayer of value for money.

We want to ensure simplicity and a streamlined process, in line with the principles of universal credit, which a number of hon. Members have mentioned. We have a solid foundation of universal credit delivery in every Jobcentre Plus, and people who are moved from housing benefit to universal credit by the Department after April 2019, and whose overall benefit entitlement will be lower, will be protected in cash terms under transitional arrangements.

As I have said, we recognise the diversity of the supported housing sector, in terms of both the groups of people who live in such provision and the range of support needs that they may have. Officials and Ministers from across the DWP and DCLG have held extensive meetings with representatives from across the sector to understand the nuances of what a new model needs to deliver. They have asked specifically about additions in the consultation document, including what potential role additional statutory provisions or duties for local authorities in England could play, particularly in terms of protecting provision for specific vulnerable groups. The task and finish groups we are setting up to consider a number of detailed aspects of the model are being carefully put together to ensure that the breadth of the sector is represented. I think three hon. Members asked whether the Government would commit to piloting the new funding model. There will be shadow-year arrangements in place on the detail and allocation of funding, to allow for the full transition to the new model from April 2018.

During the last two financial years, the majority of local authorities spent less than 100% of their allocation of discretionary housing payment from central Government. The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark has urged me not to dwell on DHP—this will be one of my few references to it—but we provided local authorities with £560 million in DHP funding in the last Parliament, and we have committed to a further £870 million over the next five years. The amount of top-up funding will be set on the basis of current projections for future need. Budgets for years beyond those already set will be determined in the usual way: at future spending reviews. I emphasise again that we want to work with the sector, through the consultation, to consider the wider strategic goals, such as responding to expected future growth in demand.

We see an opportunity here to do things differently, and to create a new strategic approach to commissioning supported housing. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) made a number of important points about doing better. He also raised the issue of the YMCA. I have been pleased to visit a number of projects since coming into this role in July, and I have long been a supporter of the work of the YMCA and have welcomed the input it has made to this process so far. I also visited a foyer in St Ives, and I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend on the importance, particularly for young people in the supported housing sector, of having move-on accommodation and increasing their level of education and training so that they have a better opportunity of employment.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) spoke of Open Door in his constituency and its supported flat service. He made the valid point that there are very different accommodation landscapes across Scotland. We recognise that challenge, which is one of the reasons why we are devolving this responsibility to local authorities and to the Scottish Parliament.

The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) asked what contact I had had with Scottish members of the sector. In one of my roundtable meetings, I was pleased to have representatives from Scottish housing associations who came down to London to put their point of view across. I pay particular tribute to Scottish Women’s Aid, along with Women’s Aid nationally, which has been really constructive and engaged throughout this process, both with myself and with my noble Friend Lord Freud, who is the Minister for Welfare Reform. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives mentioned a specific case in his constituency about students. I will be happy to meet him later to discuss that.

As we know, the Scottish and Welsh Governments have devolved responsibility for housing policy and already determine their own priorities. We anticipate that the Treasury will advise those Governments of their allocations at around the same time as the local authorities in England, which we expect will be in autumn 2017.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Nokes: I am sorry, but I really have no time left and I would like to leave a couple of minutes for the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark to wind up—it will probably be 90 seconds now.

There is a specific point in the consultation about working with the sector to design an alternative model for refuges, which was raised by the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said we should get that right. He is absolutely correct to say so. That is why we are not rushing this, and it is why I am pleased to be here today. My first debate as a Minister was on supported housing and that is the issue again today. Getting this right and ensuring that the consultation is as full and thorough as possible is an important part of
my role, so that when we move forward with the new funding model, it works for those groups who hon. Members have rightly identified.

10.58 am

Neil Coyle: I thank all hon. Members for contributing to the debate and I also thank the Minister and the Front-Bench spokespeople. Members from St Ives to Strangford have emphasised the need to get this right. The context is that the Government made an ill-thought-through announcement last year. They got it wrong, and while there have been some welcome comments from the Minister, I note that there was no apology for the damage done to the sector by that uncertainty and instability over the last year. It is a sector that saves the taxpayer about £3.5 billion through things such as preventing bed-blocking, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day).

I hope the Minister will use the consultation and the next few months to genuinely develop and improve these plans, to ensure that the Government get the policy right for the people, organisations and councils affected. I am sure there will be further opportunities to examine the issue in more detail, including through the joint inquiry by the Work and Pensions Committee and the Communities and Local Government Committee in the new year. I hope all Members will contribute more fully over time.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the effect of Government proposals on supported housing.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I beg to move, That this House has considered dissident activity in Upper Bann.

It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. It is disappointing that I must focus today on dissident republican activity in my constituency. That said, I must take this opportunity at the outset to remind Members that Northern Ireland has come such a long way from the pain and dreadful history that our Province holds. We have made remarkable progress. We are making headlines—largely on a positive note—and now receiving global recognition for the right reasons.

However, there remains an element within our community that cannot look to the future. There are some who cannot and will not build on our strong foundation, which is delivering, and delivering well, for the people of Northern Ireland. It is that element that forced the security threat level in Northern Ireland to severe. It is that element that saw our Prime Minister, the then Home Secretary, deliver the news that an attack on the UK by dissident republicans was a strong possibility. It is that element that is continually undermining the great work that our political leaders in Northern Ireland are striving to achieve.

A town in my constituency is regularly brought to the fore, with reports of dissident activity. It has one of the highest threat levels, and we all need to be on our guard and highly vigilant. In 2009, my constituent, a serving police officer, responded to a 999 call. Constable Stephen Carroll attended without hesitation, in an attempt to fulfil his commitment as a police officer and his pledge to protect the wider public, but that call turned out to be an elaborate trap set up by dissidents who lay in hiding and fatally wounded him. I vividly recall attending Craigavon that evening, as the reports came through that the first officer of the Police Service of Northern Ireland had been shot. It is a night that I will never forget. I must commend the PSNI for its skilful and thorough investigation and for bringing those responsible before the justice system. Two men are currently serving life sentences for that brutal murder, but it does not erase the pain for Constable Carroll’s family.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): My hon. Friend gives a very sombre recognition of the slaughter of an innocent police officer in Northern Ireland. Does he agree that one thing required in his constituency and all our constituencies is more police officers on the ground? We are about 800 short from what Patten recommended. We need the police to urgently recruit new members and the Northern Ireland Office to stump up the money for it.

David Simpson: I agree. I had a meeting with the Police Federation for Northern Ireland yesterday about the shortfall in its members. Hopefully we will see the fruition of that, with extra members on the ground in the not-too-distant future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does he agree that we need communities to support the PSNI and all the
investigations it is doing and to ensure that the evidence and information those communities have can be sent to the PSNI? The communities, together with the police and elected representatives, can then take on the dissident republicans and eradicate them totally from society in Northern Ireland.

David Simpson: I agree. Community support is important, and I will deal with that later on in my speech.

Our security personnel are on constant high alert. In my constituency, prison officer David Black was gunned down on the motorway as he travelled to work in 2012. That brutal ambush was carefully planned and carried out at the hands of skilled gunmen, who carefully targeted and shot him at high speed. Mr Black served Her Majesty’s Government in the Prison Service for more than 30 years and was awaiting the outcome of his retirement application. That is another mammoth loss, not only to his family but to Northern Ireland as a whole.

That is the distinct reality of the dissident republican activity we face today. They continue to generate support through illegal republican parades and protests. They are engaging with impressionable young men—a generation who have not fully witnessed the darkest days of the troubles. Having indoctrinated those teenagers, they send them out to engage in crimes, while maintaining a safe distance. In May this year, reports stated that a 10-year-old boy was cautioned after a masked colour party took part in a republican parade through Lurgan. It is extremely disturbing how young children are being exploited to try to progress a violent and brutal agenda.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Does he agree that the cancer of paramilitarism must be eradicated from all quarters and that to do that once and for all there must be community support for the PSNI and also community involvement with it, working together with all community and political organisations?

David Simpson: I agree entirely. It is important that the communities co-operate and that information is fed into the security forces.

At the time of that parade, the PSNI was aware of possible illegal parades and made several announcements regarding such activity. It urged the public not to engage in any way and reminded everyone of the repercussions of doing so. However, its pleas to the public were ignored by some, and following that parade, the PSNI followed through with robust and thorough investigations. Last week, it reported that a total of 81 files had been forwarded to the Public Prosecution Service for consideration. I understand that 35 of those files were on residents of the Republic of Ireland. There is a widespread concern that when those files are passed to the PPS, the good work of the PSNI is undone. On occasions, the files that are passed to the PPS for prosecution do not come before the justice system. In cases where they do reach the judiciary, sentencing is often too lenient and therefore ineffective as a deterrent, especially to the said impressionable young men.

In August this year, following a number of co-ordinated policing operations, locally based police officers working in conjunction with specialists from crime operations branch recovered a fully constructed explosive device, firearms and components for other improvised explosive devices in a number of searches in the area. Just a month later, in September, the PSNI uncovered an armour-piercing direct-fire mortar. Along with that find, three men were charged with targeting a former member of the security forces, and a fourth man was charged with attempting to kill police officers. We have recently seen the use of that type of weapon not only in my constituency but in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

In my constituency of Upper Bann, more firearms and ammunition have been recovered this year than in 2015; more people have been charged with terrorism-related offences this year than in 2015; and more explosives, including the vicious mortar, have been seized this year than last year. I want to put on record my admiration for the district commander, the chief inspectors and all the police officers on the ground for their resilience in working under these difficult and very dangerous circumstances.

The team of PSNI officers come under regular attacks in my constituency. Earlier this year, officers were on the receiving end of orchestrated, intense and prolonged violence when more than 100 petrol bombs were thrown and shots were fired at them during serious disorder in the local town in relation to the railway line. That railway line is famous in my constituency. It runs through a high-profile area of dissident activity and is the main thoroughfare from Belfast to Dublin, with trains approximately every 30 to 45 minutes. There have been numerous security alerts on the line, with more than 90 closures. This year, that has been somewhat reduced because of Translink’s work and that of the security forces. We all know that this is an attempt to lure police officers and forces of the Crown into the area so they can be attacked and their lives taken.

Such activity is simply not what the vast majority of my constituents want. They are trying to get on with their daily lives, but it is a stark reminder of how dissident republicans are holding the wider community back from enjoying the freedom and prosperity that Northern Ireland has to offer. I have met collectively the PSNI and Translink to discuss the impact that such closures on the line have on travellers on the railway and we are making steady progress.

Ms Ritchie: The hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. Does he agree that the interruptions to the Belfast to Dublin service add to the problems for Translink, which has received a lot of criticism from many travellers as a result of undue delays in travelling to Belfast or Dublin, which is having an impact on the local economy?

David Simpson: Indeed. That is my next point. Shoppers, travellers and people going to work are affected, and not all employers are as sympathetic as they perhaps should be in the circumstances when people may have to use buses for transport. It is a disaster from start to finish. It is unacceptable and affects the economy greatly.

The PSNI has received cross-community support—there is no doubt about that—for stamping out dissident activity where possible. With limited resources, it is delivering a high-profile response to tackling these criminals, but we cannot ignore the fact that they are maintaining
a presence and continuing to build on their support network. In recent meetings with the PSNI it has said it is greatly concerned about that.

The dissidents have a strong recruiting process, including vulnerable teenagers, and even those who were involved in provisional activity are coming back to help to build devices. Not all have been built correctly. One day, God forbid, they may get lucky and take the life of a police officer, but we hope and trust that will not happen.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s motion. Does he accept that the so-called dissident terrorists are wreaking more havoc and doing more harm and damage to the community they purport to represent than to general society?

David Simpson: That is correct. One concern of the security forces is that the dissidents may not have the capacity for a full-blown terrorist campaign, but they only need to be there and to carry out attacks once a month or every three or six months because the security forces must remain on high alert. The cost to the economy is phenomenal and we must be vigilant about that. The security forces are very aware of that, as are the Northern Ireland Office and the Executive, but unfortunately the dissidents are there and the security forces must deal with them. In recent days, parts of the group have formed a new political party with a leading character in the area—the Minister will know who I am referring to. He is so blatant, sitting in the middle of a room proposing to organise a political party when he is responsible for many dissident activities. He is like Teflon-man: nothing sticks to him. It is unfortunate that he seems to get away with it.

Jim Shannon: The fires of hell will stick to him.

David Simpson: Absolutely.

What more can be done? We know that the judiciary is impartial, but can anything be done to exert pressure to ensure that the necessary sentencing is handed down? If money is an issue, will the Northern Ireland Office consider helping to provide more assistance so that we can stop dissident republican activity and bring some normality to my constituents’ lives?

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Kris Hopkins): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) on securing this important debate. It is important to reiterate the continuing threat in his community and other parts of Northern Ireland and to ensure that we articulate, as the hon. Gentleman did, the fact that, although there has been a huge transition in recent years, a small number of individuals continue the horror of the troubles. I will refer later to some of the hon. Gentleman’s comments.

I want to speak briefly about the wider dissident republican threat before turning to the specific points raised by the hon. Gentleman. It is important to say at the outset that through the hard work and sacrifice of many brave people, there have been great strides forward in the security situation since the troubles. However, as the hon. Gentleman so clearly articulated, we continue to face a threat from dissident republicans. Dissident republicans are relatively small, disparate and factional groupings, but they are also reckless and determined, and they have lethal intent. In Northern Ireland this year, they have been responsible for five deaths and since 2010, when policing and justice were devolved, there have been 199 national security attacks in Northern Ireland. Although the threat is severe, most people across Northern Ireland are not directly affected by it. Terrorists target their efforts against the brave police, prison and military personnel who work to keep all our communities safe. We owe these public servants a tremendous debt of gratitude for their work day in, day out across Northern Ireland. We always say that in debates such as this, but we must keep reiterating it because they are the people who look after every part of our community. They are immensely brave. I have the privilege of working with them every day, and I will continue to sing their praises.

An unacceptable burden falls on people and communities who are affected because terrorists seek them out to cause them harm, because they have the misfortune to be caught up in security incidents or because they happen to live in areas where dissident republicans operate. We have all heard about the terrible injuries and deaths caused by terrorists, but even where there are no injuries, the terrorists attempt to control and disrupt the lives of many people. Often frail, elderly people or young people must be evacuated on cold nights, people have to move out of their homes or miss hospital appointments and businesses may be impacted on because a small number of disaffected individuals target their own communities to achieve their bizarre aims.

For these reasons and so many others, those who seek the path of violent republicanism cannot secure broad support. They offer nothing to the vast majority of people who want peace and good fortune for themselves and their children. The good people of Northern Ireland have a right to live in peace. They do not want the violence, intimidation and control that those terrorist groups try to impose.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I agree with what the Minister is saying in response to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson), whom I congratulate on securing the debate. Does the Minister agree that in an area such as north Belfast, which has seen a lot of dissident terrorist activity, one problem that people face and express concerns about is open displays of dissident paramilitary activity, whether it be through parades, murals or other activity? They want to see the police and security forces trying to put a stop to that, because it is designed to intimidate, to stoke out territory and to create prominence in the media.

Kris Hopkins: I recognise the point that the right hon. Gentleman makes and I support him in encouraging our police to try to bring an end to that activity. He also makes the point that many people have made, about the community articulating what they want and demonstrating that they do not want to kow-tow or capitulate to a small group of thugs who want to influence the progress
been many other attacks, and the attacks continue. Of course, they are not murderous by these individuals. Carroll and David Black—two people who were brutally murdered by these individuals. Of course, they are not the only people who have been targeted. There have been many other attacks, and the attacks continue.

David Simpson: The Minister is right to say that other people are being targeted, and not only serving members of the security forces. I have cases in my constituency of officers who left the force nine or 10 years ago but are currently being targeted.

Kris Hopkins: The hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) will agree with me about this. There is supposed to be a direct correlation between those people who are actively involved in these activities, and drug activities. Both are equally insidious and both are a cancer in society that must be eradicated.

The constant dialogue that we have, not only with other MPs but through agencies and councils, through different people, ensures that we have an understanding of the threat on the ground.

I want to offer my condolences in this arena to the families of the two people I mentioned and the other people who have been killed or had their lives disrupted. I also want to refer to the comments made by Assistant Chief Constable Will Kerr. He said:

“I would ask all those with any influence in the community to use that influence to persuade people not to get involved in this type of activity. People who get involved, particularly young people, face the prospect of significant, possibly life changing, consequences.”

That is really important. It reiterates the point made by several hon. Members, including the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for South Down (Ms Ritchie), that we all have a responsibility.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The point that the Minister makes is one of confidence in the Assistant Chief Constable wishing to demonstrate that pursuing a path of paramilitarism will always be negative and dangerous. Will the Minister reflect on how frustrating it is that, following the murder of Adrian Ismay in my constituency, the man who has been charged with his murder—Christopher Robinson—breached his bail conditions no fewer than five times, yet was still free and still is free to walk the streets? How can we encourage the community to stand against such activity when the system is not working with them?

Kris Hopkins: I will not comment on the specific case, but I will touch on the broader issue of justice. Before I do, however, I want to refer to the point made by the hon. Member for Upper Bann about a 10-year-old child being targeted. I am thinking about my own constituency and the fears about the drug-dealing scum in my town who use innocent young people, because they are cowards. They franchise out that activity to someone else—to an innocent. I would say to parents, to families, out there: be extremely vigilant. These people are not bringing someone into a cause but exploiting innocent young people, and we must do everything we can to protect them.

Ms Ritchie: I know that the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) will agree with me about this. There is supposed to be a direct correlation between those people who are actively involved in these activities, and drug activities. Both are equally insidious and both are a cancer in society that must be eradicated.

Kris Hopkins: The hon. Lady makes a very good point, with which I agree.

I will briefly move on to the justice system. Justice is a devolved matter, and we treasure the independence of the judiciary, but I will make some observations. First, a review of the system is going on, but, as a citizen, I have observations on some of the choices that have been made, such as individuals being allowed to go to pop concerts. This is about confidence. I want a system that is independent, but it also has to be fit for purpose and reflect the demands of our broad public, who have made an immense journey. When we ask people to step away from paramilitarism and have faith and confidence in a system, whether it is the police or the broader judicial system, the system must be able to sentence; it must be able to process these things. I say this for people who are charged as well. I want them to have a good system that enables them to enter the process, understand and participate in it, and have their day in court. At the moment, I think there are huge question marks over its ability to deliver that. I know that the Minister of Justice in Northern Ireland is doing everything she can to deliver it. I implore my friends across Northern Ireland to make a positive contribution in seeking change in that process.

I want finally to mention what we are doing. On a personal level, I feel so honoured to serve as a Northern Ireland Minister in a Northern Ireland that is in a far better place. It is an exciting place to be. We talk about the terrible things that we have talked about today, but when the chief executive of Belfast City Council tells me that 82 cruise ships have docked in Belfast, when the city tour bus is going around Stormont and when we have thousands of tourists coming to so beautiful a place as Northern Ireland, we need to ensure that we have some balance. A small group of individuals are seeking to go back to the past, but I believe that the vast majority of good people desire to be in a different place.

From a resource point of view, we have put an extra £160 million in this year, and we have put £25 million into addressing paramilitarism. I say to colleagues in the House today and to other friends in Northern Ireland that if I can change things or help them on the path to greater prosperity and greater peace, I will do everything I can.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
Equine Slaughterhouses (CCTV)

[MRS ANNE MAIN IN THE CHAIR]

2.30 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered CCTV in equine slaughterhouses.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main.

Believe me, like many horse-obsessed women, I could happily entertain Members with an equine monologue for at least an hour and a half, but although I would rather be taking about the brilliant exploits of horses I have known, the welfare of horses at the end of their life none the less remains an unavoidable issue requiring much greater scrutiny and action. Sadly, if someone keeps livestock, sooner or later they will have to dispose of deadstock. Those of us who care about horses would prefer to convince ourselves that every animal will either meet a natural, pain-free death or be euthanised by a vet. The reality for thousands of horses and ponies is, of course, very different. If we are concerned about their welfare, it is our duty not to be blinded by sentimentality, but rather to improve reality as we find it.

Protecting animal welfare at slaughterhouses is an emotive topic at the best of times. I am proud that as a matter of policy, Plaid Cymru believes that CCTV systems are the best means to monitor, and so protect, the welfare of animals in slaughterhouses. Smaller slaughterhouses should be supported so that they can install CCTV, as it should be borne in mind that small slaughterhouses often have welfare advantages in terms of the time and distance travelled by animals.

Although the use of CCTV in Welsh slaughterhouses falls within the competence of the Welsh Government, the specialised nature and geographical spread of equine slaughterhouses makes this a cross-border issue. Due to the lack of local facilities, horses kept in north Wales may well be taken to slaughter in the north of England. This is a particularly relevant issue to Wales, where the 2013 mislabelling of red meat scandal resulted in the discovery of horse meat in supermarkets, and also of horse meat in certain food products. A high-profile exposé on the practices of a now defunct UK slaughterhouse in 2013 showed an appalling disregard for horse welfare, with horses beaten, shunted from lorry to lorry is depressing. However, the distress caused to those animals is unnecessary, and if the public had greater confidence that horse welfare would be protected at slaughter, fewer horses might suffer prolonged misery.

Old, sick and unmanageable horses are too often sold or given away when owners should be taking responsible steps to end their life humanely. What happens to horses that are sold or given away when they are no longer wanted or useful? Very often they will be sent to horse sales and markets, passed between owners and shipped from pillar to post only to end up in the meat trade anyway. In Wales, the sight of unwanted and worthless ponies filling the pens at markets and being shunted from pillar to post is depressing. However, the distress caused to those animals is unnecessary, and if the public had greater confidence that horse welfare would be protected at slaughter, fewer horses might suffer prolonged misery.

According to the Food Standards Agency, the latest public attitudes tracker from May 2016 shows animal welfare as equal third when it comes to concern for our food, alongside salt and behind sugar and food waste. That lack of confidence is especially evident among horse owners. A high-profile exposé on the practices of a now defunct UK slaughterhouse in 2013 showed an appalling disregard for horse welfare, with horses beaten, stunned in the head, then placed in a meat mincer. Those practices were revealed only through covert CCTV footage; had CCTV been in place, with access to the footage given to authorities such as the FSA, the proprietor, or the regulator, could have stopped the malpractice much sooner. That clearly would have been in everyone’s interest and particularly that of the horses that were undergoing the experience.
David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Is she saying that there is a reluctance in equine slaughter facilities to put in CCTV? I know that in the red meat sector, although it is not compulsory, some have voluntarily done so. Is there a reluctance in slaughter plants to do that?

Liz Saville Roberts: The issue is that it is not compulsory; that is particularly pertinent in relation to horse behaviour and the behaviour of horse owners. CCTV is not necessarily present—it is a voluntary—in every slaughterhouse. It appears to have reached a certain point and be going no further—a plateau.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech, which I am following closely. Does she agree that the cost of installing CCTV has fallen rapidly in recent years and should not in any way be a barrier to good abattoirs installing CCTV without being required to do so?

Liz Saville Roberts: Indeed, I understand that many larger-scale slaughterhouses already have CCTV installed externally; to all intents and purposes, including the internal installation as well would not be prohibitively expensive. I think that is an issue for smaller slaughterhouses, and that they need to be supported.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and congratulate her on securing this debate. She is being most generous in taking so many interventions. Does she think, as I do, that another flaw in the current arrangement is that in those slaughterhouses where there is CCTV, the owner has the option of not allowing the FSA to see the footage? In fact, not only is the CCTV voluntary, but access to the footage is voluntary.

Liz Saville Roberts: It would indeed seem that if CCTV were present, we should be making full use of it. This is another aspect—given that CCTV itself is not compulsory—that should be mandatory; there should be access to the footage gained through those means.

It is important to emphasise that although we are having this debate today, that does not in any way presume that there is poor treatment in the UK’s five equine slaughterhouses, all of which also take species other than horses. However, horse owners have not forgotten that incident from 2013. A Facebook survey carried out by World Horse Welfare in September provided some interesting insights. Around 90% of more than 900 horse owners who responded did not consider the abattoir as an option for their horse, but 40% agreed that horse slaughter should remain an option within the UK as the costs of euthanasia are so high. More than 70% said that they would not use a slaughterhouse for their own horses because they did not have confidence that their welfare would be protected through the process or that the horse would have a humane death.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady for securing the debate. I am unsure whether hon. Members are aware of this, but there are no abattoirs in Scotland licensed for the slaughter of horses. None the less, the wider issue of animal welfare at abattoirs is important to many people north of the border. At the SNP conference in the autumn—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Will the hon. Lady sit down when she is being brought to order? “I am coming to my question” is not an adequate response. She is taking too much time from the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). She should ask a brief question.

Margaret Ferrier: Does the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) agree that the provision of CCTV is vital in ensuring that animals are protected prior to their slaughter?

Liz Saville Roberts: I believe that CCTV protects animals and workers in slaughterhouses and public confidence in the meat produced there. All those things are important. We have a real issue in relation to CCTV and public confidence. There is concern at present that horse welfare is not protected during the process, perhaps because of the particularly sensitive nature of horses. Specific characteristics of equines can make them vulnerable. For instance, they are “fight or flight” animals; when frightened, they seek to flee, and they become panicked or aggressive if they are not handled competently. They are sensitive and highly social herd creatures, and it is a legal requirement for them not to be killed in sight of other horses. Let us not forget that horses, unlike agricultural livestock, have been bred for hundreds of generations to interact with people. That is part of their behaviour pattern and is one of the reasons why we love them—those of us who keep them.

It can be the horse owners themselves who take their horse to slaughter, and that horse may have been a companion to them for many years. Society expects horse owners to feel an emotional attachment to their animals. The horse owner will want—perhaps more than most—a guarantee that the welfare of their horse will be protected at the abattoir, and they will want other horse owners not to judge them for ending their horse's life in this way, which means that we need to ensure that the abattoir is, and is seen to be, a humane end-of-life option.

Will CCTV provide such a guarantee? On its own, of course it will not, as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the FSA, the Farm Animal Welfare Committee, the British Meat Processors Association and many others have said. CCTV is but one of many tools to help safeguard welfare. It should be seen not as a replacement for on-site monitoring, but as support for it. Official veterinarians work in every slaughterhouse across England and Wales and make regular unannounced checks on live animals at slaughter to ensure that their welfare is safeguarded.

The FSA’s veterinary audit team checks compliance. However, no single person can monitor the whole slaughter process—from animals held in lairage, through to being led to the stun box or slaughter area, through to the actual killing. CCTV that is in constant operation, placed to cover all live horse areas, such as the unloading, lairage and so forth, provides a record of the entire process and of the animals’ experience throughout.

As I have said, CCTV could have great benefits for the slaughterhouse operator, who is responsible for ensuring the welfare of animals while on the premises. Operators would be able to monitor and assess whether
their staff were complying with the law. They would also have evidence to disprove spurious allegations of malpractice. In that respect, CCTV protects slaughterhouse workers and owners, and furthermore, it can be used for staff training and development. A European slaughterhouse told World Horse Welfare that CCTV was invaluable for staff training purposes.

The most common rebuttal of mandatory CCTV is cost. However, the costs, as the Minister explained in a debate on the issue last year, are "relatively modest". CCTV systems can be purchased for less than £1,000 and many slaughterhouses already have the systems in place to monitor the exterior of their premises for security reasons, so why not inside as well?

To provide genuine transparency and engender confidence, the footage should be available to authorities. No law currently requires CCTV footage from slaughterhouses to be shared with official vets or the FSA, whose role is to monitor welfare at slaughter. For the use of CCTV to be effective, that must change. Mandatory CCTV in equine slaughterhouses must be legislated for in tandem with a requirement for footage to be made available to those authorities. Only that will truly deliver the transparency that the public need and expect.

What is the state of play? The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has said that it wishes to encourage a voluntary approach to installing CCTV. The Welsh Government have also indicated that they support the use of CCTV in slaughterhouses in Wales, but have failed to legislate to make it mandatory. It is clear that that approach is not working. The FSA, in its board report of 21 September this year, confirmed that take-up of CCTV had "plateaued" at 49% in red meat slaughterhouses. When slaughterhouses have CCTV, it might not be placed in areas which allow them to monitor horse welfare. We need a mandatory approach.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): No horse lover could possibly disagree with the general thrust of the hon. Lady’s arguments; of course it is right that she would be ignoring the horse Government to introduce primary legislation—an extremely difficult thing to do—she would be ignoring the horse welfare issues associated with the other 95,000.

Liz Saville Roberts: I agree with the thrust of the hon. Gentleman’s arguments but perhaps the fact that, at present, so few horses travel through slaughterhouses to the end of their lives is, in itself, a welfare issue. If more horse owners, and the horse-keeping society as a whole, were more confident that that approach was appropriate, perhaps the number of horses doing that, in turn, would increase.

Let me return to the state of play. Another DEFRA approach has been to say that consumer and retailer pressure, as opposed to legislation, should be the means used to encourage the greater use of CCTV. DEFRA cites the fact that most major food retailers—I will not list them, but it is all the major supermarkets—now insist on the use of CCTV in supply chain slaughterhouses, and there are many assurance schemes, such as RSPCA Assured. However—this is pertinent—that consumer-pressure approach will not work for horses, because horse meat is rarely sold or eaten in the United Kingdom. Most of the horse meat that we produce is sold on the continent, mostly to wholesalers, so consumer and retailer pressure is not applicable.

In conclusion, I hope that the case for making CCTV mandatory in the UK’s equine slaughterhouses is clear. The current voluntary approach will not deliver that. Horse owners do not have confidence that abattoirs will protect horse welfare throughout the process. There is neither transparency nor accountability in the system for horses—just the memory of the horrific covert footage from 2013. The losers in this state of affairs are not just the horses, but horse owners, retailers and the general public, who all suffer from the negative consequences of bad practice and low confidence in equine slaughterhouses. I therefore urge the Minister to do all that he can to provide a system that ensures high standards of welfare and instils greater confidence in the sector by exploring a mandatory requirement for CCTV in equine slaughterhouses.

2.47 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) on securing this debate. This is a highly emotive subject, which has to be approached, as the hon. Lady said, with practicality rather than sentimentality.

I should start by declaring an interest as a patron of the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation and as an honorary member of the British Veterinary Association. In that context, I would like to quote immediately from a letter from a constituent of mine, Diana Stark. She said:

"As a horse owner and veterinary surgeon I am most concerned about possible harsh handling of horses at the end of their lives when everything should be...calm and quiet...I feel strongly that if all those working in slaughterhouses knew they were being monitored they would be more likely to be considerate towards the horses in their care."

My son and daughter-in-law are both qualified veterinary surgeons and they both own horses, so I know at fairly close quarters that one of the hardest things for any horse owner—indeed, for the owner of any animal at the end of its life, but particularly for a horse owner—to have to deal with is that end-of-life process.

It is fondly believed that people who own horses are rich, but there are huge numbers of people right across the country hacking with little ponies often bought for their children and enjoying equestrian sports. Many of them are not rich and the costs of disposal of a much-loved animal can often be a real burden. As the hon. Lady said, veterinary costs can be quite high. I do not think that many horse owners would want, given an alternative, to pass their animals to the knacker man. Even then, there is a cost.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) said, this comes down to a question of confidence. If the horse-owning public do not have confidence in the work of the abattoir and the slaughtermen, where do they turn? We know only too well—from the footage, from anecdotal evidence and, in some cases, privately from veterinary surgeons who witness things that they would sooner not witness as...
observers of slaughterhouse procedure—that there are things going on in slaughterhouses that any reasonable person would abhor. I commend the World Horse Welfare campaign for the introduction of closed circuit television cameras in slaughterhouses that deal with horses. Actually, I would go much further. I would like to see mandatory CCTV cameras in all slaughterhouses, and a mandatory requirement to provide footage on demand when required by a Ministry inspector or a veterinary surgeon dealing with that practice. The Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation also throws its weight behind the call for mandatory CCTV.

We are continually told—quite often by Ministers—that we do not want to burden rural business with additional costs but, as has been said, the cost of CCTV cameras and recording equipment has fallen so dramatically that it is practically available for anybody in this room to purchase. Indeed, my suspicion is that some probably have done, simply for their own security purposes. If it can be done in those circumstances, it can certainly be done in a slaughterhouse.

The object of the campaign is very straightforward. It is to seek to deliver, at the end of a working or entertaining life, a decent end for a much-loved and dedicated animal. I do not think that is too much to ask. I heard what my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) said, but primary legislation does not have to be lengthy or difficult. A private Member’s Bill with a couple of clauses, given a fair wind from Government and Opposition—I cannot believe that either would oppose such a measure—could almost go through on the nod. That is really all we are talking about.

The idea that this is somehow difficult is nonsense. It is not difficult. If the will is there, it can be done. That is what Parliament is here for and what we are here for, and I suspect it is what so many colleagues in the Chamber this afternoon are here to support. Let’s not duck it. Let’s get on with it. Let’s seek to ensure that every working or domestic animal in the land is given a decent end and a right to a decent end. That is a very simple request. I would like the Minister, in his closing remarks, to endorse this call to get on and do it.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts)—my Welsh is getting better all the time—on securing this important debate. I declare an interest as an honorary life member of the British Veterinary Association. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), who has a long history of promoting animal welfare interests in Parliament. Before going into the detail of the topic, I want to pay tribute to the campaign launched by World Horse Welfare to secure mandatory CCTV in slaughterhouses as part of its drive to raise the profile of what the charity calls the invisible horse.

The invisible horse is an imaginative way of recognising that the welfare needs of many horses go unheeded because people do not always see these wonderful creatures from the perspective of whether their needs are being met. Sometimes, of course, that means that the horse is perfectly visible in a literal sense. Nevertheless, its needs are not properly recognised. In the case of the horse in the slaughterhouse, it is the risk of real invisibility that needs tackling with changes in the law. Let me be clear: the mandatory use of CCTV in slaughterhouses should, as the hon. Member for North Thanet has just pointed out, apply in all circumstances and in relation to all animals.

With your good will, Mrs Main, I would like to spend a few moments outlining the more general case for mandatory CCTV before focusing on the issue as it relates to equine welfare. There has been progress. The Food Standards Agency estimates that in 2016, some 92% of cattle in England and Wales were monitored using CCTV, with figures in that range also applying to pigs, sheep and poultry. Looked at another way, the percentage of abattoirs with CCTV has grown to 49.3% for red meat and 70.4% for white meat. However, there is some evidence that this growth in the use of CCTV has plateaued, as the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd pointed out, as the figures for 2016 are barely different from those for 2015. Coverage is not only incomplete; it is frequently not comprehensive, very often failing to cover the five principal areas in a slaughterhouse. There is no requirement for the footage to be independently monitored, with unfooted access for official vets and other enforcement officers.

In answer to a recent written parliamentary question in the House of Lords, Lord Gardiner stated: “The vast majority of animals are slaughtered in slaughterhouses which have CCTV present, so the Government is not currently persuaded of the case for introducing regulation which would require all abattoirs to have CCTV, but we are keeping the issue under review.”

There are two problems with that response. First, it gives the impression that the welfare needs of a small minority can be compromised, although I am absolutely sure that the Minister did not mean that. Secondly, and most importantly, it overlooks the fact that, for some species, CCTV coverage is nowhere near as comprehensive as it should be. Equines stand as a good example of that.

In the equine sector, only five abattoirs are licensed to slaughter horses and all of those premises slaughter other animals as well. Indeed, in one case, 10 other species are slaughtered in the same abattoir. The latest figures suggest that around 4,000 horses per annum are slaughtered at those five establishments. The key point is not so much the number killed; rather, although the majority of horses were killed at abattoirs offering CCTV coverage—three of the five—the coverage was only partial. In other words, very few of the abattoir areas were monitored by the technology, even when it was present in some form or another. In fact, only a very small—and I do mean very small—number of horses were slaughtered under the scrutiny of comprehensive CCTV coverage in 2015-16.

Something therefore needs to be done. The situation is not acceptable. It is even more unacceptable when one considers the special circumstances that apply when slaughtering horses. The Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing Regulations 2014 stipulate that horses must be killed in a separate room, or in a bay that is kept specifically for that purpose, and that a person must not kill a horse in sight of another horse or in a room where there are the remains of another horse or animal. That heightens the case for comprehensive CCTV coverage.
Additionally, World Horse Welfare believes that horses' unique social and physiological needs make CCTV scrutiny even more critical, as the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd said earlier. Horses have a strong “fight or flight” instinct, which can make them panicked or aggressive when stressed. Competent handling is therefore required at all times.

CCTV must therefore be comprehensively applied and accessible to relevant authorities in order to support them in undertaking their duty of monitoring welfare throughout the slaughter process. Such technology would improve transparency and would not involve the relaxation of other rules relating to the direct oversight of the process or the need for other checks by officials, but it would be an important addition to the process.

There is another reason for our making CCTV coverage in slaughterhouses mandatory, and once again it relates to equine welfare in particular. For many owners of horses, this method of disposal of a well-loved animal would not be acceptable, with euthanasia carried out by a vet being the preferred option. Of course, that latter choice is rather expensive, with euthanasia costing some £500.

The recent “Horses in Our Hands” report for World Horse Welfare, which the hon. Lady mentioned, examined the problem and established, through research at the University of Bristol, that one of the four key priorities for equine welfare is addressing delayed death. In other words, some horses are kept alive for longer than is humane, and cost is often a factor in that decision. The risk is that the animal gets passed around, losing value and frequently ending up in the meat trade anyway. World Horse Welfare therefore views slaughter as an important option in that context.

When asked, more than 40% of horse owners agreed that slaughterhouses must remain available, and nearly two thirds agreed that sending a horse to a slaughterhouse is better than allowing a horse to suffer. CCTV makes an interesting difference to the perception of the acceptability of using equine slaughterhouses. More than 90% of horse owners asked would not use a slaughterhouse to end their horse’s life, but the figure reduces significantly if measures such as CCTV are made available.

This is not an animal rights issue. I deplore and condemn the concept of aggressive picketing and intimidation of slaughterhouse establishments and their staff. Rather, this is an important animal welfare issue. It is about raising welfare standards at slaughter, and it is about transparency and understanding that the humane slaughter of our horses is important for a range of reasons. Not least, it is important because surely we believe that the highest possible animal welfare standards must be maintained in a civilized society.

Mahatma Gandhi is often quoted as saying: “The greatness of a nation can be judged by the way its animals are treated.” I do not know whether that quote is accurate, but it does not really matter because the sentiment is good and sound. This debate is important because we judge ourselves by how we look after those more vulnerable than ourselves.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am reluctant to intervene on the hon. Lady, who is making a very good speech. I commend the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) for securing this debate. Will the hon. Lady reflect on the statistic that, according to the most recent figures from 2014, where CCTV is compulsory in slaughterhouses, only six cases have been referred to the Crown Prosecution Service by the Food Standards Agency? I strongly support the compulsory introduction of CCTV, but does it make a difference? Is she reassured that animal welfare is better with CCTV if only six cases have gone to the CPS?

Angela Smith: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I have made the point throughout my speech that we need comprehensive CCTV coverage. Some equine slaughterhouses have CCTV in only two of the five key areas, which is part of the problem. This is not just about having some form of CCTV in the slaughterhouse; it is about having comprehensive coverage of the process in the slaughterhouse.

I was trying to finish on the point that we judge ourselves by how we look after those more vulnerable than ourselves, which includes our equine friends. I therefore call on the Minister—I repeatedly say that he is a reasonable man—to proceed with mandatory installation of comprehensive CCTV in equine slaughterhouses and, in fact, in all slaughterhouses. I look forward to his response.

3.5 pm

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) on introducing this extremely important debate in such a professional and sensible way. It might seem odd, but I have not disagreed with a single word that she or any other speaker has said in this debate. Incidentally, before I forget, I declare that I, too, am an honorary member of the British Veterinary Association. I am also a member of the Countryside Alliance and I own a variety of horses, and have done so for many years. It is true to say that there is no correlation between richness and owning horses. Indeed, I have discovered over the years that owning horses is what makes one poor. I have had a rather large number of horses at one time or another.

I have also had the experience of taking horses to slaughter, and there can be no more terrible event in one’s life than to take to its death an animal with which one has had a day-to-day working relationship for many, many years—I am sure the same applies to dogs and cats, too. I strongly support the thrust of what has been said by all the speakers, especially the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) a moment ago. Their points are absolutely correct, and I strongly support World Horse Welfare’s campaign to introduce compulsory CCTV in abattoirs, of which there can be no doubt.

I hope that those who feel strongly about this subject will forgive me if I raise a couple of issues that I hope will not detract from the strength of the campaign, but that none the less need careful consideration. The first, which was touched on by the hon. Lady for Northern Ireland (Lady Hermon), is that there have been remarkably few prosecutions, even where there is compulsory CCTV. I am ashamed to say that one of the biggest prosecutions was of that dreadful man from west London called James Gray. I assure the House that he is absolutely no relation; none the less, it was an appalling case.
The question is whether introducing compulsory CCTV in the small number of abattoirs that kill horses would necessarily have a significant effect. My concern is that this might be one of those occasions where we make a huge effort to introduce regulation or new legislation that has little effect and might, on the contrary, assuage our concerns and make us feel that we have done something when what we have done is actually relatively inconsequential.

**Sir Roger Gale**: I seek not to be mischievous, but does my hon. Friend concede that it is just possible that there are so few prosecutions of places with CCTV cameras precisely because the cameras are having the deterrent effect that we seek?

**Mr Gray**: That is possible, of course, but it is hard to work out the cause and effect. In the case of horses, I suspect that it is probably because, depending on the statistics we use, only 4,000 or 5,000 are slaughtered each year in up to five abattoirs—there are none in Wales or Scotland. In other words, something in the order of 1,000 horses are slaughtered per equine abattoir spread over 50 weeks. A very small number of horses are being killed in licensed abattoirs today, and therefore there is no presumption that any of them is carrying out anything other than the highest possible standards of slaughter.

**Angela Smith**: The hon. Gentleman is generous in giving way, given that I have just delivered my speech. It is a mistake to assume that the five abattoirs kill an equal number of horses, because they do not. The numbers are very uneven. The FSA’s figures show that the best records and CCTV coverage are sometimes to be found in smaller abattoirs.

**Mr Gray**: The statistical point that I was making was not whether the same number were killed in each of the five abattoirs; it was that a relatively small number are killed across the whole of England. As far as I am aware, there is also little evidence of anything other than high standards in the abattoirs that do kill horses. We must not start by presuming that they are all bad people doing wicked things. They are not, necessarily; many of them are extremely professional abattoirs doing good things, so let us not start from the presumption that they are bad.

There is a bigger gap in the campaign that we are discussing. I think I am right in saying that the only horses that go to abattoirs are those going into the food chain, which in welfare terms—wilder, cheaper or less valued ponies—are unable to get into the abattoir, even supposing that it does have CCTV. We in this place often do things that make ourselves feel better. We are concerned about the end of life for horses; of course we are worried about it, and quite right too. Of course we are concerned that abattoirs should apply the highest possible standards, and it is absolutely right that we should take steps to ensure that they do.

However, my concern is that in concentrating solely on that, we are concentrating on a tiny part of the problem of horse welfare. A far bigger problem is the number of dumped horses and wild horses; we do not know where they are or what to do about them. This is a tiny problem, and we do not even know that it really is one. If we were to use our primary legislation to solve something that might or might not really be a problem, we would be fooling ourselves that we had done something useful.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): CCTV has a dual purpose. First, it ensures that the slaughter of animals is done correctly. Secondly, it also ensures that slaughterhouse personnel have done it correctly—the proof is in the CCTV footage. Is there not a dual purpose? It protects both the slaughterhouse and the staff.

**Mr Gray**: That is, of course, correct, but it applies only to the tiny proportion of horses that go to the slaughterhouse. That is the point that I am making; only a very small number are killed in equine slaughterhouses. There is no protection whatever for horses killed by the knackerman, although contrary to what somebody said a moment ago, most of the knackermen that I have met are extremely professional animal lovers; the notion that they are bloodthirsty murderers is incorrect. By far the biggest professionals of all in terms of killing horses are at local hunt
kennels, where people feel strongly about horses and know more about them than almost anybody else. Hunt kennels provide a fantastic resource for the countryside by slaughtering horses at the end of their lives.

Liz Saville Roberts: I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s argument that many horses might not be reached by a scheme, as they are not passported, but I refer him to my speech, in which I mentioned that horse owners who are concerned about the welfare of their horses, who have passports and who know whether bute has been used or not are a particular cohort of people whom we should address by making slaughterhouses as accessible to them as possible as an alternative.

Mr Gray: I agree. Of course there are responsible, sensible, grown-up horse owners who would prefer their horse to go into the food chain, although I must say that I am not certain that I want my horse to be eaten. I would much prefer my horses to be burned, or buried in some instances. I am not certain that taking them to the abattoir to be turned into horse meat and sold in supermarkets across the continent is what I personally would want to happen, even though I believe that I am a reasonably responsible horse owner. However, my concern is not so much the people like us who are responsible and who understand about veterinary medicines and all that; it is about the hundreds of thousands of other horses that are not owned by responsible owners, that would not be taken to abattoirs and that have had veterinary medicines. They are the horses towards which we must address our concerns.

All I am saying is that the minimum—proper standards in the abattoir—must not be the enemy of the best. Although I support this particular campaign—it is a good idea, and we must find a way to ensure that there are no abuses in our equine slaughterhouses—I ask the Minister not to use it as an excuse for not doing something about the much bigger problem of the large number of horses that are unwanted, dumped on other people’s land or used in the extremely inhumane horse trade. There are a whole variety of welfare problems that this small matter would not necessarily solve.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to correct the record by clarifying one point. He referred to me as “the hon. Lady for Northern Ireland”—I am the hon. Member for North Down—and quoted me as apparently supporting the idea that the low number of prosecutions was evidence that CCTV was not working. Quite the opposite: I think the low number of prosecutions was evidence that the Food Standards Agency that CCTV should be comprehensive throughout the entire slaughterhouse, and that Food Standards Agency staff should have compulsory and easy access to all the footage. That was my point. That would make horse slaughterhouses much more effective.

Mr Gray: I know that the hon. Member for North Down will forgive me if I inadvertently misquoted her; of course I understood that she meant that we prefer to have CCTV in slaughterhouses. The same remark of mine made her feel that I had not understood that point. I apologise. My concern is simply that by introducing legislation that is the least we can—

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Gray: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I am quite keen to hear what the Minister has to say, but of course.

Christina Rees: I definitely do not want the hon. Gentleman’s horses to be eaten. I watched a TV documentary on slaughterhouses as a teenager, and it turned me into a vegan; I have not eaten meat all my life. I support the campaign, because I think that any exposure of slaughterhouses would be beneficial, and I support CCTV cameras in—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady is making a speech, not asking a question of the hon. Member speaking.

Mr Gray: I accept what the hon. Lady says. A couple of experiences that I have had in slaughterhouses over the years have nearly made me, the biggest beef-eater in Parliament, a vegan. It is a revolting sight, and I would certainly not want to see my horse taken there and slaughtered. However, she makes an extremely good point, which is that the only horses that go to horse slaughterhouses are those destined for the food chain. Other horses do not. Ninety-five per cent of horses are not destined for the food chain, and could not go there. There is a bigger issue. I always argue that we ought to abolish equine slaughterhouses in the UK altogether, thereby sending no meat at all into the human food chain, although I accept the animal welfare downside to that as well: where would those ponies and horses then go?

My message to the Minister is that we must avoid making one thing that we do—introducing compulsory CCTV into slaughterhouses—the enemy of the best. We must address the huge animal welfare concerns about horses, particularly about the large number of unwanted horses abandoned across our land, which is growing as we speak. Those horses will never go anywhere near an equine slaughterhouse, and the provision of CCTV in such slaughterhouses will therefore not help them even slightly at the end of their lives.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, and congratulate the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd on obtaining the debate. I hope that she does not feel that I have in any way lessened the thrust of her argument, which was very powerful. None the less, I hope that one result of this afternoon’s debate will be that the Government begin to listen and think more carefully about the wider welfare issues that affect horses across our nation.

3.20 pm

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): I am grateful to have this opportunity to consider the use of closed circuit television in equine slaughterhouses and to present the views of the Scottish National party. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) on securing the debate, which clearly has strong cross-party support, and Kate Fowler of Animal Aid on her tireless work to bring many of the issues that have been presented today to the attention of MPs; I also congratulate colleagues in World Horse Welfare and Blue Cross.
Undercover filming of poor welfare practices in slaughterhouses has, as we have heard, led to campaigns by a number of animal welfare groups to make it a legal requirement for all slaughterhouses to install CCTV—including those that slaughter horses. It is worth reminding ourselves why we are debating the issue today. The investigations that have been conducted have highlighted cruelty and regulatory breaches in no fewer than nine of the 10 randomly chosen English slaughterhouses that were filmed. The abuses included animals being punched and kicked in the head, burned with cigarettes, and beaten with paddles and broom handles, as well as sheep being picked up by their fleeces and thrown across rooms or smashed head first into solid structures, and animals being attacked with shakele hooks or being deliberately given powerful electric shocks through their ears, tails, abdomens and open mouths. That state of affairs is unacceptable.

Currently both the Food Standards Agency and the UK Government support the use of CCTV in slaughterhouses to prevent cruelty; but neither has yet taken the step of arguing that it should be made a legislative requirement. Five abattoirs in England are licensed to slaughter horses. The public would undoubtedly be surprised to learn that a total of 12,431 horses have been slaughtered in those abattoirs over the past three years. Indeed, according to World Horse Welfare, 4,515 UK horses were killed in slaughterhouses in 2014 alone.

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): I apologise to the hon. Member for Dywfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) for my late arrival.

I come from the Scottish borders, where there is a rich equestrian tradition. There may be five such slaughterhouses in England, but there are none in Scotland, which adds impetus and interest to our interest in this issue south of the border. Does my hon. Friend agree with what we heard—that although CCTV is important it should be just one of a package of measures to ensure the appropriate welfare of all animals sent to slaughter?

Dr Monaghan: I agree with my hon. Friend. CCTV is an important initiative that will contribute to animal welfare across all the nations of the UK.

The practice of slaughtering horses in abattoirs is clearly relatively common, as is the gratuitous cruelty. That is a vital consideration, particularly given that 40% of horse owners state that the cost of euthanasia is too high, which leaves slaughterhouses as the only affordable alternative for their companion animals. As my hon. Friend has said, no abattoir in Scotland is currently licensed to slaughter horses. Nevertheless, the Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing (Scotland) Regulations 2012 highlight the relevant standards. The regulations pertaining to horses provide that where

"a slaughterhouse is one in which horses are killed, the business operator must ensure that a separate room or bay is provided for the killing of horses and no person may kill a horse except in that separate room or bay"

and that

"a lairage in which a horse is confined must contain at least one loose box which is so constructed as to minimise the danger of any horse injuring itself or any other animal confined in that lairage."

Paragraph 13 of schedule 1 to the Scottish regulations makes it clear that

“No person may kill a horse within sight of any other horse.”

That is broadly similar to the regulations that apply in England.

It is right and proper that slaughterhouses should protect against animal abuse. The Scottish Government take the welfare of animals at the time of slaughter seriously, and will continue to do so. They, along with the Food Standards Agency, have already recommended the installation of CCTV as best practice in monitoring the welfare of animals at the time of killing, regardless of the species. At present, the FSA estimates that 95% of animals slaughtered in Scotland are killed in plants where CCTV has already been installed. The Scottish Government continue to monitor its role in promoting animal welfare.

The European Union also plays a role in guaranteeing the welfare of animals across Europe. Approximately 80% of UK animal welfare legislation originates from the EU, with over 40 laws relevant to animal welfare. Those laws cover all four groups of animals—farm, research, wildlife and companion—and have developed over 40 years. In Scotland we place a value on that legislation. Let us hope that animal welfare will be recognised in the promised great repeal Bill and that there will be no attempt to dilute, cancel or repeal animal welfare laws such those I am advocating.

While CCTV will not prevent all welfare breaches, it is an invaluable tool to help vets, slaughterhouse operators and auditors ensure best practice and compliance with welfare laws. There is compelling evidence that properly monitored CCTV cameras work. Footage has been used to cast light on thousands of abuses resulting in slaughterhouse workers’ licences being revoked and abusive workers being successfully prosecuted. Independently monitored CCTV protects animals. Cameras also protect staff from bullying and false allegations, promote health and safety and deter workers from committing acts of cruelty. Where the cameras are properly and independently monitored and robust action is taken where appropriate, they are a powerful deterrent. Where their presence fails to deter abuse, resultant footage provides evidence for prosecutions.

The UK Government argue that voluntary CCTV schemes do not work. If that is so, let us make CCTV mandatory. Independent monitoring and robust action is essential; without them, the presence of cameras is worthless. I am calling for regulations to set out the details of how the footage is gathered and stored, who monitors it, how much they view, and how often. That change can be achieved simply under section 12 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which provides for the making of regulations

“for the purpose of promoting the welfare of animals for which a person is responsible”.

Such a change would not be without precedent as the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 were introduced in that way. Israel and India have already taken similar steps.

Sheffield University has calculated that the cost of an independent CCTV monitoring system would be in the region of £370,000 a year for slaughterhouses in England, and substantially less for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In weighing that against the cost of not acting, it is worth noting that the Minister of State for Environment,
Food and Rural Affairs said on 3 February 2015 at column 251 that the cost of cameras themselves was “relatively modest”.

The 2016 Rotherham report suggests that the costs be met by placing a levy on each animal killed, so that industry and consumers pay, rather than government and taxpayers. In that scenario, the costs would be negligible—about a penny per animal. One penny per animal to avoid further scandals emanating from the industry and further reputational damage arising from welfare abuses, deaths of workers and horsemeat contamination seems like a good investment. That investment could address inconsistent management practice in slaughterhouses, inconsistency in CCTV usage, and variable retention periods, and challenge the many businesses currently unwilling to share footage with regulators.

Sending a horse to slaughter is clearly not the preferred choice for most horse owners, but it is an alternative to other methods of ending a horse’s life that are prohibitively expensive, and a more humane alternative to leaving a horse to deteriorate. We must ensure that horses and indeed all animals are treated humanely in slaughterhouses, and I urge the Minister to amend section 12 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to mandate independently monitored CCTV in slaughterhouses.

3.29 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) on securing this really important debate. The excellent speeches that we have heard from hon. Members reflect the strong public opinion that CCTV should be installed in all equine slaughterhouses. Forgive me, but I must declare an interest: a member of my family works in the meat industry.

I support the argument of the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) and my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) that there should be CCTV in every slaughterhouse throughout the UK. Like my hon. Friend, I pay tribute to the animal charities, particularly World Horse Welfare, which contacted me about its campaign to make CCTV mandatory and whose work is helping the public campaign to grow. In its recent survey of horse owners, which has already been mentioned, World Horse Welfare found that 90% of those surveyed would not use a slaughterhouse to end their horse’s life, but that if measures such as CCTV were in place, 50% of respondents would change their minds. The fact that owners do not have faith that horse slaughter is humane may well lead to welfare problems as horses are passed through various routes until they meet their death. We have already heard that is a particular concern for horse owners, who simply cannot afford the costs of veterinary euthanasia and the resulting carcass disposal, which can be well over £500.

I am presuming that the Minister will refer to the fact that under the relevant EU regulations, slaughterhouses are not required to have CCTV in place; that he will point to the Farm Animal Welfare Committee’s opinion document, which hon. Members have already mentioned and which was published last year; and that he will reiterate his own statement that he was keeping the issue under review. However, the Government must act to increase the confidence of the public, of horse welfare charities and of horse owners in the slaughter process for these animals.

According to the most recent Food Standards Agency survey of operating slaughterhouses in England and Wales, just over 49% of red meat slaughterhouses and 70% of white meat slaughterhouses use some form of CCTV for the purpose of protecting animal welfare. As hon. Members have said, that number has now plateaued. The British Veterinary Association and the Veterinary Public Health Association have called for mandatory CCTV in slaughterhouses too. These organisations have gone further, though, and requested legislation that would allow vets unrestricted access to the CCTV footage. The health Minister responsible will not agree to that, even though there are no national records to show how effective the current system is, yet the FSAs’ authorised officers can ask the food business officer present for access to relevant footage. Will the Minister look into using legislation to strengthen the powers of vets when a breach is suspected?

The conclusion of the FSA publication is that CCTV can be used by operators as part of their system for monitoring and protecting animal welfare and to complement direct oversight by management and checks by officials. I stress the importance of the industry and the Government in reassuring the public that the welfare of the animal is paramount throughout the whole slaughterhouse process, because even though we are not known to consume horsemeat in this country, the recent horsemeat scandal is well remembered. The cost implications of using CCTV are thought to be manageable for businesses, even smaller companies. Many companies already have CCTV installed for security issues—many hon. Members have made that specific point, and so has the Minister on previous occasions.

It is now time for the Government and the industry to take the opportunity to make their commitment to horse welfare in equine slaughterhouses more transparent and effective and to make CCTV mandatory, as has been called for in this debate.

3.35 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) on securing this important debate and articulating an emotive subject so sensitively. As she pointed out, people who have owned a horse all their life are often reluctant to see that horse meet its end. She acknowledged that even if we had CCTV in slaughterhouses, it would get us only so far, because people have a natural reluctance to see the horse that they have lived with for all those years go to a slaughterhouse, with all the uncertainty that they believe that would involve.

I acknowledge the work of World Horse Welfare and other groups on this issue and their long-standing campaign for mandatory CCTV in equine slaughterhouses. I must point out that this is a devolved issue and that my response to this debate applies to England. As hon. Members will know, devolved authorities in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are responsible for the welfare of animals at slaughter in their respective Administrations.
The Government share the British public’s high regard for the welfare of horses. We take seriously our responsibility to ensure that the right laws are in place to secure our horses’ welfare.

**Lady Hermon:** I am grateful to the Minister for allowing me to make an early intervention. He will know well that the lead that is set at Westminster is often followed by the devolved Administration in Northern Ireland. If this Government lead the way with compulsory CCTV in slaughterhouses, that will set a very good precedent for the Northern Ireland Assembly.

**George Eustice:** I understand that; indeed, in many areas we learn from one another when different Administrations trial different pieces of legislation; we share ideas and often work together.

A variety of laws provide protection for the welfare of horses. The Animal Welfare Act 2006 places a clear duty of care on owners and keepers to provide for the welfare needs of their horses. My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) discussed abandoned horses and made the important point that there are wider welfare issues that we must not lose sight of. He will be aware that, in recognition of the specific welfare issues that arise with some horses, the Government recently supported the introduction of the Control of Horses Act 2015 to help landowners and local authorities to deal with the problem of horses left on other people’s land without their permission, which can often give rise to animal welfare issues.

The Government are also firmly committed to improving standards of animal welfare at slaughter. At the end of their lives, horses are covered by WATOK—the Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing (England) Regulations 2015—which sets out requirements pertinent to the protection of animals at slaughter.

**Neil Parish:** I know that the Minister is very keen on animal welfare and does a great deal to promote it. I just wonder why it is not possible to have compulsory cameras for the slaughter of horses, both in the slaughterhouse itself and in the lairage, to ensure that the horses are handled properly all the way through. I feel that that is something that we could do, and it would not be so difficult to make it compulsory.

**George Eustice:** My hon. Friend will appreciate that I will come on to all those issues, which are so pertinent to the debate.

WATOK sets out protections for all animals, regardless of whether there is CCTV in slaughterhouses. There are clear legal obligations on all operators to have standard operating procedures, including monitoring procedures, in place for all slaughter operations, as well as trained stockmen and trained slaughtermen. Official veterinarians from the Food Standards Agency are present during slaughter operations to monitor and enforce animal health and welfare regulations.

On equine slaughter specifically, several long-standing national requirements in WATOK are relevant to the special needs of horses at the time of killing—the business operator must ensure that a separate room or bay is provided for the killing of horses; no person may kill a horse in a room or a bay where there are the remains of a horse or other animal; and no horse may be killed within sight of another horse.

As several hon. Members have pointed out, there are currently five approved equine slaughterhouses in England and Wales, and they are all located in England. Three of them have CCTV installed in some areas for animal welfare purposes. Some 3,280 horses were slaughtered in the past 12 months, and the two plants without CCTV were responsible for only 32 of those animals. From the perspective of equine slaughter, then, most horses are slaughtered in premises with CCTV—

**Angela Smith:** Will the Minister give way?

**George Eustice:** I may be about to answer the hon. Lady’s point. It is important to note that CCTV is not present in all areas in the equine slaughterhouse with the highest throughput.

**Angela Smith:** Will the Minister confirm that in 2015-16 only 61 out of 4,000 horses were slaughtered in an abattoir with comprehensive coverage in all five areas?

**George Eustice:** No; the number would be far higher than that. I will have to write to the hon. Lady to confirm the figures, but the figure of 61 is for only one of the slaughterhouses—the one in Lincolnshire.

**Mr James Gray:** The Minister mentioned that in the past 12 months only 32 horses were killed in abattoirs with no CCTV; is he aware of any reason to presume that those 32 were killed under anything other than 100% humane circumstances?

**George Eustice:** The feedback we have had from the Food Standards Agency’s official veterinarians and reports is that it has not encountered any particular problems or concerns about the welfare of horses at slaughter. We should also note that the number of horses slaughtered at abattoirs in the UK has been in steady decline since 2012, when 8,426 horses were slaughtered. That fell to 5,000 by 2013, and in this past year it is down to just 3,280. That partly reflects a changing view among owners about the end-of-life choices that they have for their horses. It also reflects, as several hon. Members have said, how people are increasingly choosing to have their horses euthanised.

I want to talk about the meat of this debate, which is CCTV. As many hon. Members have said today, CCTV can and does play a useful role. Last year, the Farm Animal Welfare Committee published an interesting report that detailed the positive benefits of CCTV to slaughterhouse operators and those monitoring and verifying compliance with welfare standards. The benefits go much wider than any deterrent effect, and include, for instance, more accurate ante-mortem inspection in the lairage—for example, sheep often mask lameness if stressed when a stockman or vet is present, but behave normally under remote observation.

Another benefit is that CCTV can be a valuable training tool for operatives to encourage sensitive and sympathetic behaviour towards animals, and it can enable the spotting of any bad practices that could result in incidents or near misses. It can also allow the observation of activities in small or confined spaces that it would otherwise be difficult for the official veterinarian to observe. As the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals briefing for the debate also illustrates, it can be of use to operators and audit schemes in providing assurance that good practice and legal requirements are followed.
The Government understand the desire for the use of CCTV in all slaughterhouses, although we are yet to be convinced that it should be a mandatory requirement. I do, though, understand the calls for the Government to go further by introducing legislation to require slaughterhouses to have CCTV installed, and that official veterinarians should have unfettered access to CCTV footage. As I have made clear previously, the Government have never ruled out further action, and we keep the matter under review. I shall ensure that my noble Friend Lord Gardiner, who now has responsibility for the relevant part of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs portfolio, is made aware of the points made today. We will, of course, consider them all carefully.

It is important to highlight one other important point about CCTV made by the FAWC, which is that it is at its most powerful when used as a tool for food business operators to manage their operations and staff and to help with training. There is one area of caution here: CCTV cannot be a substitute for responsible food business operators, and nor can it replace the role of official veterinarians. If it is used well, it is preferable that it is used because food business operators really want it and want to use it to improve the management of their operation. In considering legislation, we need to be careful that we do not inadvertently change the culture and thereby lose out on all the benefits from CCTV highlighted by the FAWC. It is for that reason that the Government have encouraged the voluntary take-up of CCTV in slaughterhouses, and will continue to do so.

It might help if I clarify the current situation concerning CCTV in slaughterhouses generally. The latest FSA survey figures show that in Great Britain 92% of cattle, 96% of pig, 88% of sheep and 99% of poultry throughput is currently from premises with CCTV. As the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) pointed out, the number of slaughterhouses with CCTV installed has been at the same level for the past couple of years. The numbers of high-throughput slaughterhouses with CCTV reflects the fact that, although the installation of CCTV in slaughterhouses is currently voluntary, it is also a requirement of many retailers and food assurance schemes. I acknowledge that many of the medium and smaller slaughterhouses have not yet installed CCTV.

Many operators who have installed CCTV say that it is a positive training tool, so we would like to consider the issue to ensure that we get greater uptake of CCTV installation.

I shall briefly address some of the issues mentioned by hon. Members. The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd talked about EU law. She is right that the initial intention of the great repeal Bill is that existing EU regulations will be put on to a UK legal basis, but I should point out that there is currently nothing in EU law that would prevent us from legislating to introduce mandatory CCTV if we so wished. This also relates to a point made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon). I do not intend to blame the EU and say that we cannot do it because it is not required; it is not required under EU law, but there is nothing in EU law that would prohibit it.

The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd also mentioned the cost. I have said in previous debates that the cost is indeed modest. She said that it can be under £1,000, and it can be for single cameras, as I have pointed out previously. However, when the FAWC looked into the cost, it estimated that for most abattoirs the cost of installing CCTV in the areas that people would want covered, which would require several cameras and additional monitoring systems, would be £3,000 to £10,000.

As I have said previously and will say again, though, that is a relatively modest cost.

Mr James Gray: Does the Minister accept that there is a risk that the number of abattoirs killing horses and the number of horses killed in abattoirs might well decline further if CCTV is made compulsory? Many abattoir owners will simply say, “Why bother with horses?”, because they are a huge hassle anyhow and the carcass value is very low. Is there not at least a risk that the small number of abattoirs will become smaller?

George Eustice: There is another, wider point. This debate is focused specifically on CCTV at the point of horses’ slaughter, but all five of the slaughterhouses that are licensed to slaughter horses also slaughter other animals. The reality is that, were anybody to consider measures on CCTV, I am not sure there would be a specific reason to single out those abattoirs licensed for horses. I think that if someone was going to install CCTV, they would take a broader view, across all species, because the principles involved are broadly the same for each species.

The final point that I will make on the speech of the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) has been a long-standing campaigner on a wide range of animal welfare issues. He made a separate legislative point, saying that if there is not time for primary legislation to address this issue, perhaps the Government should give a fair wind to a private Member’s Bill. Obviously, private Member’s Bills are an issue for the House and for private Members; it is open to anyone at any time to bring one forward. However, I am not sure that we would need primary legislation if we decided to address this issue. Potentially it could be dealt with under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which has quite wide provisions to deal with these types of things. Nevertheless, I take on board his point, and if any Back Bencher wanted to introduce such legislation, they could obviously do so.

Sir Roger Gale: Will my hon. Friend the Minister undertake to have a look at the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and see whether it is possible to introduce a statutory instrument to achieve this aim?

George Eustice: As I think I explained to my hon. Friend, my belief is that we probably could. I will move on to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire made. He brought a refreshing sense of balance to this debate: we always need to question ourselves when we consider new measures of this sort. He made the very important point that we have had serious welfare breaches in slaughterhouses where there has been CCTV, so we should not see CCTV as a panacea for these problems. There are
strong arguments for CCTV in slaughterhouses, but some of the breaches of animal welfare have been in slaughterhouses that already have CCTV.

Finally, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for North Tyneside, mentioned access to footage. If the Food Standards Agency is conducting an investigation, it already has access to footage where CCTV exists; it can require access to that footage. Also, the British Meat Processors Association and others have developed protocols with their members about how to store, share and use data, where it is available.

Mary Glindon: Will the Minister give way?

George Eustice: I will give way only briefly, because I want to give the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd time to reply to the debate.

Mary Glindon: It was simply to say that the Government do not keep a national record of incidents. Such a record would be really beneficial.

George Eustice: We are obviously aware of prosecutions brought by the FSA nationally. So, where there are incidents or breaches, we get involved, and I am often involved in sanctioning the withdrawal of licences and other such sanctions.

In conclusion, I again thank all hon. Members for their contribution to this interesting debate. It is about 18 months since I last responded to a debate on the issue of CCTV in slaughterhouses. While the evidence on the impact of CCTV on animal welfare within slaughterhouses has probably changed a little in that period, I do take on board all the issues that have been raised today. In addition, I note that take-up of CCTV among some of the smaller abattoirs has plateaued over the last two years.

I reiterate that, as well as helping to protect the welfare of animals, many of the benefits of CCTV in slaughterhouses that were identified by the Farm Animal Welfare Committee’s report also help the slaughterhouse operator. Also, the Government have never ruled out mandatory steps on CCTV in slaughterhouses, although we have always encouraged voluntary uptake.

I assure the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd that this Government remain committed to promoting high animal welfare standards and protecting animal welfare on-farm, in transport and at slaughter, and I hope that I have been able to address some of the concerns that have been raised today.

3.54 pm

Liz Saville Roberts: Diolch yn fawr iawn—thank you very much, Mrs Main, for giving me the opportunity to close this debate.

I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate this afternoon. I think that I need to put on the record, as I have heard everybody else doing so, that I have been an honorary member of the British Veterinary Association for about three weeks or so. It is important that I record that.

Listening to the speeches, the general thrust was to do the best that we can for the welfare of horses, and of domestic and agricultural animals more widely. I particularly welcome the support from the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) of the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation, and also his comment that the cost of CCTV need not be prohibitive.

I also welcome the comments of the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), who mentioned the “invisible horse”, referring to the fact that there are many animals out there that are effectively not seen by anybody. It is very easy for an animal that is kept, say, in a field simply to disappear from sight, although we are concerned for its welfare, we are not really in a position to know much about what is happening to them.

I agree with the concern of the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) about the wider issue with horse welfare. I understand that there are almost 800,000 horses in the United Kingdom, although we do not know how many there really are, and a great many horses are owned by people who, in all honesty, are not interested in any aspect of their welfare. Although I feel strongly that CCTV would improve the welfare of horses in certain circumstances, we should not fool ourselves that CCTV in itself would resolve all the problems for horses. I share the hon. Gentleman’s discomfort with the idea that horses are meat animals. None the less, the fact that, although they are not meat animals, they are still large herbivores in itself affects their life experience.

Turning to the contribution of the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan), of course, Scotland and Wales are in the same situation; we do not have licensed equine slaughterhouses. That means that horse owners in Wales or Scotland have to travel outside our nations if they wish to use those facilities.

It is important that all the nations of the United Kingdom set standards for each other. Wales passed the Control of Horses (Wales) Act 2014, which dealt with fly-grazing; previous to that being dealt with in England. Interestingly enough, only a certain number of authorities have used those enabling powers. I suspect that is partly because some of them do not want to be seen to be responsible for the death of horses that come under their control, which is part of the irony of our relationship with horses. In welfare terms, we perhaps need to address that irony.

Finally, I turn to the contribution by the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon). She summarised the views of many in this House by saying that the welfare of animals in slaughterhouses is of paramount concern to the public. I very much welcome some of the Minister’s comments. I noted his comments that CCTV has a useful role to play; that it can make evident concealed injuries, such as lameness, which animals conceal when they are under stress and feel that they are being observed; that it can be used for training; and that it can be used in particular when it is difficult to gain access to smaller spaces.

I noticed the subtleties of the Minister’s comment that he perhaps remains to be convinced about CCTV but that he has never ruled out further action. He also said that this issue could be dealt with by a private Member’s Bill or a statutory instrument arising from the Animal Welfare Act 2016, which was certainly an interesting comment. I hope that he will commit to consider that matter further in future.
Of course, CCTV is not a substitute for responsible work practices or the presence of official veterinarians. Nevertheless, there is a strong feeling that it contributes to and enhances welfare. As for making CCTV mandatory, we have been talking about equines today but that could also apply—well, it should apply—to all other agricultural animals. The time has come to deal with this issue, and there are strong feelings about that.

I will close by saying that many little girls aspire to own their first My Little Pony and then to own the real thing—

Mr James Gray: And little boys.

Liz Saville Roberts: And little boys, possibly. I am talking for myself and my own daughters; forgive me. However, horses are not necessarily well served if they are regarded an aspirational status symbol. They are neither an agricultural animal nor a visible family pet. They can be dumped, “invisible” and uncared for, in barns or fields. They can be cheap to buy; indeed, they can easily be free to acquire. The costs of worming them and maintaining their feet can be prohibitive for people who might find it easy to acquire them, and their value disappears after they reach a certain age.

Mandatory CCTV and ensuring access to CCTV footage will improve the reality of horse welfare, and indeed that of all animals sent to slaughterhouses, and I hope that we can address this issue further in the future. Thanks very much—diolch yn fawr iawn.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered CCTV in equine slaughterhouses.

Foreign National Offenders

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the return of foreign national offenders to prison in their own country.

I am grateful to you, Sir Alan, for your time in the Chair, to Mr Speaker for granting me permission to hold the debate, and to my constituents who have sent me here to articulate their concerns. I welcome other hon. Members to the debate, and declare myself open to as many interventions as they care to make.

My main contention is that there are too many foreign national offenders in prison in this country and that they should be in prison in their country of origin. I invite the Minister to update the House on the latest figures, first on the number of prisoners in our jails. I think it is something like 85,000, which basically means that our prisons are full to bursting. It is good that we catch people who do bad things and lock them up, but my understanding is that more than 10,000 of those 85,000—something like 12%—are foreign national offenders. At a time when our prisons are full to bursting, when we, by the Government’s own admission, do not have enough prison officers and when public expenditure is tight at best, it seems that we need to redouble our efforts to ensure that we send those foreign national offenders back to their own countries.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Hollobone: It would be an honour and a privilege to give way to the former Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee.

Keith Vaz: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Earlier today, the Minister gave evidence about this very issue to the Justice Committee and I asked him a question about it. Does the hon. Gentleman think it is inexcusable that there are 4,270-plus EU nationals in our prisons? If there is one group of prisoners we should return to their country of origin it is prisoners from EU countries, because they are costing the British taxpayer £169 million. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is essential, as part of the Brexit negotiations, that we get that problem sorted out once and for all?

Mr Hollobone: I do think we should get the situation sorted out once and for all. I pray in aid the excellent report by the right hon. Gentleman’s previous Committee, which looked into the issue. I quote, I think, from that report:

“The public would expect our membership of the EU to make it easier to deport European offenders, but this is clearly not the case, and we continue to keep thousands of these criminals at great and unnecessary expense.”

There is in place an EU prisoner transfer directive, which means that countries can compulsorily return prisoners to their country of origin within the European Union. The last time we managed to wheedle a figure out of Her Majesty’s Government on how many EU nationals we had returned to their country of origin, I think the number was 101—pathetically low. Legislation,
in the form of that directive, exists with which to do that, but we are simply not getting on with it. Perhaps the Minister in his response will confirm how many EU nationals are in our prisons, how many we have returned to their country of origin, and why we are not sending thousands more of these individuals back.

I have to tell the House that, beside EU nationals, there are representatives of 160 nations from around the world in Her Majesty’s prisons. Not only are we a cosmopolitan society at large, we are also a cosmopolitan city in Her Majesty’s jails.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): Would my hon. Friend also like to elicit the numbers for Jamaica? I believe they are the highest in the world.

Mr Hollobone: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. The figure I have for Jamaica is 567, and I, like him, would like the Minister to update us.

In a minute, I will come to a list of shame, of those countries that have the most foreign national offenders in our prisons.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Hollobone: I would be honoured and delighted to give way to the hon. Lady.

Lady Hermon: The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that dissident republicans continue to wage a very violent campaign in Northern Ireland. These are individuals who claim they want to achieve a united Ireland through violence. At present, some of them are relaxing at Her Majesty’s pleasure in Maghaberry prison in Northern Ireland. Does the hon. Gentleman have any facts and figures relating to such prisoners who have requested to go back to the Republic of Ireland?

Mr Hollobone: I do not have the answer to the hon. Lady’s question, but I hope that the Minister does, because he is paid to have that sort of information. I can tell her, however, that according to my figures, southern Ireland—Ireland—has 783 nationals in UK prisons and is No. 2 on my list of shame.

Some 80% of the world’s nations are represented in our prisons. A third of those prisoners have been convicted of violent and sexual offences, a fifth of drug offences, and others of burglary, robbery, fraud and other serious crimes, yet we have the privilege of paying for them to stay in our country. The National Audit Office, in a report just a couple of years ago, looked at how much that is costing our nation. The average annual cost of incarcerating a prisoner is £33,000, so the very least this is costing our nation. The average annual cost of prison costs and police costs, Crown Prosecution Service costs, legal aid costs and prison costs were added in, the total bill would be between £769 million and £1 billion a year, with its median estimate being £850 million.

I come now to my list of shame, the list of the top 10 nations, according to the latest figures I have, on the basis of how many of their nationals are in our prisons. At No. 10 is Nigeria with 385, No. 9 is Somalia with 430, No. 8 is India with 458, equal sixth are Lithuania and Pakistan with 471, No. 5 is Albania with 472, No. 4 is Jamaica with 567, No. 3 is Romania with 629, No. 2 is Ireland with 783 and No. 1 is Poland with 951.

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Keith Vaz: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Hollobone: I will be delighted to give way to both Members, but I feel I should give way to Rochdale first.

Simon Danczuk: I thank the hon. Gentleman, not least for securing what is a very important debate. He mentioned Pakistan. People will remember Shabir Ahmed who is serving more than 40 years for 40 years for raping dozens of children as part of the Rochdale grooming gang. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that he should be deported to Pakistan to see what he thinks of prison there?

Mr Hollobone: That is a very sensible suggestion. I am not aware of all the details of the horrific crimes that that unpleasant gentleman has committed, but I do not see why British taxpayers should pay for him to be in prison—Pakistani taxpayers should. In fact, I would go further. I take the view that if a foreign national in this country commits a crime for which they are potentially imprisonable, they should be deported and banned from ever returning, whether they are in prison or not.

Keith Vaz: I felt that I had walked into an early edition of “Top of the Pops” when the hon. Gentleman did the countdown from 10 to one—I suppose that from his point of view it is “Bottom of the Pops”. In respect of that list, with one or two exceptions they are either EU or Commonwealth countries. We would expect, as far as the Commonwealth countries are concerned—Nigeria, Jamaica and the others—that Ministers would be able to elicit a better deal than the one they have. Only yesterday, the Polish Prime Minister was in the country. I asked the Minister this question earlier in the Justice Committee meeting. Should this issue not be the No. 1 concern when our Ministers are meeting the leaders of other countries? It would save the British taxpayer a lot of money and would enable those countries to imprison their own citizens. We would be happy to take back our prisoners who are in their countries.

Mr Hollobone: As always, the right hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point. From the list of 10, four are EU countries and four are Commonwealth countries. He is absolutely right. I hope that in the Prime Minister’s discussions with the Polish Prime Minister yesterday, she raised the fact that Poland was top of the list of shame and asked the Poles what they were doing to take their citizens back. I understand that Poland has a derogation from the EU prisoner transfer directive until this month. I hope that the Minister will get on to his Polish counterpart at the end of the month to say that we look forward to triggering the proposals that have become live.

Those top 10 nations account for 5,617 prisoners, but we have imported—I am afraid this is absolute truth—a wave of crime from eastern Europe with the accession of eastern European countries to the European Union. Poland has 951 of its citizens in our jails. In 2002, before Polish membership of the European Union, there were 45 Poles in prison in this country. I urge the Minister to get on with it, but I also urge him to speak to his counterpart in the Department for International Development. My list of shame of 10 countries could be cross-checked with the 28 countries that receive large assistance from ever returning, whether they are in prison or not.

Some 80% of the world’s nations are represented in our prisons. A third of those prisoners have been convicted of violent and sexual offences, a fifth of drug offences, and others of burglary, robbery, fraud and other serious crimes, yet we have the privilege of paying for them to stay in our country. The National Audit Office, in a report just a couple of years ago, looked at how much that is costing our nation. The average annual cost of incarcerating a prisoner is £33,000, so the very least this is costing our nation. The average annual cost of prison costs and police costs, Crown Prosecution Service costs, legal aid costs and prison costs were added in, the total bill would be between £769 million and £1 billion a year, with its median estimate being £850 million.

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amounts of aid from DFID. Indeed, I asked a few years ago how much aid we give in total to Jamaica, Pakistan, Nigeria, Somalia, India and Bangladesh, and the answer in that year was almost £1 billion, yet those six countries provide us with almost 3,000 foreign national offenders. It costs us more than £100 million a year to incarcerate those people in our jails, yet we are giving those countries £1 billion in international aid assistance.

I think we should do more things such as those we are doing in Jamaica, where we are using international aid money to build a prison to which we can return its nationals. That is a sensible use of the international aid budget. In Jamaica, we signed an agreement in 2015 to build a 1,500-bed prison. It will be built with British taxpayers’ money, and Jamaican nationals in prison in this country will go back to prison in Jamaica as soon as it is completed. Will the Minister urge DFID to look for similar arrangements in the other five countries that I mentioned?

Perhaps more worrying than those foreign national offenders in prison is the very large number of foreign national offenders who are in this country, but not in prison. Alarmingly, it takes the Home Office 149 days on average to deport a foreign national offender. That is simply too slow. The latest figures I have are for March this year. They show a total of 5,895 foreign national offenders living in the community awaiting deportation. These dangerous people are not even in prison. They are free to go about their business on our streets. Of that 5,895 FNOs, 84% have been at large for more than one year and 30% have been at large for more than five years. That is a national scandal. Very large numbers of those individuals will have committed further offences in this country since they have been outside prison. My contention is that those foreign national offenders also need to be deported. If they are not going to be in prison, they need to be walking the streets of their country of origin, not those of our country.

This is an alarming state of affairs, and I am looking to the Minister—he has a solid reputation for being enthusiastic about his portfolio and being skilled and articulate in arguing the case to get things done—to knock heads together in his Department and the Home Office to say that it is not good enough. The previous Prime Minister said to the Home Affairs Committee that the Government’s performance was not good enough, and I am sure the present Prime Minister would admit that. The issue is costing British taxpayers more than £800 million a year. Almost 5,000 foreign national offenders are at large on our streets. Some 10,000 are in prison in this country when they should be in prison in their countries at the expense of their own taxpayers. My constituents in Kettering are looking to the Minister to get it sorted out.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) for securing this afternoon’s debate. I know he has raised the issue before. The debate has raised a number of issues that I will try to tackle in turn. I welcome an opportunity to highlight the Government’s approach and the progress we are making.

Let me say at the outset that the House should be in no doubt that the Government are absolutely committed to increasing the number of foreign national offenders removed from our prisons. Any foreign national who comes to our country and abuses our hospitality by breaking the law should be in no doubt of our determination to deport them. Increasing removals is one of our top priorities. When I was appointed, the Prime Minister certainly made it clear to me that it was a key priority for the Department. All FNOs sentenced to custody are referred to the Home Office at the earliest opportunity to be considered for deportation.

My hon. Friend asked for an update on the numbers. Overall, since 2010 we have removed more than 33,000 foreign offenders from prisons, immigration removal centres and the community. In 2015-16, we removed 5,810 FNOs, which was the highest number since records began. That represents good progress, but there is certainly a lot more that can be done, and I am ambitious to do more. My hon. Friend asked for clarification. FNOs make up 12% of the overall prison population, with 4,180 EU nationals in prisons and immigration removal centres. He went through a list of his top 10. Without going into too much detail, I can confirm that Poland holds the highest number of offenders. Ireland is second and Romania is third.

The primary responsibility for the removal of FNOs sits with the Home Office. It is the Home Office that can remove someone from this country. The Ministry of Justice and the National Offender Management Service support that work by setting the policy and administering the removal schemes. As I am sure everyone present will recognise, the removal of an FNO requires a co-ordinated and sustained approach across Whitehall. My hon. Friend alluded to that. My Department works closely with the Home Office, the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development. Only last week I met ministerial colleagues from those Departments to agree a programme of work to increase FNO removals.

Mr Hollobone: We have got oodles of time to explore the nitty-gritty of the issue. My understanding is that it is regularly on the agenda of the National Security Council. Can the Minister confirm that? Can he confirm how often the NSC meets to discuss the issue? Can he confirm that he is able to attend those meetings to press the case, given that the Prime Minister said to him that it is one of her top priorities?

Mr Gyimah: I can confirm that I have met the Minister for Immigration twice in the past two months. He has the levers to remove people. I met him only this week. We have widened the meeting to include Ministers from the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development. We have got an ambitious programme and clear actions to take forward. We have agreed to meet as often as possible to give the issue the ministerial attention it deserves. In addition, we are making sure that when other Government Ministers meet Ministers in countries with which we have a concern about foreign nationals, this issue is included as a top priority in their briefing pack to raise with and get feedback from Ministers of those Governments, so that we can act on that.

Simon Danczuk: Will the Minister do all that he can to ensure that Shabir Ahmed is deported to a prison in Pakistan?
Mr Gyimah: I am certainly willing to look at that case. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I cannot make a decision here about who gets deported and under what terms; we have to look at the case very carefully. If he writes to me, I am willing to look at that with the Immigration Minister and the Home Office.

Lady Hermon: I intervene with reference to dissident republicans. Terrorism is not an issue that is devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly; it is a responsibility for this Government, thank goodness. I would like the Minister to reply to my earlier question. How many dissident republicans—who wage a violent campaign and who have murdered, bombed and shot people in Northern Ireland and elsewhere—have requested to return to prisons in the Republic of Ireland? Since they want a united Ireland, surely one can understand that they would wish to go back to prison in the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Gyimah: I thank the hon. Lady for her very forcefully put question. I do not have those data to hand, but if they are available—I look to my officials—I will be happy to write to her with the detail.

There is a huge amount of activity under way on each stage of the FNO process, from the point of arrest to appearance in court, being given a prison sentence and stage of the FNO process, from the point of arrest to removal from the UK. That means that foreign offenders cannot delay appearing in court to state their nationality. Those provisions are designed to help to speed up early identification of nationality and will require anyone appearing in court to state their nationality. Those provisions are designed to help to speed up early identification of FNOs and so assist with their quick removal from the UK.

Keith Vaz: Will that include the production of their passport? Telling the court their nationality is very important, but the production of the passport is absolutely critical. Is that included in those measures?

Mr Gyimah: I believe that is included in the process that I have outlined. In other initiatives, my Department is currently working on proposals to introduce a new fast-track appeals process that will apply to all detained foreign offenders. That process will make sure that appeals are determined as efficiently as possible, so that foreign offenders may be removed from the UK more quickly.

We have also strengthened our ability to deport foreign offenders through new powers introduced by the Immigration Act 2014, which contains a discretionary power allowing us to deport first—the FNO can appeal later. That means that foreign offenders cannot delay their removal with frivolous appeals and are instead required to appeal from abroad, but only if the Home Secretary certifies that removal pending the outcome of any appeal would not risk serious irreversible harm following their return. More than 4,100 foreign offenders have been deported under that new provision since it came into force in July 2014, with many more going through the system.

In terms of wider cross-governmental work, which I have touched on, I am determined that we make extensive use of the influence and worldwide reach of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development, which my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering so articulately focused on, so that we can bring our relationships to bear in discussions, to make sure that we fast-track the process.

Mr Hollobone: I want to ask the Minister two things. How many foreign national offenders have we sent back to EU countries under the EU prisoner transfer directive and how many compulsory transfer agreements do we have with other non-EU countries?

Mr Gyimah: If my hon. Friend bears with me, I will come to those facts in my speech. Wider cross-governmental work means that there is a focus on countries in which DFID operates and for which we hold large numbers of FNOs in our prisons, such as India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Somalia.

I am sure hon. Members will appreciate that the barriers to returning FNOs to their countries of nationality are both varied and complex. That is why the action we take must be tailored to each specific country. To that end, I am working closely with my ministerial colleagues, with work ranging from Ministers pressing the issue with foreign Governments every time they travel overseas, to supporting other countries with our aid spending in order to increase FNO removals from our prisons.

The early removal scheme is our principal mechanism for removing FNOs from our prisons, especially those on shorter sentences. Under the scheme, offenders are returned to their home countries and are barred from entering the UK, potentially for life. In 2015-16, we removed more than 2,000 prisoners via that scheme. That is around 95% of early removals from prison. It is worth highlighting that although that number of removals is very welcome, I am working with the Home Office—I see the Immigration Minister has just walked in, which shows how closely he takes an interest in this important matter—to improve the removal mechanism still further and ensure that it is working as effectively as it possibly can. We have more than 100 prisoner transfer agreements with countries and territories around the world.

Mr Hollobone: How many compulsory transfer agreements do we have? My understanding is that something like 95% of those removals are voluntary. In other words, they require the permission of the prisoner himself.

Mr Gyimah: I am about to make a point about the compulsory and voluntary nature of removals. Where an agreement is in place, prisoners can be transferred on a voluntary basis or on a compulsory basis, meaning that their consent is not required. Most of the agreements we have are necessarily voluntary—which is the point my hon. Friend touched on—due to the standard of prison conditions and the treatment of prisoners in many parts of the world.

Our approach is that we will seek to secure compulsory transfer agreements wherever possible. We have one in place with EU member states, as well as with a number of other countries, such as Albania, the home country of one of the top nationality groups in our prisons. It is worth saying that we are working closely with Albania in particular to improve our prisoner transfer agreement in order to remove more FNOs from our prisons. For that reason, the Minister for Courts and Justice, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North...
[Mr Gyimah]

East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), recently met the Albanian Justice Minister to reinforce the importance of returning FNOs as quickly as possible. In terms of compulsory agreements, which my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering asked about, we currently have compulsory agreements in place with Somalia, Libya, Rwanda, Albania, Nigeria and the EU. That is the factual answer to his question.

The most recent published statistics, from June this year, show that we have transferred 102 prisoners back to their home countries since the EU PTA came into force. We continue to see increasing numbers of transfers as member states become more familiar with the processes. I am determined to maintain that progress and build on it. The number of transfers should of course be seen within the wider context of our work to remove FNOs. The early removal scheme is only one mechanism. It is the most successful one, and 2,000 people were transferred under that scheme last year.

We are working across Government to consider options for securing transfers of EU nationals once we leave the European Union. That is one of the key Brexit priorities for the Ministry of Justice and we have made that very clear to the Department for Exiting the EU in terms of our negotiating position. Although it would not be appropriate for me to provide a running commentary, I hope that what I have said underscores how important the issue is for the Department. I am particularly focused on returning FNOs to those member states for which the Ministry of Justice and we have made that very clear to the Department for Exiting the EU in terms of our negotiating position. Although it would not be appropriate for me to provide a running commentary, I hope that what I have said underscores how important the issue is for the Department. I am particularly focused on returning FNOs to those member states for which the number of transfers should of course be seen within the wider context of our work to remove FNOs. The early removal scheme is only one mechanism. It is the most successful one, and 2,000 people were transferred under that scheme last year.

It is worth bearing in mind that there are also, of course, British nationals detained in prisons overseas—the current figure is roughly 2,046. We are thinking of savings, but in that context there would be a bit of going backwards and forwards.

The time available for today’s debate only allows for an overview of the numerous initiatives and policies under way. I am willing and available to meet with hon. Members who want to look at our processes in more detail and contribute to them. Wherever possible, we will always look to remove those who have broken our laws and will continue to work with Governments across Europe and the world to increase the number of prisoners removed. Be in no doubt that the Government are absolutely committed to reducing the number of foreign national offenders in our prisons, which is why each year we are increasing the numbers of people removed.

Question put and agreed to.

Refugee Family Reunion (Immigration Rules)

4.30 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered immigration rules for refugee family reunion.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. The world is facing the greatest refugee crisis since the end of world war two. According to statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which I checked today, an unprecedented 65.3 million people have been forcibly displaced worldwide for various reasons including famine, war, poverty, climate change and internal repression. That total roughly equals this country’s entire population. Of those 65.3 million people, 21.3 million are classed by the UNHCR as refugees.

An International Rescue Committee report published in March described the rapid acceleration of the problem. In 2010, 10,000 people a day were displaced from their homes, and by 2014 that number had quadrupled. Again, that comes from UNHCR statistics. It is slightly less than that now, but still very high.

The UK has legal obligations to refugees under international law. There is a rigorous process of assessment before someone is granted refugee status, and only then are they allowed to apply for work and look for somewhere to live. The refugees I have met have all been determined to do everything they can to contribute to the UK. They have also been determined to be reunited with their families.

I am the chair of the all-party group on refugees, and I have initiated a public inquiry entitled “Refugees Welcome?”, which has just completed four oral evidence sessions. We have received hundreds of pieces of written evidence and will be visiting Bristol and Nottingham later this month to see for ourselves how refugees who have been granted status in this country are treated. The refugees we heard from in person gave powerful testimony about their difficult journeys, their painful experiences in their countries of origin, and their desire to contribute to and be part of this country, which has welcomed them. They also spoke about periods of destitution and poverty after being granted status. That subject will be dealt with in our report. Pertinent to this debate, they spoke of their natural desire to be reunited with their family as soon as possible.

This is a highly gendered issue. Women and children are far more likely to have been left behind than men. Their only hope of escape is to wait for a male family member to reach a country of sanctuary and then apply for reunion. Recent research by the Red Cross shows that 95% of applicants waiting to join family members to and be part of this country, which has welcomed them. They also spoke about periods of destitution and poverty after being granted status. That subject will be dealt with in our report. Pertinent to this debate, they spoke of their natural desire to be reunited with their family as soon as possible.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I understand that, under the current rules, if the child turns 18 before the refugee status of the family member in the UK is confirmed, they are no longer eligible for family reunion. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is a problem, and that the Government should look at changing the rules so the age of the child is considered when the Home Office procedure begins?
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Thangam Debbonaire: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I will come on to that issue. I completely agree that it is unjust and leaves many vulnerable young people in danger and alone.

Fifty-one per cent. of the families Red Cross helped in 2014 were at risk of violence, torture or harassment during the process of applying for family reunion, so the process is not safe. The British Red Cross also told me that, to date in 2016, it has supported the travel of 1,551 people accepted by the Home Office under refugee family reunion, 580 of whom were from Syria. As of the beginning of September, 767 children granted family reunion visas had arrived in the UK after assistance from the British Red Cross, 280 of whom were from Syria. Those are hardly huge numbers. In its 2015 research, “Not So Straightforward”, the British Red Cross found that the current UK policy for refugee family union is not simple, not affordable and not safe.

The system is failing many women and children. Women for Refugee Women, which is represented here today, told me that it knows of many women in the UK who have had to flee from danger without their children and then struggled to bring their children to join them, as the hon. Member for Rotherham and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) said. The problems include, first, delays from the Home Office. If a woman has waited many years in the asylum process, her children back home may be older than 18 by the time she has been granted status, so they are not allowed the automatic right to join her.

Secondly, there are the costs of accessing family reunion rights. I hope the Minister will address both those issues. For instance, a woman whom Women for Refugee Women knows well, and whom I am going to meet later today—she has given me permission to describe her story—entered the UK in 2007 after being imprisoned in the Democratic Republic of the Congo as a human rights activist. She left behind her children, aged 12, 15 and 17. It was three and a half years before she was called for her first asylum interview, and she was not granted status until 2013. By then, her children, still vulnerable, were 23, 21 and 18, and were therefore refused the right to join her. She is still struggling to find a legal route to be reunited with them. She has already spent £600 per child on the first application and has been told that she needs to spend still more for the appeal. As can be imagined, those sums are an incredible burden for a refugee woman who can access only very low-paid jobs due to her interrupted employment history.

This afternoon, at a City of Sanctuary event that I hosted, I met two brothers. Both were Syrian. One was granted status quickly, but the other was still in the process after being in detention. Their parents are still in Syria. They cannot come on the resettlement scheme or on family reunion, even though the first brother now has a full-time job and has said he is willing and able to support them.

I want to talk about expanding the scope of refugee family reunion rules to protect children and bring families together. The UK, unlike most European Union states, does not allow children to bring family members to join them here. Under the Dublin regulation—EU regulation 604/2013—they can be transferred to another EU member state if they have a relative living there, but that just moves children around the EU and places more burdens on the states that receive the most refugees. It does not allow children already here and granted status to bring their parents here.

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill):

May I point out that the Dublin process is a two-way process, and that we are taking children who have family here from elsewhere in the European Union? We have resettled a number of children this year, and the process is gathering pace.

Thangam Debbonaire: I acknowledge that it is a two-way process. That is important, but there is a lot more we can do.

Someone fleeing war, torture or conflict may have lost relatives or been separated from parents or children. They may have been cared for by an aunt or an older sibling. They may have a wider idea of family than the nuclear family of western social policy. As the hon. Member for Rotherham and Hamilton West said, their children may have reached 18 by the time their status is confirmed, but they may still need protection or be dependent. If refugee family reunion rules in the UK are to ensure the security of refugees’ family members and family unity, they must address relationships of dependence beyond those currently permitted.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful case. The reason why people run needs to be at the heart of how we do our refugee policy. Nobody decides to leave their family lightly. We need to counter the idea that one member of a family is at risk but another is not to understand how to have a dignified and humane approach to refugees.

Thangam Debbonaire: I agree. I find it difficult to understand why a child who has come from a place that is deemed unsafe for them to go back to cannot simply bring their parents here.

In July, the Home Office published updated guidance on refugee family reunion, which set out details of types of cases where exceptional circumstances may apply—for example, in the case of dependent children over the age of 18. It is important that there are exceptional circumstances, and it is a welcome sign that the Government recognise the importance of family reunion, but it is not enough. People are usually granted leave to remain in exceptional circumstances for only 33 months, and they may be subject to other restrictions to which those granted refugee status are not subject. Those restrictions are left to the discretion of Home Office officials, which does not give them the certainty that a change in the rules would provide.

The Home Affairs Committee, in HC 151, its sixth report of this parliamentary Session, reviewed the work of the immigration directorates:

“IT seems to us perverse that children who have been granted refugee status in the UK are not then allowed to bring their close family to join them in the same way as an adult would be able to do. The right to live safely with family should apply to child refugees just as it does to adults. The Government should amend the immigration rules to allow refugee children to act as sponsors for their close family.”

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for that work.
The same Committee, in HC 24, its seventh report of this Session, on the migration crisis, stated:

“Family reunion of migrants has been shown to have benefits in terms of integration and support networks, in addition to the human rights requirements of allowing families to be together, and there is clear scope for further measures to facilitate women and children joining husbands, fathers and other male relatives who have reached the UK... We also recommend that the UK broaden the scope of family reunification.”

I therefore support the Home Affairs Committee, the Refugee Council, Refugee Action, Amnesty International, the British Red Cross and many others, and call on the UK Government to end the discrimination against children, allowing those recognised as refugees the right to be joined in this country by other family members. Further, the definition of “family” should be expanded to include a wider range of family members. I recognise that that is challenging, but those people have come from war zones.

Our system needs to be properly implemented to fulfil our legal and moral obligations. The effect of cuts to legal aid is that refugees and UK citizens struggle to be reunited with their family members. Legal aid for specialist legal help for family reunion was cut by the coalition Government in 2013, on the grounds that it was considered a straightforward immigration matter that did not warrant the need for specialist legal support. The evidence, however, from the British Red Cross, the Refugee Council, Women for Refugee Women and my own caseload shows that many of the cases are far from straightforward—they are complex and require specialist legal advisers. Given what is at stake for families, there should be legal aid provision to assist refugees making family reunion applications.

Furthermore, those refugees who have been granted citizenship cannot sponsor family members in the same way as those only with refugee status. That seems particularly harsh. They are subject to the same minimum income and other requirements of the spousal visa process as other UK citizens. I understand why that has happened, but it is difficult for newly arrived people to meet such conditions—for those who have arrived here from war zones, it seems unnecessarily harsh. I therefore ask the Government, after their review of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, to reinstate the provision of legal aid in family reunion cases. Will the Minister comment on that?

I also ask the Government to expand the scope of family reunion so that those who have been granted UK citizenship, or who were born UK citizens, can sponsor family members in the same way as those with refugee status. I further ask that they be granted legal aid in the same way.

Rather than simply turning down an application if there is not enough information, it would be helpful if the Home Office asked for more information. The Refugee Council reported to me that applicants are not being given the opportunity to submit further evidence for their application when their supporting documentation is deemed insufficient. They are simply told that their application has been turned down, which forces them into lengthy and costly appeals processes. During that time, refugees who want to come to the UK have to live in precarious conditions, often in a third country—for example, if they have fled Syria, they might be in a camp in a neighbouring country such as Lebanon.

That would save the Government money on the appeals process and, most importantly, it would end the practice of leaving families stuck in vulnerable and precarious situations for months on end, waiting for an appeal to be heard. I therefore call on the Government to revise their practice guidance to officials carrying out the process and to move to asking for more information, rather than simply rejecting a family if there is insufficient information.

Demonstrating a relationship involves further complications. In applications for a sponsor’s spouse, whether through marriage or civil partnership, as well as an unmarried partner, the applicant must demonstrate a “subsisting relationship” that preceded the sponsor’s application for asylum, as well as the intention to live together permanently. Again, I understand why that has come about, but I hope that the Minister accepts that relationships and marriages happen, and children are born, while refugees remain in third countries awaiting decisions on resettlement. The rules exclude such families from reuniting, because they are deemed to be post-flight families.

For unmarried and same-sex partners, applications must also demonstrate that the couple “have been living together in a relationship akin to marriage or civil partnership which has subsisted for two years or more.”

Again, I ask the Government to recognise that resettled refugees are likely to form family relationships during the often lengthy period between their flight from their country of origin and their resettlement in the UK. I ask the Government to revise their rules accordingly.

The process should be safe. The British Red Cross report, “Not So Straightforward”, which I mentioned earlier, described how, although the initial application for family reunion can be made online, the following process requires family members wishing to join relatives here in the UK to travel to their closest visa application centre. The report highlighted examples of families risking their lives to travel to an embassy, crossing conflict zones, or of people being turned away from the embassy when they arrived, even when they had appointments. I therefore ask the Government to change the rules so that the process is safer, by allowing refugees in the UK to submit the family reunion documents, rather than forcing their family members to make journeys that are often costly and dangerous.

In conclusion, I ask the Government to consider eight requests, and I hope that the Minister will be able to give an answer to some, or at least an indication of the direction of travel. If he cannot grant my requests, will he agree to meet me in any case to discuss them further?

First, will the Government allow children recognised as refugees the right to be joined here in the UK by family members? Secondly, will the Government expand the definition of family to include a wider range of family members? Thirdly, will the Government reinstate the provision of legal aid in family reunion cases? Fourthly, will the Government expand the scope of refugee family reunion so that those who have been granted UK citizenship can sponsor family members in the same way as those with refugee status? Fifthly, will the Government grant legal aid to refugees with UK citizenship? Sixthly, will the Government revise the guidance so that officials ask for more information, rather than simply rejecting a family’s application because...
of insufficient information? Seventhly, will the Government recognise that resettled refugees are likely to form family relationships during the often lengthy period between flight and resettlement, and revise the rules accordingly? Eighthly, will the Government change the rules, so that the process is safer, by allowing refugees in the UK to submit the family reunion documents?

Those people have fled from war, persecution and torture. Many of them have gone through terrible journeys to reach sanctuary in the UK. Many are children. Surely it is not too much to ask that they are allowed to be reunited quickly, safely and easily with their families. After all, is that not what we would want if it happened to us?

4.47 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) for securing this important debate, and I commend her for it. The topic is important to my constituents, as it is to her and, of course, to the many refugee families and lone children throughout the world.

The UK Government have made some progress in expediting the move of refugee children to the UK from the fallout of the Calais “jungle” camp shutdown. That has to be welcome to an extent, but the lack of speed and organisation has been disappointing. While delays continue, children go missing, fall victim to traffickers, are bought and sold, are damaged, and are alone.

Stella Creasy: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the Government seem to be changing the rules retrospectively on the children whom we take from Calais, specifying certain countries rather than persecution as the question at the heart of the issue? Just as this debate is about how to help those being persecuted, it is important that we as a country do not renge on our commitments.

Owen Thompson: I very much agree with the hon. Lady. At times, it feels like a feast of moving goalposts, which does not help those in most need of the support that we should be giving them. The Government need to do more to speed up the process of helping.

Lone children wandering Europe, who are now estimated to number in the hundreds of thousands, will not reduce in number if we ignore the situation in Syria. That is why we must take a joined-up approach and not separate the problems. I am confident that the Minister will tell us about how the Government are putting more money into support for refugees than any other country in Europe, but simply throwing money at a problem is not enough. We need to accommodate the points made by the hon. Member for Bristol West and to change our system, taking into account individual circumstances, which would make a real difference to families and, most importantly, those young people who are so often left alone.

I recently raised in the House the case of one of my constituents who had lost their son. He had not been known to the family for more than a couple of years and was sadly thought to be dead. Luckily, we found that he was still alive. However, having had the joy of discovering that, the family then had to battle to bring him to join them in Scotland. At one point, they did not know whether they would ever see him again. I commend the Home Office for the support that it has given the family. Although it took a bit of time to arrive, that support has been productive, and we are hopeful that there will be a positive outcome to that case in the near future. The Home Office must work with all the agencies on the ground that do such an amazing job to help children who are alone in a war zone. We need to do so much more to ensure that the process of bringing those young people back to join their families is much faster.

The humanitarian situation in the region affected by the Syrian conflict is vast and growing. Atrocities happen every minute of every day, and the children caught up in that situation who so often flash up on our TV screens and social media feeds sadly face many more years of conflict, pain and hurt before there is any end in sight to that conflict. It is so sad to consider that children and families are separated.

We must do what we can now. We must act swiftly and with compassion. We must not continue waiting for child refugees to come knocking at our door; doing so leaves them with little option but to make dangerous journeys, often with dangerous people who do nothing but profit and prioritise money over their safety. Where it is safe to do so, we must actively seek out displaced families and children in conflict zones. We must make more of an effort before an entire generation of children is put at risk of losing the care of their families, many of whom have been affected by emergencies and cannot support their children without help.

4.51 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on bringing this crucial issue back to this place. I must confess that I find it difficult to fathom why any Government would put as many barriers in the way of family reunion as the current Government and their predecessors have. I want to focus on children who have been granted refugee status in this country—children who are recognised by the state as part of a group that is in danger in its home country. What possible benefit is there to them or us in denying their parents the opportunity to be reunited with them?

Even if the overarching concern is financial, it is expensive to keep a child in care. In the long term, such children have a higher chance of developing mental health problems, getting involved in crime and becoming homeless. By virtue of having been in care, their life outcomes are lower than those of the average child, and dealing with those reduced outcomes is expensive for any country. Can I convince the Minister to consider that allowing the parents of such children to come here to look after them could be classed as preventive spend? Given that we know that preventive spending means huge future cost reductions, would that not be a sensible financial decision?

The Government may well argue—they have in the past—that we cannot let that happen lest it creates some perverse incentive for unaccompanied migration, but that argument is flawed on several levels. Not just that—it is offensive and betrays a deep cynicism about humankind. First, there is no evidence from other jurisdictions that permit family reunion for unaccompanied children that such incentives actually exist. It is worth stressing that in the EU, only the UK and Denmark do
not permit reunion in such cases. In all earnestness, I must ask the Minister on what evidence the Government base their assumption—or is it simply an excuse?

Secondly, as I said, that argument is based on a base and deeply cynical view of human nature. Yes, some people would abuse the system, just like there are MPs who abuse their systems and companies that abuse the tax system, but should Governments really reach a position based on what a minority of those vulnerable people might do? Who would send their child off unaccompanied into a foreign country with strangers on the off-chance that they might get to safety and be able to send for their parents? Surely only those who were desperate and genuinely in fear for their lives and their families’ lives, such as the parents whose three-year-old was murdered and eaten in front of them by terrorists and the mother who was forced to watch as soldiers raped her little girl in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I should say “mothers and fathers”—there have been many more than one.

Given that unthinkable choice—rape, murder or an uncertain journey into the unknown that could end in their child reaching a place of safety—what would any parent here do to protect their child? Perhaps one day they will see them again, but if not, at least those children have a chance. Who would send their children on such a journey? Only someone who was desperate—only genuine refugees.

I echo Amnesty International’s call—it was also one of the eight requests of the hon. Member for Bristol West—for the Government to reinstate legal aid in family reunion cases. The Scottish Legal Aid Board continues to fund such cases, but given the complexity of some of the processes involved, particularly for refugees with a limited grasp of English, natural justice surely demands that legal aid must be available to all so that the proper evidence on which to make decisions is submitted. I know that that costs money, but the alternative, which is that those with valid claims—those who are at risk of suffering the terrible atrocities I have just mentioned—routinely fail due to a lack of proper legal support, should be repugnant to a civilised society.

The Immigration Law Practitioners’ Association raised several detailed points about the definition of “family” when it comes to family reunion. Does that cover grandparents or siblings in the case of parental deaths? There must be far greater recognition of the difficulties that refugees face. I spoke earlier about the financial cost of putting children in care to the taxpayer and the cost to those individuals in terms of life outcomes. It has long been agreed that it is far better to place children with a wider family network if their parents cannot be with them. In this country, that is called kinship care, which is rightly praised by all Governments because of the sacrifices that are made and the benefits to us all. Yet when grandparents, siblings, aunts or uncles of refugee children are willing to make that sacrifice and take care of those children—as all kinship carers do—which would benefit us all, that is suddenly deemed not such a good thing and they are not recognised as family.

In short, the Government have got themselves into a complete and utter fankle in this area. They need to look again at family reunion so that refugees who have already had to give up their homes, families, friends and familiar surroundings do not also have to give up their families and never have to choose between safety and family because of decisions made by the UK Government. We in the Scottish National party group will continue to press the UK Government to be at the forefront of efforts to respond to the humanitarian crisis and ensure that our systems for dealing with these complex issues are fit for purpose and reflect a kind and compassionate set of values.

4.57 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I, too, thank the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees, for securing this debate. I agree with pretty much everything she said. In fact, this is one of those debates where I probably agree with everything that everyone has said so far.

I also thank the organisations that have once again been in touch with excellent briefings. It is only a few months since the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) led a debate on the very same topic, and we had a debate prior to that on UN pathways. I salute all those campaigners for their perseverance, which reflects the significance of this cause.

In international human rights instruments, the family is the fundamental unit of society, and no one should ever have to consider making a choice between finding a place of safety and living with their family. Refugee family reunion is also a hugely significant part of what should be a strategic response to the refugee and humanitarian crisis, the circumstances of which the hon. Member for Bristol West described today, which I very much regret having missed.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene when he has only just got started. I have listened carefully to all the contributions. Will he take a moment to pay tribute to the many churches and community groups that do so much to welcome and warmly embrace the vulnerable people who manage to make it into the UK, who may be isolated and frightened and do not have the language or an education?

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Lady makes a good point. The churches who have taken such steps deserve our full praise. In fact, some have gone even further and are now trying to get involved in offering homes to refugees through resettlement programmes and so on. Many other organisations deserve praise as well, many of whom will have been present at the meeting that the hon. Member for Bristol West organised today, which I very much regret having missed.

To return to the point about how family reunion is also important as a part of our strategic response to the crisis that the hon. Lady described, there are two reasons for that. First, it provides safe legal routes for many refugees through resettlement programmes and so on. Many other organisations deserve praise as well, many of whom will have been present at the meeting that the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) said. Secondly, it is a vital method of building support networks here, because family members arriving in the UK will have
help and assistance in integrating and settling into communities. They can then provide support to the refugee with whom they are reuniting. These are people whose rehabilitation and ability to integrate can be greatly enhanced through the presence of partners and children.

In short, family reunion is an effective way for this country to step up to its obligations to do its fair share for those fleeing persecution—an obligation that we are a long way short of being able to say we have fulfilled properly. We have the family reunion basics in place, but vital improvements need to be made. They fall into two categories: the scope of eligibility rules and making the process much easier for those who qualify. In the time available, I will mention a handful of areas in which we need to see improvement.

We have heard about the cut-off age of 18, which I regard as brutally harsh. Why are we saying that an 18-year-old Syrian woman, separated from her family during escape and now living with her grandmother in Damascus, does not automatically qualify to join her refugee mother here in the UK? One hard and fast cut-off based on age is too arbitrary. Cohabitation and dependency are surely better guides to whether someone can really be considered part of the family unit of which we should be promoting a reunification.

More generally, the rules are also too restrictive regarding the range of other relatives who can apply. Particularly in this crisis, many, such as kids with only an uncle in the United Kingdom, will not fall into the limited partner or children categories under the rules, but they have no-one else to turn to. I also support calls made by hon. Members today and recently by the Home Affairs Committee for the UK to change its mind on parents being able to join refugee children here. Quite simply, there is no evidence that following the approach taken in every other EU country—with the exception of Denmark—will undermine child safeguarding. On the contrary, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) pointed out, it will promote child safeguarding.

While we are on the subject of different types of qualifying relationships, the hon. Member for Bristol West raised an important point about the latest statement of changes to the immigration rules and concerns expressed by organisations such as ILPA about the definition of unmarried partners. There are concerns that the new rules could be read as altering the definition of unmarried partners so as to create a new requirement of cohabitation, which could be difficult to prove if, for example, a couple is gay and same-sex relationships are prohibited or perhaps because persecution has meant separation. I understand that the intention was to consolidate the rules rather than to change the definition, and it would be useful for the Minister to clarify that point.

Hon. Members have also touched on refugees who have family members who are British citizens or, indeed, persons settled in the United Kingdom. There is a strong case for opening up family reunion rules to apply in such circumstances, and the eye-wateringly prohibitive immigration rules on spouses are particularly inappropriate when used in that context. The consequence is that we have seen British citizens or settled persons living in refugee camps across Europe with family members who they cannot get admitted here. I and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East, along with other colleagues, met some of them in Calais and Dunkirk earlier this year.

Hon. Members have also rightly highlighted post-flight families. Surely it is wrong to expect refugees, particularly those fleeing persecution and perhaps waiting for resettlement in a third country, not to develop family lives while in third countries, especially if they are waiting to go through programmes such as the one the United Kingdom now operates.

In response to those concerns, I have no doubt that the Minister will highlight the possibility of exceptional grants of leave outside the rules based on the recently amended guidance I referred to, but that remains far from good enough, with the ridiculously high hurdle of exceptional, compelling compassionate circumstances utterly inappropriate for the times we live in, because previously tragic and exceptional circumstances are now all too common and therefore not exceptional at all.

The guidance retains a caution that leave outside the rules is appropriate only rarely—and, with just 175 such grants in five years, that part is clearly being scrupulously implemented. Just 175 grants outside the rules in five years is wholly insufficient. Hon. Members’ suggestions are all sensible proposals to expand the scope of the eligibility criteria, but we also need to ensure that practical problems do not prevent those who do qualify for family reunion from achieving that goal.

I will give a few examples. Organisations such as Red Cross have shown how tricky the process can be, as shown in “Not So Straightforward”, the report mentioned by the hon. Member for Bristol West. In fairness, the Government have listened to recommendations, but they can do more. There is a need for qualified legal support. I fully back calls for the reintroduction of legal aid funding, which remains available in Scotland—from the Scottish Legal Aid Board, as part of its advice and assistance scheme—so it can be done.

Problems have been highlighted with applications being treated in essence like any other immigration application, as the hon. Lady pointed out, with the entry clearance office refusing to wait for extra information. Applications should not be treated like normal immigration applications; these are profound questions of family unity and protection.

The Home Affairs Committee has highlighted problems with the short entry clearance periods sometimes granted to families, who then face an impossible task to arrange transport in time or having to choose between leaving separately and risking one of the entry clearance periods running out. I recall a reassurance being given in the debate in June that that issue would be addressed, so it would be useful to know whether progress was being made.

A final, practical issue is about making applications easier to submit, because 95% are made by women and children and, as the hon. Lady pointed out, many of them are required to make dangerous journeys to third countries to find the nearest British embassy. I urge the Minister to work with organisations to explore ways of making sure that people are not put at risk in trying to access what should in essence be a safe legal route.

The work the Government have done in the countries neighbouring Syria has been excellent, but that is not the issue today. My hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian
put it perfectly. It is not enough for us simply to support other countries to host refugees. Particularly now that those countries are way beyond coping, it is more imperative than ever that we step up our efforts in hosting refugees. Refugee family reunion is an utterly compelling way to provide protection, ensure better support groups here and provide safe legal routes for those who would otherwise be likely to take horrendous risks. It is a win-win policy that the Government should expand and make easier to access.

5.7 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on securing this important debate and, if I may say so, on making a powerful speech. With a big immigration and migration case load, I have seen examples of the problems she cites. It is a particular and random cruelty to meet a constituent who applied for refugee family reunion and, because it has taken so long, the children are now over 18. It is important to do something about that, among the many other things she raised.

Some Members are marvelling at why our approach to refugees is not as fair or humane as we would want. There is nothing to marvel at: we have had a debate on immigration in this country down the years that, sadly, has rendered the issue of refugees toxic. Much of the unfairness in the way that refugees are treated is to do with the fact that, in popular opinion, “immigrant” applies as much to a refugee or asylum seeker as to anybody else. I will return to that in closing my remarks.

One of my hon. Friends made the point about how desperate people are. We really must focus on desperation. I have been able to visit refugee camps, not just in Calais and Lebanon. I cannot stress how desperate people are. It is also worth reminding the House that the weight of the public debate on immigration sometimes stops politicians doing the fair and rational thing on refugees. When we live in a political time in which a well-read tabloid newspaper can have on its front page a series of six pictures of lorry drivers and the headline, “Foreign lorry drivers reading their phones”, we are talking about a toxic debate, which, as she says, militates against what is fair, appropriate and reasonable in dealing with refugees.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Does it not come to the fact that, for most people, actually getting refugee status and getting here is only part of the beginning, as has been said. What they need around them, if at all possible, is their family. That is what the unfair and inappropriate state of family reunion rules militates against.

Ms Abbott: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. If we regard these people as people, then gaining refugee status is only the beginning, as has been said. What they need around them, if at all possible, is their family. That is what the unfair and inappropriate state of family reunion rules militates against.

I remind the House of the final act of the United Nations conference of plenipotentiaries on the status of refugees and stateless persons, which provided that signatories—are we one—take “the necessary measures for the protection of the refugee’s family”, with particular reference to “Ensuring that the unity of the refugee’s family is maintained” and “The protection of refugees who are minors”.

I think the summation of this debate so far is that we are not taking the necessary measures for the protection of the refugee’s family.

Article 3 of the 1989 UN convention on the rights of the child states that the interests of the child must always be the primary consideration in all actions relating to them. The Home Office guidance from 2009, “Every Child Matters”, says that there is a statutory duty to promote the welfare of children, which must also apply to children overseas. I have dealt with so many cases down the years in which it was quite clear that the welfare of the children overseas was the last thing on the Home Office’s mind. As we have heard, many campaigners, non-governmental organisations and immigration lawyers argue that the current UK legislation and practice may meet the letter of the UN convention but not the spirit. As I think most of us know, there is scope to allow an application outside of the immigration rules, but in my experience that is an extremely rare occurrence.

The then Immigration Minister, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), argued in the House in 2015 both that the UK rules were more fairly drawn than other countries and—that to widen the scope would act as a pull factor for more refugees. That is what is behind the Home Office’s thinking. The Dublin III regulations are designed to allow greater access for child refugees, but they are widely regarded as bureaucratic and unwieldy, and the same verdict is widely shared of the application form itself. The Dubs amendment, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) referred, was designed to provide access in the interests of the child. However, it now seems very unlikely to meet its designated target of 3,000 child refugees from the encampment in Calais. We have let those children down, and we have let those Members of the Lords and the Commons who supported the Dubs amendment down.
As the Minister will no doubt tell us, there is a series of long-established refugee resettlement schemes, such as the mandate and gateway schemes, and the Syrian vulnerable persons scheme. The Government have also recently announced a vulnerable child resettlement scheme—I dare say we will hear about too. However, the effect of those various ad hoc schemes is to add to the complexity and bureaucracy, as any of us who have dealt with refugees will know, and to exacerbate inconsistencies—Syrian children, but not Yemeni or Afghan children.

I am quite clear that the reason why the existing regime for refugee family reunion seems unfair and incoherent and not in the spirit of the UN conventions that we have signed has to do with the toxic debate on immigration that we are having. In the post-Brexit era, and in the era of Trump, I cannot let the issue of the general debate on migration go past.

**Stella Creasy:** Does my hon. Friend agree that this is not a debate that makes sense in Britain? Actually, we have had a proud tradition of taking and supporting refugees in this country. I am mindful that Creasy, like Farage, is a Huguenot surname, and that all of us come from communities that have benefited from the input of refugees. That is the true British, patriotic tradition that we should be supporting.

**Ms Abbott:** My hon. Friend is completely correct: this is not a debate that makes sense in the UK any more than it makes sense in the US—a country that was built on immigration, more than any other society that can be named. However, because migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and so on are conflated in the popular narrative, we are where we are.

With Brexit, Trump and the debate about the conditions under which we leave or do not leave the European Union, there is no doubt that the issue of migration is going to come up over and over again. I urge Members who have shown such sympathy and compassion to refugees, and on family reunions specifically, to hold their nerve on the question of immigration. It is so important that as politicians we have a debate on immigration that is based on the facts, not on urban myth. It is so important that we do not propagate notions that immigrants in some general sense drive down wages. It is so important that we do not join UKIP in the gutter when talking about migrants and refugees.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West made eight very important points. I want to leave the Minister plenty of time to respond to each of them—not with waffle, not by trying to change the subject and not by referring to general things the Government may have done in the past. I say to the House that these are difficult times to argue for fair treatment for asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants, but precisely because it is a difficult time, it is so important that those of us who feel able to should stand up and be counted. After all, the point about refugees is that they are not just figures on a Home Office briefing; they are not just images on a television screen; they are not just the subject of Nigel Farage’s speeches—they are people, and they deserve to be treated as people in a fair and humane fashion.

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): Before the Minister begins, I ask him to leave a small period of time at the end so that the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) can wind up.

5.11 pm

**The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill):** I am happy to do so, Sir Alan. First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on securing this debate on an important subject and pay tribute to the work of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees.

I want to make it clear that there is no need for a question mark when I say that refugees are welcome here. I was recently in Jordan and met a number of refugees, some of whom had just arrived from the berm. I had very helpful meetings with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which was selecting the most vulnerable families and children to come as part of the schemes we have in place. I am proud that we are the second biggest donor of humanitarian aid. That shows that we are determined to help those most in need in the most vulnerable locations, which in many cases is in the refugee camps, not, for example, in European Union countries.

I am aware of calls in favour of widening the family reunion immigration rules. That issue has been debated at length, including in both Houses during the passage of the Immigration Act 2016. The recent campaigns by the British Red Cross and the Refugee Council demonstrate the interest in this subject. This has been a good debate, and I welcome the thoughtful and passionate contributions from right hon. and hon. Members.

We recognise that families may be fragmented due to conflict and persecution and the speed and manner in which asylum seekers often flee their country of origin. That is why the Government have dedicated family reunion immigration rules and have granted more than 22,000 family reunion visas in the past five years. Our policy meets our international obligations and allows immediate family members who formed part of the family unit before the refugee sponsor fled their country to reunite with them in the UK. British citizens are able to sponsor their spouse or partner and children under the age of 18 to join them under the family immigration rules, providing they make the appropriate entry clearance application and meet the relevant criteria.

**Ms Abbott:** The Minister talks about how the system works. What does he have to say to the suggestion from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) that we should have a broader definition of family that is not just immediate family?

**Mr Goodwill:** I would not accept that. As I will say later in my remarks, we do not want to create the pull factor that results in people drowning in the Mediterranean or the Aegean. That is one of the major reasons why we are maintaining this policy.

**Thangam Debbonaire:** I urge the Minister to think about the fact that the so-called pull factor does not go away. These people are living in danger. They are fleeing for their lives. When we make safe and legal family reunion routes harder, we actually make it more likely that these people will end up in the hands of people traffickers and make these dangerous journeys.
Mr Goodwill: I understand the hon. Lady’s point, but I will justify exactly where we are and why we believe we have got the right policies.

As I was saying, the rules reflect our obligations under article 8 of the European convention on human rights. Where an application does not meet the rules, our policy requires consideration of any exceptional or compassionate reasons for granting a visa outside the rules. That caters for extended family members of refugees and family members of British citizens who cannot meet the financial requirements of the rules.

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Goodwill: I will make a little progress, otherwise I will not be able to answer the points made during the debate, given the time constraints.

In July, the Home Office published revised guidance on the types of cases that may benefit from a grant of leave outside the rules in exceptional circumstances, including adult dependent sons or daughters over the age of 18 who are not leading an independent life and are living in a conflict zone. The new guidance also provides more clarity for applicants and their sponsors, so that they can better understand the process and what is expected of them. I do not believe that widening the definition of family is practical or indeed necessary, especially as the numbers of people granted a family reunion visa are likely to increase in line with the numbers of recognised refugees in the UK.

A balance has to be struck between reuniting families quickly and not creating a situation where the UK becomes the destination of choice, with family members and children in particular being encouraged or even forced to leave their country and risk hazardous journeys to the UK. They should instead claim asylum in the first safe country they reach.

Stella Creasy: More of us might have sympathy for the Minister’s argument about a pull factor were it not for the fact that only the UK and Denmark put this restriction in. Surely if there were no pull factor, it would be coming from other countries. Does he have any evidence that other countries offering this form of family reunification has been a pull factor? If not, I think it is time to put this straw argument to bed.

Mr Goodwill: The point was made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) that if children could sponsor parents, it would not be a pull factor. I point out that Eurostat figures show that in 2015, there were 35,250 claims from unaccompanied minors in Sweden and 14,400 claims from unaccompanied minors in Germany. Those are the countries with the highest number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and the most welcoming asylum policies.

We must not inadvertently create a situation where parents are incentivised to place their children’s lives in the hands of traffickers or criminal gangs and risk dangerous journeys to Europe. Indeed, I was in Nigeria over the summer and had that precise point made to me by those whom I met there. The Government’s priority is to provide humanitarian aid to those most in need in the regions affected by conflict. We have pledged £2.3 billion in humanitarian aid to Syria and neighbouring countries. We are also providing nearly £65 million in response to the Mediterranean migration crisis.

The Government remain strongly committed to resettlement. We are on track to resettle 20,000 Syrians by 2020, and there will be an update on those figures later in the week. That is in addition to the vulnerable children’s resettlement scheme, which will resettle up to 3,000 children and individuals at risk by 2020, and our long-standing gateway and mandate schemes, which the shadow Immigration Minister mentioned. There is no limit to the number of refugees who can be resettled under the mandate scheme, and individuals with close family ties in the UK may be eligible. That route also allows wider family members to be resettled in exceptional circumstances.

The hon. Member for Bristol West mentioned the time taken to grant asylum claims. I point out to the House that we have turned asylum performance around. Since the end of 2014, we have consistently met our ambition of deciding 98% of straightforward cases within six months. We are committed to improving the process for those applying for family reunion, and my officials have been working with the British Red Cross to ensure that the application process is as smooth as possible and decisions are made in a timely fashion, to ensure that families are separated for the shortest possible time. In 2015, the Home Office was deciding family reunion applications within an average of 40 days.

I have met the chief executive of the British Red Cross, Mike Adamson, to discuss many of the issues we have debated today, and my officials are looking at what more we can do to improve our service to those applying for family reunion, including redesigning the application form. A simpler application form, as well as the improved guidance, will help applicants better to understand the family reunion process.

There have been calls, including today, for legal aid to be made available for family reunion applications, but I do not believe, with the changes we have made and continue to make, that it is necessary. Applications for family reunion are free of charge, and in deciding how to allocate legal aid support, the Government must be mindful that this is all taxpayers’ money.

UK Visas and Immigration is formulating plans to consolidate decision making for family reunion applications into one team based in the United Kingdom. That work was initiated following the inspection of family reunion applications by the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration. I am grateful to David Bolt for conducting such a thorough inspection. I assure the House that the Home Office treats all applications for family reunion with compassion and sensitivity and will continue to do so. The Government have accepted all the recommendations in the chief inspector’s report and work is under way to implement them.

I want to reassure Members that I have listened carefully to the arguments put forward today in favour of widening the family reunion criteria. The Government recognise the important principle of family unity, but our policies must be balanced, and we must not inadvertently and perversely create a situation in which families see an advantage in sending people ahead, in particular children, putting their lives at risk by attempting perilous journeys into and across Europe: tragically, such journeys have cost many lives. I therefore remain of the view that widening the criteria to include many other categories of people is neither practical nor sustainable.
5.28 pm

Thangam Debbonaire: Thank you, Sir Alan, for allowing me to sum up. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions and the Minister for answering. It will not surprise anyone, and surely not him, to know that I am incredibly disappointed by his response. I was not expecting promises on any of the eight points, but it is disappointing that the Minister emphasises exceptional circumstances rather than the reality of people’s lives. All of us, at our darkest times and our best of times, want our family with us.

There is no evidence of this pull factor. People come because they are desperate, not because they have read in a brochure that the UK is an easy touch. For the sake of the young men I met today who want to bring their old parents here from Syria, for the sake of the woman whose children were too old to come here by the time she was granted status, and for our conscience as public servants, I ask the Minister to reconsider and to make refugee family reunion work for refugees, to whom we owe a legal and moral obligation. I ask him if he will meet me to discuss that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered immigration rules for refugee family reunion.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the seasonal agricultural workers scheme.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. It is also a pleasure to see other colleagues here today, including members of the new all-party group for fruit and vegetable farming, of which I am the chair. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise British growers’ concerns about recruiting workers in the coming years. I will focus my comments on the fruit and vegetable industry, but I emphasise that a flexible, seasonal workforce is vital for other parts of the food and farming industry, such as sheep and poultry farming. The industry as a whole is worth more than £100 billion to the nation’s economy. Within that, horticulture is worth £3 billion. Fruit and vegetable farmers have a vital role to play in making us all healthier.

As the Minister knows, I represent the beautiful constituency of Faversham and Mid Kent in the heart of the garden of England. When I drive from Headcorn on one side of my constituency to Faversham and the surrounding villages on the other, I see fields full of great British fruit. Depending on the season, there are strawberries, raspberries, blackcurrants, apples, pears, cherries and plums. Apart from growing healthy local food, fruit and vegetable farmers are part of the fabric of rural life. British growers employ thousands of people across the food and drink sector, look after the environment and contribute to the local and national economy, but they are facing tough times. They are worried about the speed of the introduction of the national living wage, face uncertainty over our future relationship with Europe and struggle with falling farm-gate prices and declining profitability. While recent yields have been good and the volume of strawberries sold in the UK has increased dramatically, around half of fruit farms are making less than a 2% margin and fruit farmers’ incomes have fallen by 43% over the past five years.

From speaking to local farmers, I know that opinions were split over Brexit, but one thing that all growers are worried about is access to labour, particularly since our decision to leave the European Union. The horticulture industry needs thousands of seasonal workers every year to pick and pack their produce. The British Growers Association estimates that the horticulture industry employed 80,000 seasonal workers this year and forecasts that that need will increase to 95,000 by 2019. The vast majority of those seasonal workers come from the European Union, and they do demanding work hand-picking fruit and packing it into punnets with care and speed. We should put on record the fact that we welcome those seasonal workers to Britain and are grateful for their contribution to our economy. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] It is getting harder for farmers to recruit seasonal workers. The National Farmers Union’s end of season labour survey found that in 2015, nearly a third of growers had experienced problems recruiting workers. Some 69% of growers expect the situation to get worse by 2018.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I, too, represent an area with a large number of horticulture businesses, including fruit farms, soft fruit and glasshouses. We have a big food production sector, too. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need action immediately? The old seasonal agricultural workers scheme worked extremely well before 2013. We need a trial scheme to be brought in as soon as possible.

Helen Whately: I completely agree with my hon. Friend about the need to bring something in soon. My farmers are asking for a new scheme to be trialled as next year because of the problems they are already experiencing in recruiting workers for next year, but I will come on to that point.

Organisations that recruit seasonal workers, such as AG Recruitment in my constituency, have told me that there are four times fewer people looking for jobs than last year. The NFU surveyed seasonal worker recruitment companies, and nearly half said that between July and September 2016 they were unable to meet the demands of the sectors they were supplying. That compares with nearly 100% being able to recruit enough workers in January, February and March this year. One farmer in my constituency, Tim Chambers, has told me that normally he would expect around 80% of his workers to ask for a place next season as they leave. So far this year, it has been only 50%. David Figgis, another local farmer, says that compared with last year the number of seasonal workers he has been able to recruit to start in the new year has halved. There is already a problem recruiting workers, before we have even left the European Union.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the excellent speech she is making. It chimes exactly with what I am hearing from growers in my patch. May I add that seasonal workers exactly fit the Government’s immigration policy, because the controlled environment that growers and farmers provide ensures that these are people who come and go, having done an excellent job in between?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend is completely right about that, and I will come on to that point. Under the previous scheme, we know that the vast majority of seasonal workers went home after working. It is not a question of immigration.

Coming back to the current problem of recruiting workers, one issue is that the falling pound means that wages sent home are worth less than before. It is a fact that EU workers are feeling a lot less welcome, and many of these workers have a choice as to where they work. They do not have to come and work in the UK; they are in demand across the whole European Union. Another farmer in my constituency, Simon Elworthy, has told me that there is a genuine risk of British fruit going unpicked next year because of a shortage of labour.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Like other Members, this issue affects parts of my constituency. The west Lancashire part grows a lot of vegetables. Will my hon. Friend note that when we met the NFU, it said that it was not just the UK that was reliant on migrant
labour? We need to put paid to that myth that all the workers could be UK-grown—all OECD countries are reliant on labour from outside their borders to pick fruit and vegetables.

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend is completely right about other OECD nations. I will mention other countries that have seasonal agricultural workers schemes for exactly that reason in a moment.

Another point that has been made by several of my local farmers is that because of the shortage of labour, there is a risk that British fruit farmers may go out of business. I mentioned how tight their margins are, but if we add to that an inability to pick all the produce because of a labour shortage, they will struggle to stay in business. One consequence is that we will probably see the cost of British fruit go up. That will happen just at the point when we want to improve our balance of trade. Fruit is a sector where I would argue we are among the best—and perhaps are the best—in the world. I suspect that my colleagues who, like me, have strawberry growers in their constituencies agree that you cannot beat a great British strawberry. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”] The noise around the room suggests that there is consensus on that point. Despite that high quality, there is a risk that we may see British produce replaced by imports. What an enormous shame that would be. It would clearly not be a good thing economically.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. I am sure she will agree that it is not just about the farmers struggling on workers or prices, but the processors that process the fruit or vegetables. In Northern Ireland, some of those factories are dependent on people from other countries, who can make up 40% and 60% of their workforce.

Helen Whately: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point. I am focusing my comments on pickers, because that is the most visible part of the supply chain in my constituency, but there are hundreds and thousands of workers involved in the whole supply chain—between the plant and the table, so to speak—including large numbers of packers, processors and all that. The whole supply chain is affected.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. The issue is not only about processing in factories. In my constituency of Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk, a big farming area, up to 95% of factory workers are migrants. The issue is not only about fruit and veg, but about bacon and so on. Beyond that, the jobs cannot necessarily be done by my own constituents. I have only 635 at the moment who are looking for work. That is a big problem, too.

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend rightly refers to the large number of people working in the supply chain. Most of us—I know this is the case in my constituency—do not have many people looking for work.

Farmers have told me how their EU workers are genuinely worried at the moment about their legal rights to be in the UK. There are also concerns about their safety following reports of attacks on migrant workers. I hope the Minister will reiterate that the status of EU workers in the UK remains unchanged. It would be helpful to communicate that clearly to EU workers in the UK to make absolutely sure that they feel welcome and understand that legally they are allowed to remain and work in the UK while we are in the European Union.

The recent referendum result was decisive and, rightly, the Government plan to negotiate a Brexit deal that controls free movement. However, that creates a challenge for an industry that relies on seasonal migrant labour largely from the European Union. This is where the Government may be able to help. I want the Minister to look into piloting a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme, known as SAWS, for 2017, next year.

We used to have a seasonal agricultural workers scheme until 2013, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) has mentioned. Similar schemes exist in other OECD countries, including New Zealand, Canada, the US and Australia. Organisations from the NFU and the Fruit Advisory Services to the Migrant Advisory Committee agree that our old seasonal agricultural workers scheme worked well, as my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier) mentioned. SAWS had robust entry and exit checks, which meant that more than 98% of those who came to work in the UK returned home when their work was complete. For that reason, those coming to Britain under SAWS did not count towards immigration figures. This debate on SAWS should not be seen as part of a wider debate on immigration. It is very much about the workforce for a specific sector.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and I congratulate her on securing this debate. On the seasonal workers who return home after they have worked here, whom she has mentioned several times, it is obviously the case that they are able to secure employment here more easily and more readily than is the case closer to home in their own nation states. As in so many other issues relevant to the Brexit negotiations, their countries benefit from the moneys that they earn here and return to their own nation states to spend, so it is not a one-way system; it is a two-way process that should benefit farmers in the UK and the workers’ countries of origin as well.

Helen Whately: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. On the new scheme that we would like to pilot, we would expect it to include all the positives of the old scheme: oversight by the Home Office; checks on arrival and departure; restrictions on the length of placement; and independently accredited standards.

People often ask, “Why can’t British farmers employ British labour to do all the work? Why do we look to recruit people from overseas?” I have brought this up with farmers in my constituency. I know that they and many others have tried to recruit locally, and it is possible to recruit small numbers locally. I held a jobs fair in Maidstone a couple of months ago. Representatives were there from the local fruit farms and they recruited workers on that day. However, the problem, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), is that there simply are not enough
people looking for work. It is almost a downside of the very low unemployment rate that we have, which overall is clearly a good thing, but the fact is that there is not a swathe of people looking for work.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point, and I refer Members to my declaration of interest. On a good labour supply, horticultural farmers and producers often plan 10 years ahead, so they are planning for well into the 2020s at the moment. For them to plan, they need a good labour supply and Government policy to deliver that, or they will not invest now for the longer term.

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about the investment decisions made in the farming sector where plans are made years in advance. It takes a long time for fruit plants to produce a crop, so farmers have to plan ahead and they need to feel secure about their future workforce. There is a short-term and a long-term problem, so reassurance is needed.

On the scale of the problem, in the picking season, farmers in my constituency need thousands of extra workers. A single large farm needs about 1,000 extra workers in the peak picking season. Across my constituency, between 5,000 and 10,000 seasonal workers are needed, and it is a pretty long season because strawberries can now be grown from March to October. However, in my constituency, only a few hundred people are on jobseeker’s allowance, so there is a big gap between the scale of the demand and the number of people looking for work. There is a real problem of numbers.

The days of fruit picking as a holiday job for students are long gone. We not only have a very long season, but supermarkets put enormous pressures on farmers, demanding absolutely impeccable quality and consistency of product that has to be available at high speed to meet demand. That involves picking at a very fast rate, which requires workers who are experienced and physically fit. Although the work is seasonal, workers do it for a significant period of time, often year after year. They cannot just show up and do the work for a couple of weeks. That is a myth that I want to debunk.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on a concise debate. I have similar issues with growers in the vale of Evesham in my constituency. On the supermarkets that she mentioned, does she agree that they have an important role to play on pricing in their negotiations with farmers, because the price point is another pressure on many of our farmers?

Helen Whately: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for that intervention. Supermarkets clearly have an important role to play on price. We want the price to reflect the cost of production. However, there is a balance to strike. If prices go up significantly, will British consumers still buy the product at the same rate? It is not an easy nut to crack. I will do my utmost to make sure that I am concise, as my hon. Friend commented, and I am coming to the end of my speech.

Although some say that we should solve the problem through British recruitment, there is another approach that I have sometimes heard proposed, which is that we should solve the problem through mechanisation. These days all fruit and vegetables could be farmed mechanically using robots without a substantial workforce. There have definitely been significant advances in mechanisation. Lots of processes are now much more automated and mechanised. The horticulture industry is investing in mechanisation. I recently heard about a machine that has been developed for the robotic picking of strawberries, but that is some way off. It may be a decade or so before that becomes a real prospect.

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): The hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) made a point about price. Many of the machines are extremely costly and investing in them will not solve the problem of the prices paid for produce. The machines are possibly a dead end.

Helen Whately: The hon. Gentleman has made exactly the point that I was coming to. Mechanised fruit picking for many fruits is some way off, and it would be expensive, particularly in the early years. Many parts of fruit farming are capital intensive, so we could introduce new technologies only gradually; otherwise the product would be completely unaffordable. It will take some time, so he is absolutely right.

I will briefly repeat my requests to the Minister. Will he reiterate that the status of EU workers in the UK remains unchanged and emphasise that farm workers in the UK should and must feel welcomed, because we value their contribution to the economy? Will he look at issuing some guidance to farm workers confirming their legal rights to remain in the UK?

Will the Minister look at trialling a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme from next year? That would be welcomed across the agricultural sector, especially by fruit and vegetable farmers in my constituency who want to be able to carry on producing great, fresh and healthy British fruit and vegetables.

9.50 am

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) on securing this very important debate and on the way she presented her case. As she did so well, there is no need to go through the statistics again on why we need such a scheme. However, I underline the points she made about the need to plan ahead, given the challenges faced by the agricultural sector in particular. We know that labour is still at the heart of agriculture in the UK and we need to consider the issue in terms of other agricultural sectors, not just horticulture, such as livestock and poultry.

I understand the argument from Migration Watch that we need to focus on innovation in industry and that to introduce a seasonal workers scheme would detract from the importance of investing in technology and skilling up the workforce, but I accept the points made by the hon. Lady about the time needed to deliver that kind of step-change in the industry and the difficulties that will be faced. I am confident that the industry will invest and innovate, but as she said, it will take time, and the agricultural sector does not have time when it comes to fulfilling its labour needs in the immediate future and the medium term—because of Brexit. Therefore,
although Migration Watch has a point, that is subsumed by the immediacy of the needs faced by the industry.

The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) made a point about the high levels of employment in some parts of the country—not in all, but in some—that make it genuinely difficult to fulfil the needs of the farming sector. I represent a constituency with farming in the western aspects and unemployment in my constituency is 1.9%. That is perhaps unusual for a Labour constituency, but there is a real challenge for rural areas to fulfil employment needs and it is not always easy for people living in urban areas to travel to the countryside and do that kind of work.

The fact has to be faced that British workers are keen on permanent work and the supply of British workers to work on the land is not what it was. I grew up in an area where every morning women would pile into the Land Rover at the end of the street and go off to work on the land. That no longer happens. My own mother worked on the land in the horticulture sector, on and off over the years when she needed the money. The transitional nature of that work is something that the British workforce nowadays finds difficult to accept and we have to tackle that reality. I know that the National Farmers Union has some ideas on how to tackle that obstacle.

We are where we are and we cannot allow the industry to be damaged by a refusal to face the fact that we need to find labour over the next few years. The impact of Brexit is already being felt by the sector when it comes to labour supply, so I absolutely support the case made by the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent.

The Government have a responsibility seriously to consider the need for a seasonal labour supply scheme for the agricultural sector and to place the need for such a scheme in the context of an overall plan for Brexit. I do not think that we can run away from that argument this morning; it is really important. Agriculture wants certainty from the Government on labour supply over not just the next one or two years but in the medium term; the sector needs certainty on what Brexit is going to look like. It is not just the agricultural sector of course—the financial services sector, manufacturing and every part of our economy need that certainty—but we have to acknowledge that agriculture is very dependent on the European Union for much of its funding and for much of its supply of labour, so it is particularly vulnerable to how the Government respond to Brexit and handle the negotiations for Brexit with Brussels.

Are we going to have a Canada-type deal? Are we going to have Canada-plus? Are we going to have a deal along the lines enjoyed by Norway or Switzerland, or are we going to stay in the single market? The Government need to start answering those questions. Are we going to conclude the negotiations in the two years, once article 50 has been triggered, or are we going to need a transitional deal?

It is not just agriculture that needs certainty. The Country Land and Business Association points out that rural tourism is also very dependent on seasonal labour:

“Tourism Alliance data notes that one in four workers within the tourism sector are non-UK nationals. As such, the decision to leave the EU and the potential to limit the availability of a non-UK workforce will undoubtedly be of significant concern to these businesses.”

The evidence shows that urban tourism can stay open to some extent through the winter, perhaps with more limited opening, but rural tourism tends to close its doors. There is a real challenge here for the Government. We really need some certainty from the Government on what their plan for Brexit is going to look like.

Very good points have been made on the case and need for investment in the farming sector and for security in relation to labour supply if we are to give the agricultural sector—farmers—the confidence to invest. I agree strongly with those points. Certainty is everything in business—agriculture is no different from any other part of the economy in that respect—but the point can be made more strategically. If farmers and other rural businesses are to have the confidence to invest for the long term and to innovate and invest in the technology that enables them to become more profitable in the long term, they need not only the scheme under discussion this morning but a clear sense of the strategic direction being pursued by the Government on Brexit. I hope that the Minister will address that point; farmers up and down the country really want to know where Britain is going on Brexit. It is of huge importance to them and to the farming sector in my constituency and I look forward to the Minister’s response.

9.59 am

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) on securing this important debate.

I welcome the opportunity to acknowledge the contribution that seasonal workers make to our rural economy. They are critical to UK agriculture plc. It is worth noting that a small number of seasonal workers are British citizens who go to work in the fields in the summer and autumn months to increase their pay packets, but the vast majority are non-UK nationals. I will focus my contribution on them, because they play a very large part in the north Cornwall workforce during the summer months.

We are facing a seasonal worker shortage at a time when UK food production may need to increase to meet the country’s needs. I believe that implementing a new seasonal workers permit scheme for non-UK workers would give farming businesses certainty at a time when they need it. Without such a scheme, the UK could be at a significant disadvantage, as many other developed countries around the world have a seasonal workforce. At this crucial time when we are withdrawing from the European Union, we need to give the agricultural sector certainty about future workforce planning. Farmers and other rural businesses need assurances about the labour market and about how any future schemes will operate, so they are confident that they will have that role in the long term as the UK removes itself from the European Union.

It is also worth looking at an accommodation strategy to house seasonal workers in the summer months. A lot of farm-based businesses in north Cornwall have raised the problem of accommodation with me. Having such a policy would mean that people coming to Britain to work knew they had somewhere to stay before they agreed to come. A seasonal scheme would also benefit other rural and coastal businesses, which face similar
increases in trade throughout the summer months. Tourism Alliance data show that one in four workers in the tourism sector, in which north Cornwall plays a huge part during the summer months, are non-UK nationals. A dedicated strategy to meet increasing pressures during the year for farmers and the tourism sector would be welcome.

Prior to 2014, there was a quota-based seasonal workers system that enabled farmers to recruit temporarily from overseas. It took a pragmatic approach to labour, and it was controlled through the UK Border Agency and managed by contracted operators. I ask the Minister to consider learning from what worked back then and to implement a strategy to check workers in and out. It should be overseen by the Home Office and managed by licensed operators, and it should not just support EU citizens but be open to the wider world. I ask the Minister to consider an accommodation strategy to cope with temporary population changes, and a 12-month permit in conjunction with other industries, such as food processing or tourism, that would enable us to offer a full year’s work to committed non-UK workers.

This debate has been a great opportunity to put the farming case for seasonal permits. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

10.3 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As always, it is a pleasure to speak in this Chamber. I congratulate the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) for bringing forward this issue and for comprehensively setting the scene for us all to try to follow. My contribution will obviously be from a Northern Ireland perspective. My plea, like the hon. Lady’s, is for us to help our seasonal workers.

I hail from Strangford, and my constituency has some of the finest agricultural land in the entire United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I represent the home of the trademarked Comber spud, which is a treat to any palate across the United Kingdom. Nobody who has had a Comber spud will ever want any other kind of spud—I say that with great respect to other kind of spud. Members who will probably make a plea for their own areas.

The land in Strangford is so fertile that we can sometimes have three harvests in a year, as opposed to the two that farmers in other areas of the Province have. We have some of the lowest levels of rainfall—I hope I do not tempt providence by saying that, but that is what the stats say and they have been accumulated over a number of years. That is wonderful news for our farmers, who struggle to make ends meet and put food on all our tables. However, as my mother used to say to me when disciplining me for misbehaving as a young boy, “You reap what you sow.” That is a solid principle. The harvest must come in or it is all for naught. If farmers do not have the labour to bring in the harvest, the result is clear: a waste of food and money. That is unconscionable.

Jo Churchill: Is not the point also that the industry is constantly pushing the boundaries of innovation and increasing productivity, thereby fulfilling what the Government are asking it to do by improving production and productivity? If we are not careful, we will constrain the one thing it really needs, which is a decent seasonal workforce.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for those very wise words. I am sure the Minister is listening intently. I fully endorse what she said, and I am sure others do too. Governments have encouraged the agricultural sector to grow, and with that growth has come the complications for seasonal workers, which we are debating today. I hope that point is taken on board.

When there was a labour shortage in 2008, horticultural businesses lost an average of £140,000 as crops were left unpicked in the fields and retailers were left to try to fill their shelves with imported produce. We are not too old to remember 2008 and the peculiar difficulties that farmers and retailers faced. A shortage of labour puts at risk horticultural businesses, which contribute £3 billion to the UK economy and employ about 37,000 people on a permanent basis. We must address that issue, because we are possibly facing the same scenario again. I know that from my constituency, and I am sure the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent and other hon. Members who have spoken and will speak later will endorse that view.

The briefing outlines the situation that we are currently in. I declare an interest: I am a member of the Ulster Farmers Union, the sister organisation of the NFU, of which I am also a member. The NFU 2015 end-of-season labour survey has shown for the first time since the seasonal agriculture workers scheme closed that growers are starting to struggle to source an adequate supply of seasonal workers to meet their needs. Some 29% of respondents stated that they experienced problems in 2015, and 66% said that they predict that the situation will worsen by 2018. That cannot be allowed to happen. This debate is an opportunity to address that problem at an early stage, and I hope the Minister and the Government will do so.

Those data were collected pre-referendum, with full freedom of movement within the European Union. Since the referendum, labour providers have reported a marked drop-off in interest from EU workers in seasonal work. That was demonstrated by the results of the NFU labour providers survey, which shows that between July and September 2016, 47% of labour providers said they were unable to meet the demands of the sector they were supplying. That is a colossal figure. That compares with the 100% of labour providers who said they were able to recruit sufficient numbers of workers during January, February and March this year.

That is not good news for our farmers, for our constituents or for us in this place. Many crops produced in the United Kingdom are seasonal, which creates a structural problem that requires the annual recruitment of sufficient seasonal workers. Those jobs are fluid and flexible, but they do not provide the stable, permanent wage that people need. I say this gently: farmers do not want to undercut wages by bringing people in to do the work; the fact is that they cannot get enough labour to do the work at the right time.

I was taken by the figures that the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent mentioned—I think she referred to 1,000 workers for one section of land. Think about that for a second. That is 1,000 workers who have to be housed and looked after. That is a colossal figure, and it is for just one place, not the whole of the United Kingdom. That puts where we are into perspective.

In my constituency, we have Willowbrook and Mash Direct, which are local agri-food producers. I know how hard they work to encourage local people—those at
home—to work for them, but the reality is that a large portion of their workforce is not from Northern Ireland. In one of those factories the figure is 40%, and in the other it is 60%. We need seasonal workers in Strangford, across Northern Ireland and throughout the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Those companies could not operate without a seasonal workforce, and I know they are not alone. The NFU said that the industry currently uses about 80,000 seasonal workers, and that figure is expected to rise to 95,000 by 2021. The projected figures show that we need more seasonal workers; we must not decrease the number we already have. A flexible workforce is needed across food and farming—an industry worth £108 billion to the nation’s economy. The input of agri-food, therefore, makes a massive contribution to the economy, as anyone who represents an agri-food sector or constituency knows—those who do not probably know from the facts and figures.

Workers from across the skills spectrum are needed throughout the industry—for example, in livestock and poultry businesses to process and pack meat. Cereal farmers need workers to weed crops and drive complex machinery. Farming is not as simple as it was years ago. There is more complexity to it today, and bureaucracy as well—there is a certain level of regulation to meet to move products throughout the world. Dairy farmers need workers with high levels of animal husbandry skills. I am old enough to remember the small milking ventures in my constituency, because I had many friends in farming. The systems were easy to work with then, but with all the complexity and technology today, people need a degree to work in a milking parlour.

The UK is not alone in the need to outsource help; Canada, the US and other countries do the same. My own son applied to go to Australia for a year on a work permit visa to see the country while working on different farms—he fell in with a girl, which of course put an end to all that, but that happens sometimes in this world, so he did not take up the opportunity in Australia. That scheme appeals to many young people wishing to take a gap year, and the Australian Government have made it easy for young people to do it, at great benefit to farmers and their economy. It is an opportunity to see other parts of the world, and to learn a wee bit more about farming and how people do things there.

The scenario is clear. We once had an extremely successful quota-based scheme for seasonal agricultural workers, which enabled farmers to recruit temporary overseas workers to carry out crop growing, harvesting, on-farm processing and packing. I have been informed that it was robust and effective, controlled by the UK Border Agency and managed by contracted operators. It has provided a pool of labour for the horticulture industry for the past 60 years. Exceptionally high rates of return to home countries meant that the seasonal agricultural workers scheme was never an immigration issue.

We must bring something similar into play as a matter of urgency, and that is why the debate today is so relevant to our times. The NFU has called on the Government in 2017 to trial a substantial fixed-term work permit scheme for agriculture and horticulture targeted at non-EU workers. That is what the farmers in my constituency and I are calling for in today’s debate. This country knows how to carry out such a scheme, because we have had one before. We only need to bring it back and update what is necessary.

The NFU has said that a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme could include “all of the positives” of the previous SAWS arrangements, but with “new criteria” that could include oversight by the Home Office—UK Visas and Immigration; I hope the Minister will respond to this point—management by licenced operators, and checks on arrival and departure for scheme workers. The scheme could be open to workers from anywhere in the world, have independently accredited scheme standards and include restrictions on the length of the placement period.

I ask the Minister gently but firmly to indicate how willing the Government are to take into account where we are, and to address the needs before we have to address a crisis. We should go from this debate in Westminster Hall and proactively put in the time and effort needed to bring a pilot scheme into play by 2017. That is what we are all asking for, and I look to the Minister for leadership. We need help, our constituents need help, and we need to make progress, as the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent said, to ensure that our agriculture sector can grow even more, producing more jobs, and so that great product, the Comber spud, can continue to be available for palates and plates throughout the United Kingdom and further afield.

10.13 am

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am delighted to be following so many illustrious hon. Members and, in particular, to be speaking in a debate called by my neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), who has done an awful lot in the 18 months that we have been in this place to represent the farming and agricultural communities that overlap our areas so much.

It is a huge privilege to be at this important debate, because the question it asks is fundamental and, in many ways, will shape British agriculture not only for the next season, or even the next two or three seasons, but for the next generation. The danger, however, is that we could see British agriculture going from being an industrial heart of innovation and technological improvement, and from providing taste explosions such as those from the strawberries my hon. Friend was describing, to a desert—perhaps simply a commuter belt of dormitory villages.

The question is therefore fundamental to what we want our countryside to be in the next 20 or 30 years. I am pleased that my hon. Friend spoke with such passion and eloquence, and that so many voices from around the United Kingdom—I am sure we will hear from Scotland shortly—are speaking out, because it is not simply a matter for the garden of England, which we all know is the most beautiful part of the kingdom, and it is not simply a matter for soft fruit farmers; it is a matter, as everyone has mentioned in different ways today, of migrant labour in the different areas.

We must get the system right, because if we do, we will have migrant labourers who are able to come, perhaps for a period of a few weeks or months, depending
on whether they are here for tourism, fruit picking or other areas of the agricultural industry, and then to go. They will take their revenue and go home, continue their education, rejoin their families, or whatever it might be. If we get it wrong, we will have a real problem, because either we will have to close down large swathes of British agriculture, and perhaps swathes of tourism, or we will have done something that we did not intend, which is to create permanent migrants. The alternative to temporary migration when the economy is such a strong draw, as our growing economy is after six years of tough decisions, is that migration becomes permanent.

Communities might be complaining about a few thousand fruit pickers every now and again, but the pressure from people coming with their kids and families will be quite different. We should recognise that we are talking about a fundamental question for the United Kingdom industry. If we are to get this right, it must be a temporary migration scheme open to many other industries, not just agriculture. Such a scheme would open up an enormous opportunity for the UK to grow flexibly and create space for innovation.

One of the big problems for companies is that hiring workers is great, but firing them is not. No one wants to lay people off, in particular as companies innovate and come up with new ideas and new technologies, and as the agricultural sector revolutionises how we grow food in this country—as it has done, let us not forget, for the past 300 years, because we invented so many of the great reforms on land that allowed people to leave the soil and go to the cities, which led to the urban and economic regeneration of the United Kingdom that enabled us to become the powerhouse of the world. Those innovations are carrying on, but if we force people to have workers on permanent contracts, innovation will be discouraged, because the economic and emotional cost of moving people on and letting them go creates a drag. For an innovative sector such as agriculture, what we want and really need is temporary workers. They fill the seasonal hole and they allow innovation.

We can get this right, because here in the UK we are combining so many wonderful things. I joked a little about the garden of England perhaps becoming a desert, but the truth is that it is not one. It is already a centre of innovation, and what people often forget—I know that the Minister will not, because he has looked into this carefully—is that agriculture and technology work incredibly closely together.

Were the Minister to visit Kent, he would be very welcome at East Malling research centre, which is at the forefront of agricultural innovation. Not only are the people there developing new forms of apples and strawberries—some even better than the ones grown in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent, however extraordinary that might seem—but they are coming up with innovative ways of using water, so that food can grow in areas where water is very much at a premium, in particular in sub-Saharan Africa. They are also looking at the robotics that my hon. Friend mentioned. Those areas are really challenging, but because we are blessed in Kent, we get the two of them working side by side and developing together, and that innovation spreads to the rest of the world.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I am reluctant to interrupt my hon. Friend’s fabulous speech, which we are all enjoying, but as a fruit farmer’s daughter and a fruit farmer myself, I feel it is imperative to ask whether he agrees that these agricultural workers are a fairly unique breed. They must be both skilled technologically and strong physically. The type of work we ask them to do is unusual, skilled and often back-breaking. As such, they are a group of people who need to be able to move around—perhaps even more than other migrant workforces.

Tom Tugendhat: I completely agree. My hon. Friend knows very well that we share a passion for the British apple. As my right hon. and hon. Friends have already pointed out, the Kentish Russet is the champagne of apples—well, the English champagne of apples. They are the most fantastic product.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent said, we are talking about creating a system—I know the Minister is listening carefully and following the theme of this debate—that allows innovation in the agricultural sector to increase. As a boy in Kent, I did quite a lot of fruit picking, and I know that many other people did that too. My picking was not quite of the standard that my dear friend Marion Regan would require, as I was not packing for Wimbledon, which is where her strawberries go. We used to go as kids to a pick-your-own farm. Of course, we ate half the stuff before it got into the punnet.

Getting the system right would not mean some return to the halcyon days—which have not existed for a long time—of east-end Londoners going hop picking in the summer, because those east-end Londoners, thank God, now have very good jobs and spend their holidays all around the world. I am afraid that the idea that hop picking in Kent is an alternative to Ibiza is simply not credible for large swathes of people. Perhaps it is for some.

The change that we as a nation voted for on 23 June means that we have to reinvent ourselves and remember some old skills. Some of those skills are to do with imagination and creativity, which was the extraordinary thing about the seasonal agricultural workers scheme. Although other OECD countries copied the scheme, it was innovative when it came in. Indeed, extraordinarily, it almost—I do mean almost—still exists. It was last operated in 2013, which is only a few years ago. One of the many organisations that operated it, the Harvesting Opportunities Permit Scheme, or HOPS, stopped only then, and it still runs a recruitment agency for agricultural workers, so it could easily be brought back. We are not talking about a complete redesign; we are talking about switching back to a scheme that worked extremely well until only recently.

None of that will compensate for the many workers deciding not to come because they will take a 10% or 15% pay cut if they are paid in pounds but want to take their money back to parts of the world where they spend in euros, so a new scheme will not be a direct replacement. It will not simply turn on the tap immediately. We must recognise that there are still challenges for farmers, not just in Kent but around the country, but such a scheme will go some way to offering opportunities. If we look at the issue seriously, as I know the Minister
will, we will create the flexible scheme that Britain needs, that farming needs and that many of our friends in Europe need.

We are of course about to enter—in some ways, we already have—the toughest negotiations the world has ever seen, on hundreds of lines of Government business, industry, migration and any number of other questions. Everything is to play for. As we started those negotiations, we must demonstrate our good will towards our European neighbours. Whatever people may think about the European Union, we are all friends with our European neighbours, and we must show them that we are open. We must show them again that we are believers in free trade. We created the rule of law and the system of international agreement—that system was created largely in the Chamber not far from here. If we remind them that openness is something that we feel we still share, and that we are not just willing but actually very happy for their young men and women to come and do a significantly better job than I ever did in Kent’s strawberry fields and take money home to enrich their own communities, that will go a little way—perhaps not far, but certainly a little way—to showing our good will to our European friends in particular, but also to people around the world. That would be an important gesture, not just for us but for them.

May I briefly sum up and ask the Minister a few questions, which I know he will be delighted to answer? Will he consider introducing a pilot scheme as soon as possible? I mentioned HOPS, which I am sure would be delighted to assist, should the Home Office be willing to engage with it. I am sure that he will not need to give reasons why he will not, so I shall skip over any explanation he might otherwise have given. Will he please collect data from that pilot scheme and share them with Members and groups such as the National Farmers Union, which has done a lot of work on this issue, and the Country Land and Business Association, which likewise has devoted an awful lot of energy to supporting not only the agricultural sector but all industry in rural areas? That would allow us to evaluate and, yes, to adjust. We do not pretend for a moment that the first scheme that will roll out will be perfect. It will not be, but we would be happy to work with him on that.

Jo Churchill: Does my hon. Friend agree that as the industry has been so proactive in asking us to have those discussions, it behoves the Government to involve the industry—the NFU, the CLA and so on—in developing the scheme that is most appropriate to service the issues that have come to light during this debate?

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend makes an absolutely essential point. Not only does it behove the Government to consult the industry widely because of all the efforts it has made, but we simply will not get a very good answer unless we do that, because the experts are the people who are doing the work, not the ones who are legislating on it. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will be only too willing to meet members of the NFU and the CLA. I remember his willingness to meet all manner of groups in his former occupation as aviation Minister, when he listened carefully to the people of west Kent and came up with absolutely the right answer. We will skip over that.

My last point is this. We have offered evidence that businesses will not survive if they rely solely on UK workers—a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent made extremely well. The farmers in my community need help now. I know that the Government, my hon. Friend the Minister and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural affairs are listening. I urge the Minister to act with a little alacrity, because as my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent said, the season for strawberries is not in June; it is in March.
industry in general are aware of the issues that surround the use of migrant labour, but they rightly point out, as I said, that many of them are students who come to this country, and there are genuine benefits to the UK from their coming and going back.

One issue that has not been touched on is what happens if the labour is not here? Some larger growers have already invested in farms in eastern Europe and are likely to invest more there. There has been talk of the great British strawberry, but unless we tackle this issue our export markets may disappear as that becomes the great Polish strawberry or the great Romanian strawberry. It is in our interests.

The National Farmers Union, with the support of horticulture and fruit growers, has come up with proposals for a renewed SAWS scheme, which it hopes would match its demands and tackle concerns about the use of migrant labour. In a rare degree of unanimity in the Chamber, I think we are all supportive of that, and perhaps of a trial, but, if the Minister is to go down the road of a trial, may we have one that takes in all parts of the United Kingdom, unlike for the post-study work visa, which, despite Scottish concerns, was for only a few English universities?

I make no bones about the fact that I firmly believe all existing EU workers should have the right to remain, but the NFU proposal is a sensible and genuine attempt to come up with a scheme that would meet Government objectives and allow this valuable industry to have the labour it requires. I urge the Minister, along with everyone else in the Chamber, to give that serious consideration.

10.37 am

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) on her passionate defence of her position. We would not want the pricing model of the British strawberry to go the same way as Toblerone or Marmite—or, worse still, for it to be outsourced entirely. The discussion has highlighted the often overlooked yet crucial role of economic migrants in the rural economy and shown that we need carefully managed migration policies if we are to ensure that we will not be worse off as we voyage into these uncharted post-Brexit waters.

Whatever side of the argument we are on in that debate, we must all agree that a thriving agricultural sector is vital to the strength of our rural economy. The figures I have say that 302,000 people work in agriculture and that the total income from farming, although it is declining, was in excess of £3.75 billion in 2015. We have heard slightly different figures in the debate, but agriculture is the lifeblood of hundreds of communities up and down the country. Within that, the horticultural sector is an important plank of British agriculture. It contributes £3 billion to the UK economy. However, the nature of the life cycle of crops and fruits means that inevitably it relies on seasonal workers. Figures in the Financial Times yesterday put the seasonal workforce at 80,000, 98% of whom are from the EU.

I certainly do not want those jobs to disappear. It is of course right that British people should be encouraged to work in agriculture, but realistically the seasonal nature of much of the work means that it will be difficult to achieve that in the short term. As we have
heard, there are gaps that need to be plugged. My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) eloquently dealt with the arguments of Migration Watch, and the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent described the difficulties with mechanical fruit picking. How do we resolve all that?

Obviously, agricultural workers, whether from the EU or of any other origin, should be allowed on UK farms seasonally, or permanently, and the Government need to work out a system that would guarantee a stable and predictable flow of farm workers. Most developed countries have some sort of temporary migration programme; it is not unusual. I believe that they even have one in Poland, in which they take workers from Moldova and Ukraine. It is not a bizarre idea; we have had it for a long time in this country. Economists value such systems and say that there is a triple benefit—I will not say triple lock; that is a bit controversial at the moment. There is a benefit to the host state, because the labour gaps are plugged; the system is good for the state. There is a benefit to the host state, because it does not engender the brain drain that we hear of.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): As the shadow Minister knows, there has been a terrible increase in hate crime since the referendum, 85% of which is race-related. Does she agree that that disgraceful behaviour not only threatens our identity and values but causes many overseas workers to reconsider whether to choose this country for work?

Dr Huq: The hon. Lady anticipates a later part of my speech. I was going to refer to yesterday’s Financial Times, which reported that a chap called John Hardman, of HOPS Labour Solutions of Kenilworth, 20% of whose recruitment is for agriculture jobs—I think it is an employment agency—said:

“Post-Brexit, Romanians and Bulgarians have had the view that Britain is a xenophobic, anti-European place and that they can go to Germany, Holland and Belgium, with better conditions and earn better wages, since the devaluation of the pound has reduced their net income by 15-20 per cent.”

The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent and other hon. Members alluded to such conditions. We do not want that to happen; it is a good point.

The hon. Member for Angus (Mike Weir) pointed out that for the migrants themselves there are many benefits, including those to do with language. Such schemes are seen as good, and we had one from 1948 to 2013. Originally, the point of it was the opportunity for cultural exchange, with young people in war-torn Europe gaining the opportunity to contribute to the reconstruction of its economies—including Britain’s—by offering seasonal labour. In 2009, 21,250 agricultural workers were given short-term permits under the scheme. All of those were from Bulgaria and Romania, as Britain had started to use the scheme to ensure that citizens from countries newly admitted to the European economic area could contribute to filling those identified labour shortages. Along the way there have been adaptations; under the Labour Government in 2005 the Gangmasters Licensing Authority, which we established to give trade unions an effective voice in the prevention of exploitation of tied labour, was incorporated.

There has been a large degree of consensus in the debate that the scheme was a sensible, managed and welcoming migration policy, but in 2013 the Government decided to scrap it—quite controversially. Conservative MPs for Kent and Essex constituencies voiced concerns at the time. Fast forwarding, yesterday’s Financial Times contains some alarming things. The NFU, which many hon. Members have mentioned, is publishing a new survey later in the week. The article reports its worries that

“the supply of pickers for late-season crops such as potatoes and brassicas—cabbages, cauliflowers and turnips—was only enough to meet 67 per cent of the industry’s needs.”

There is a shortfall there. The article also states:

“In a letter to Robert Goodwill, the immigration minister, dated November 10 and seen by the FT…the NFU’s deputy president, warned: ‘There is a clear emerging labour crisis in the industry’ and ‘a very real risk that British fruit and vegetables will be left to rot unpicked in British fields in 2017.’”

We do not want to get to that point, obviously.

To some extent there were warnings in 2013. The British Growers Association said that scrapping the scheme would have

“a significant and damaging impact on investment and production decisions affecting the UK with immediate effect”

The NFU, again, also gave a warning at that time. Even the Government’s Migration Advisory Committee predicted:

“In the medium- and longer-term, farmers are likely to experience increasing difficulties in sourcing the required level of seasonal labour from the EU (including the UK) labour market.”

I was speaking in a debate in this same 9.30 slot a week ago; I am having an attack of déjà vu. It was a debate on the effect of Brexit on higher education. Some of the questions are enduring ones about, short term, allowing people in and out. These are not migratory flows that would have a long-term impact. There has been an unusual level of consensus in the debate; I do not think that anyone has argued against bringing the scheme back temporarily.

Researchers from the University of Sussex have found that the working conditions of agricultural workers have not changed in any substantial way since the closure of the scheme. As a result, attracting sufficient British workers to the task is becoming increasingly challenging. Those claims are worrying and, given the post-Brexit climate that we are heading into, they need to be properly addressed and considered. The Government need to work with employers and unions to see what impact the scrapping of the scheme has had on jobs, wages and working conditions.

The NFU is calling for the reintroduction of a migration scheme for agricultural workers to be piloted, with a particular focus on students, as the hon. Member for Angus mentioned. Perhaps the Minister could at least commit to offering a proper, comprehensive assessment of the impact of scrapping the policy. Has there been an increase in labour productivity in the sector that will feed through to higher wages? Are jobs disappearing in agricultural firms? As those firms will be unable to produce goods without access to labour, it would be good to have a level-headed assessment.

The Government cannot say that they were not warned. Anyone who hopes that leaving the single market will allow the Government to liberalise migration policy in
the agricultural sector will be as disappointed as the curry chefs who were told by the International Development Secretary that, if we voted to leave—

Mr Brazier: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Huq: I am in the last minute of my speech, and I should prefer to wind it up: my apologies.

The Government aim to reduce immigration to the tens of thousands whatever the economic costs, and insist on the mantra “Brexit means Brexit”, even though we do not know exactly what that means. They include student numbers in the calculations, despite the overwhelming evidence that the public do not want that. They seem to have boxed themselves into a corner, because they will not be able to liberalise immigration in a sector when the economic case and rationale are clear.

I know the Minister from his previous incarnation. He is a very reasonable chap. I had a win for my constituents because of his actions; so I hope he can do the same thing today. We have seen that dogmatic quotas and targets can result in counter-productive policies. I hope that he will listen to the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent about having just a temporary trial scheme next year and about seasonal agriculture workers being at the forefront of the negotiations.

10.49 am

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) for initiating this important and informative debate, and I congratulate her on her elevation to the chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group for fruit and vegetable farming. She presented her case with her customary eloquence and passion, and I am grateful to her and to all hon. Members who have participated. I assure all hon. Members that I will reflect very carefully on the points that have been raised.

When I was appointed as the Minister for Immigration, I was interviewed by the Home Office staff magazine. One of the questions they asked me was, “If you weren’t a politician, what would you be?” I note in passing, and with relief, that they asked the same question of all of my ministerial colleagues at the Home Office, rather than it being a question solely for myself. I replied, “I’m a farmer, first and foremost. Politics has always been the other thing I do. My family have been on the same farm in north Yorkshire since 1850.” Indeed, I have carried out many of the same jobs as the hon. Member for Angus (Mike Weir). I suspect my father should have been arrested for using child labour, given the age at which I began doing those tasks.

It is important that we consider the issues before us today. I understand the position of the farming community and, every bit as importantly, I absolutely appreciate the importance of food and farming industries as a crucial component of the UK economy and of the fabric of rural Britain. I will just put the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) right on one point before I move on: seasonal workers do not contribute to net migration figures; someone has to be here for more than a year to count towards those. Indeed, the reason the seasonal agricultural workers scheme was closed was not because it was unsuccessful, but because the Government were required under EU law to lift the restrictions on Bulgarian and Romanian nationals, who then had unrestricted access to the labour market.

The issue of how we meet temporary labour needs in the agriculture sector is a long-standing one. In the past, the immigration system made provision for a seasonal agricultural workers scheme, under which overseas workers were admitted to for up to six months to undertake crop harvesting. Those arrangements worked very well indeed. The reason why the seasonal agricultural workers scheme was phased out was because the sector had access to an expanded pool of labour, following successive accessions of eastern European countries to the European Union.

As part of our commitment to reduce net migration, the Government’s consistent position has been not to introduce new migration schemes for non-EU nationals to meet labour needs at lower skill levels. The previous seasonal agricultural workers scheme was phased out on the recommendation of the Migration Advisory Committee at the point at which restrictions on the employment of Bulgarian and Romanian nationals were lifted. While the UK remains a member of the EU, EU nationals continue to enjoy the right of freedom of movement in accordance with the UK’s treaty obligations, and employers in the food and farming sector can continue to recruit EU workers to meet seasonal labour needs.

It is not the Government’s policy to admit non-EU nationals to meet labour needs at lower skill levels. However, I appreciate the concerns that have been raised about whether the present situation is sustainable. I met Minette Batters, the deputy president of the National Farmers Union, and Ali Capper, who is also from the NFU, at the beginning of the month. They raised that very point with me, and I have undertaken to reflect on it carefully. Indeed, at the Conservative party conference in Birmingham, I met the president of the NFU, Meurig Raymond, who also raised that very point.

I know there are concerns that the UK’s impending exit from the EU, or even the fall in the value of sterling, might lead to an immediate shortage of labour as EU workers go home, although the data do not support that so far. The most recent labour market statistics were published by the independent Office for National Statistics earlier this month. They cover the period up to September 2016—after the referendum—and show that the number of EU citizens in the UK labour force was higher in the quarter to September 2016 than it had been a year earlier.

Not only that, but the number of workers from the eight countries of eastern and central Europe that joined the EU in 2004, and from Bulgaria and Romania—the countries most commonly associated with low-skilled labour—are also up year on year. To be precise, there were 129,000 more workers from those countries in the UK in the third quarter of 2016 compared with a year earlier. That does not suggest that there is a major exodus from the United Kingdom although, as I have said, I will continue to monitor the situation carefully.

The Government wish to ensure that any decisions we take on the short-term need for seasonal migration schemes do not pre-empt future decisions about how the immigration system will work post-Brexit. As I am
[Mr Robert Goodwill]

sure hon. Members will understand, there are constraints on what I can say about the future arrangements for EU citizens who want to work in the United Kingdom; the way in which we will control migration post-Brexit is yet to be determined. One of the opportunities of Brexit is that we will be able to control both the numbers of migrants from within the EU and the activities that they undertake when they are here.

Angela Smith: Can I read from the Minister’s comments that the Government’s plan, if they are to control and restrict freedom of movement, is to leave the single market?

Mr Goodwill: I think that question goes above my pay grade. The Leader of the Opposition will have an opportunity to ask the Prime Minister about that at Prime Minister’s Question Time—presumably once he has finished paying tribute to Fidel Castro.

What I can say is that, in framing those future arrangements, the Government will give careful consideration to the needs of the agricultural sector and, of course, every other part of the UK economy. The Government have made it clear that we will work with sectors of the economy to ensure that the potential impacts of Brexit are understood and taken into account when developing our approach. However, we will also be mindful that, in voting for the UK’s departure from the EU, the British people sent a clear message that gaining more control over the number of people who come here from Europe must be a priority in our negotiations.

There is no doubt that there is a debate to be had about whether workers admitted to the UK to undertake seasonal work on a temporary basis are an immigration issue. For example, they may not, as I have said, count towards the official net immigration statistics produced by the ONS if their stay is less than 12 months. However, they certainly have an impact on the communities where they are located, and they do use public services.

A wider issue is the balance to be struck between short-term fixes and the longer-term sustainability of the sector. The horticultural sector has clearly acquired a profound dependence on migrant labour. A Gangmasters Licensing Authority survey following the closure of the seasonal agricultural workers scheme found that, of the 234 farms that responded, only eight had employed any UK nationals at all to undertake seasonal work. Whether we arrived in that position because UK workers have ceased to be available to growers, or because migrant workers have become more readily available to them—or both—may be an academic point now. However, it is still sensible to ask whether the Government should act to perpetuate that dependence in future.

I will deal briefly with a couple of points raised during the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent asked about those EU citizens who have already settled here. The Prime Minister has made it clear that she wishes to protect the status of people already here. Indeed, the only circumstances in which that would not be possible would be if British citizens’ rights in EU member states were not protected in return.

Points have been made about the reaction following Brexit and potential xenophobia. I am meeting the Romanian ambassador later today and I will make the point that this country still welcomes people to come and work here. Indeed, as long as we remain a member of the European Union, those people are free and welcome to come here and participate in our vibrant, thriving economy.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) made a point about accommodating seasonal workers. I agree that it is important that we look at accommodation, not only because we need to ensure the welfare of the migrants, but because the lack of rural accommodation is a barrier to the recruitment of UK workers. The working group on seasonal workers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs continues to look at how increasing the availability of accommodation can be incentivised. Employers can offer some accommodation costs against the national minimum wage. My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) said that non-EEA seasonal workers coming here temporarily do not impact on the migration figures. I mention in passing that I have two Egremont Russet trees in my orchard and I can attest to the quality of their fruit.

This has been an excellent debate, and I repeat my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent. I will allow her a few moments to sum up before the end of the debate.

10.58 am

Helen Whately: I thank the Minister for the time and care he has taken and for his comments. I particularly thank all hon. Members who have contributed. It has felt like a pretty lively debate. We have had strawberry wars about who produces the best strawberries. We have debated which the best apples are—the Russet performed very strongly; it is the English sparkling wine of apples, perhaps. We have also heard Kent compared to Ibiza.

There has been a lot of emotion in the room as well.

To be serious, we have talked about how times have changed. Many of us have at some time picked fruit at a young age—who knows who was the youngest—and done our bit in the past. However, people do not work on the land any more, as the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) said, so we need a reliable supply of seasonal workers for our farms. I urge the Minister to keep looking at this, and to look not only at the overall figures for EU migrants but specifically at the agricultural sector to see what is happening to it. It is absolutely vital. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) said, this is an existential question.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Criminal Justice System: Equality of Access

11.1 am

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered equality of access to justice in the criminal justice system.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss this important topic. In the past six years, many lawyers have spoken of their fears about access to justice. When they do, they are often accused of special pleading, as if only lawyers care about people being able to use the protection our laws afford us.

There is a problem in this country with the debate about access to the courts and the provision of legal aid. The Government say that our legal aid budget is generous. The Government speak about court users, who must contribute to the running of the courts, as if most people have nothing better to do than spend their lives in court or as if people relish rushing off to court as often as they can. The truth of people’s attitude is, of course, quite different. I can do no better than quote a giant of the Labour movement and labour law, Lord Bill Wedderburn. In his seminal 1965 book “The Worker and the Law”, he wrote that “most people want nothing more from the law than that it should leave them alone”.

The truth is that most people would hope never to have to use the courts—the employee who is being underpaid or unfairly treated, the businessperson owed money by a customer who will not pay or the mother who is injured in a car accident on the school run. For those who commit criminal offences, the situation is very different, but no doubt many of them wish the law would leave them alone.

There have been cuts to legal aid funding in many areas of law since 2010. It would be wrong to suggest that cuts have been visited only on criminal legal aid, and it is important to put things in context. First came the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. At that time, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) was the Justice Secretary and Lord Chancellor. The Act removed eligibility for publicly funded legal assistance from a raft of areas of social welfare law. For those seeking legal help with debt advice, there is no support—no support for housing advice, unless someone faces being made homeless, and no support for welfare benefits advice; the latter is particularly troubling. Past figures show that many appeals against the Department for Work and Pensions are successful. Between December 2014 and June 2015, 53% of those who appealed against fit-for-work decisions had that decision reversed. People would have to go to court far less if the decisions of Government Departments were better.

The cuts have given rise to a geographical concept I have never heard of before: a legal aid advice desert. The Law Society has a campaign devoted to the eradication of the cuts. There are areas of the England and Wales jurisdiction where legal aid advice for housing cases is disappearing. My constituency of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney shares with the neighbouring area of Rhondda Cynon Taf just a single provider of legal aid housing advice.

The figures show that civil legal aid cases have decreased dramatically since LASPO became law. In July this year, Young Legal Aid Lawyers, along with the Legal Action Group and the Legal Aid Practitioners Group, wrote to the Prime Minister. They explained that in 2012-13, before LASPO, there were 724,243 civil law cases funded by legal aid. By 2015-16, that figure had plummeted to just 258,460. As they told the Prime Minister, that is a picture of justice denied. The Act removed most private family law matters from the scope of legal aid. Divorce proceedings, child contact arrangements and financial and property disputes are no longer eligible, save where there is evidence of domestic violence.

At the time of LASPO coming into force, the Government made a commitment to review the effects of the Act within three to five years. We are squarely in that timescale now. The calls for that review to start have reached a crescendo. In recent months, the Trades Union Congress and Amnesty International have produced reports highlighting the scale of the problem. I pay tribute to both organisations for their work. It is surely time that the Justice Secretary set that review in motion. Perhaps her reason for not acting is that she is in possession of another review—a review of the effect of employment tribunal fees—that the Ministry of Justice appears to be sitting on, which we strongly suspect is because that review is critical of the fees.

In 2013, the then Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), introduced more reforms. He sought to impose restrictions on the availability of judicial review, to restrict the ability of foreign nationals to receive publicly funded legal assistance; to remove publicly funded legal assistance for nearly every area of prison law; and to make further cuts to immigration law and to family law. A proposal for competitive tendering for criminal legal aid fees was also floated, but later abandoned.

The right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell asserted, without providing evidence, that the legal aid bill was spiralling. He also asserted, without providing evidence, that the public had lost confidence in the legal aid system and that campaigners were using judicial review as a tool to block his Government’s unimpeachable legislative programme. We can debate whether the economic argument was ever really made out. However, those reforms were a further restriction on access to justice. Worse still are the restrictions on judicial review, which can only be characterised as a flagrant set of measures to reduce Government’s accountability to the people.

During the past six years, we have witnessed a curious sight little seen before. Outside the Old Bailey here in London and outside courts across the country, we have seen the strange sight of gowned and bewigged lawyers protesting against cuts to legal aid. That, in turn, gave rise to more curious sights still: a huge and grotesque papier mâché likeness of the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell being carried aloft around Parliament Square, and the barrister and former Tory MP Sir Evan Lawrence taking to a platform erected in Old Palace Yard to call on the legal profession to strike. If 2016 has been the year that saw old certainties undermined, perhaps we should have seen it coming from that moment alone.

The question is, what brought criminal lawyers to that point? The profession has not seen a rise in fees for more than 20 years. While it is abundantly clear that many
[Gerald Jones]

QCs have done and continue to do well from legal aid, the position is very different for the majority of junior barristers. Some reported at the time not being paid for their work or paying more in travel to get to court than they would receive for the court appearance itself. Solicitors firms throughout that time had to do much more with much less.

The profession told of a real and present fear that it simply could not take more cuts. Diminishing fees would mean greater case loads and pressure to accumulate more clients and devote less time to those cases, all in order to stay afloat. For some professionals, that would mean compromises in quality and integrity that were a bridge too far, and they feared that firms willing to stack ‘em high and sell ‘em cheap would prevail.

It was rumoured that long-established and trusted law firms would disappear and that those that had been a presence on the local high street and had served their local communities for decades would be replaced by warehouses of inexperienced and exploited paralegals. It was also rumoured that removing those firms from the high street would leave no physical presence, which would be replaced with a faceless website and call centre run by G4S, Tesco or even Eddie Stobart.

The Government abandoned their restructuring of criminal legal aid and opted for more cuts. Mr Grayling imposed a reduction of 17.5% on solicitors’ fees, a huge reduction in resources that would have serious implications for any business. The cut was to be introduced in two stages: an initial 8.75% reduction last year with a planned further cut of 8.75% cut in April this year. The second cut was postponed for one year by Mr Grayling’s successor, Mr Gove.

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman is aware that we normally refer to hon. Members by their constituencies, not their names.

Gerald Jones: I am sorry, Mr Gapes.

It is hoped that the new Justice Secretary will shortly confirm that there will be no further reduction, but the warnings from lawyers to the Government have continued. They have warned about the future of the justice system, miscarriages of justice, and two-tier justice with one law for the rich and another for the poor. That is the peril we risk creating if ordinary people are denied proper legal representation.

Wealthy defendants in criminal cases sometimes seem to have unlimited resources and create the mistaken impression that justice can be easily bought or easily evaded. That may be unpopular. People convicted of the most serious offences may have benefited from legal aid. Newspapers often howl with outrage at the sums involved, but such cases are often the longest and most complex. The answer is not to deprive people of representation. If the state and the public choose to demand that wealth in a criminal case is a sufficient reason to deprive people of proper representation, it is the mark of a civilised society.

We must ensure that those who want representation are represented. Only then can we be confident they are properly tried, and properly acquitted or convicted. A proper trial means competent prosecution and defence, and since 2010, the Crown Prosecution Service too has seen significant restraint. Its budget has been cut by around 25% and its staff has been reduced by 2,500. The Government will say this has not led to any problems and cannot be blamed for trials collapsing, cases being dropped or disclosure of important evidence being missed, but the truth is that the service is stretched and that has implications for access to justice.

Access to justice does not apply only to those accused. Victims of crime also need access to justice. They must be confident that their case receives the attention it deserves, that it is adequately resourced and that it is handled with care and expertise. Austerity has made access to justice more difficult for thousands of people, not just for the reasons I have given. Yes, the Government have cut legal aid and the budget for the Crown Prosecution Service, but they have also closed courts around the country. In February, it was announced that 86 courts and tribunals would be closed, but it was reckoned that 97% of citizens would be able to reach their required court within an hour by car. That is fine for those who have a car and drive, but what about those who do not? Many people rely on public transport and for them the journey time is greater. With those closures and greater travelling times comes a diminution in the principle of local justice.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Two of the courts that were closed across the country were in my constituency. Some of the reasoning was that the closures would facilitate a roll-out of technology and that access to justice would be more available than ever, but nothing has replaced the closure of those courts. There has been no technology, no hubs and no additional video link technology. We are left with a significant deficit in access to justice.

Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend makes an interesting and correct point, which underlines the position across the country where access to justice has been denied to too many people. It has been replaced not with an improved service, but with a diminution in the principle of local justice.

The Government have rightly looked at technology to ameliorate some of the problems. Trials have been launched with greater use of video links, including for defendants who need not appear in court unless necessary. Mobile vans have been parked near witnesses’ homes to allow them to give evidence without going to court. However, there are other examples, to which my hon. Friend alluded. Solicitors in Exeter were left frustrated by a new court system enabling all defendants to appear over a video link from local police stations to Plymouth magistrates court but which, however, denied them proper and private consultations with their clients. Technology must be utilised, but it must not be assumed to be good in and of itself. It must not be adopted without allowing defendants a proper defence—there must be no compromise on that.

We are worried about access to justice. One of the first acts of my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) on becoming leader of the Labour party was to ask Lord Bach to convene a commission to assess access to justice in our system, and it is considering what can be done to improve the current situation. An independent group of commissioners is looking at the whole system. They have been invited...
not for their party sympathies, but for their expertise. An interim report was recently launched and is already a great piece of work with innovative and exciting ideas. It is hoped that it will be finalised next year.

Lord Chief Justice Thomas observed earlier this year that “our justice system has become unaffordable to most”.

There can be no greater indictment of the position we find ourselves in today. I hope the Minister can offer some reassurance but, sadly, I do not hold out much hope.

11.16 am

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald):
I join the welcome to you in the Chair, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) on securing this debate on an important subject.

Access to justice is at the heart of everything we do in the Ministry of Justice. The sad thing about the hon. Gentleman’s remarks—of course he is entitled to point to areas where things are unsatisfactory—is that he did not talk about the context. The context is that there are far fewer cases and that, because of that, in some parts of the country courts sit for only a quarter of the time they could sit. Therefore, we are working against a changing picture, and not least against the background of the Government spending £1 billion to modernise our courts and tribunals. Every time one introduces modernisation, one has fewer unnecessary directions hearings; and one enables witnesses to give evidence by video link. Any of these changes affect the sort of court estate we need and issues of access to justice, but in a positive way. It is clear that he has concerns about access to justice and I hope that I can reassure him.

We are still spending a great deal of money on legal aid. The changes the hon. Gentleman referred to were made by the then Lord Chancellor, my right hon. and learned Friend concentrated the effort where it was most needed. I do not think it is my right hon. and learned Friend concentrated the effort where it was most needed. I do not think it is seriously arguable that he did not.

A review by March 2018 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offences Act 2012 was promised; it has to be completed by a particular date in March 2018. We have only just entered the period in which the review might have started, so it is not as though we have been dragging our feet for years. The review will go ahead.

To say that in this country we do not have debt and housing advice is incorrect. What is the citizens advice bureaux network doing? It is providing just that. On Friday, I opened a new bureau in Letchworth, where the debt and housing advice from Citizens Advice is well regarded. Shelter, which has a contract with the Legal Aid Agency, is a fantastic organisation giving advice about housing matters. The Department for Work and Pensions puts a great deal of effort and time into welfare benefit advice and giving people information.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that there were legal aid advice deserts for housing law. That is not so. Every part of the country has housing advice available. The point about housing advice is that in some areas of the country there are many more housing cases in which people might lose their homes than there are in others, so the provision is not exactly the same in each place, but it is national. The fact that there is one provider with a number of offices in one place does not mean that there is no advice. There is advice from that provider, and often the provider is very expert. If we said that that area had to have two firms, we would reduce the amount of work available to the provider that has the expertise, so it is not as simple a question as the hon. Gentleman suggested.

I was glad that the hon. Gentleman mentioned Sir Ivan Lawrence. I do not remember the occasion in question, but I pay tribute to his contribution in this place over many years before his retirement.

Turning to access to justice more generally, I think it is true to say that our courts and tribunals are open to everyone, regardless of their circumstances and location. As my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor, the Lord Chief Justice and the Senior President of Tribunals made clear in their joint statement in September, a modernised Courts and Tribunals Service must be just, proportionate and accessible. It would be undermined if it were not. However, the services that our courts provide at the moment do not always accommodate our citizens’ busy lives or meet customers’ accessibility needs. Access to justice is not just about how close people are to a court. Our programme will reduce the need for many customers to attend court. Modern technologies offer significant benefits in that respect, and we intend to explore every opportunity to use those technologies to make access to justice easier.

Holly Lynch: To return to my point about the courts in my constituency having closed, I completely buy the notion, if we are starting from a position of what is best practice in supporting vulnerable victims and witnesses through the court process, that having old-fashioned buildings was not necessarily the best practice that we would like to see, but nothing—no technology, digitalisation or modernisation of the justice system—has come in to replace the courts in my constituency. Can the Minister give me any information on what might be happening?

Sir Oliver Heald: I am of course happy to look into the situation in Halifax and write to the hon. Lady, but I will make this point to her. Because our courts are used for only about 50% of the time, we are trying to use them more fully and to have courts that are more modern and have modern communications—wi-fi, video links and so on—so we are closing some courts and investing the money in improving the remaining ones. That is the overall plan.

The Lord Chief Justice gave this example—a Welsh example—the other day to the Select Committee on Justice. Wales is mountainous in parts and has road issues and so on, but in Dolgellau, where the court was closed, a video link has been established so that it is easier for local residents to give evidence and they do not have to travel to Caernarfon, for example. There are areas where such changes have already been made. There are some areas where we are proposing to make
suitable alternative arrangements, and we have a more general programme of considering questions such as whether it is possible to sit a court for a particular case in, say, the town hall or another public building. Such courts have been characterised as pop-up courts. We also have that initiative, which we are working on at the moment. Attempts are being made, but I will of course write to the hon. Lady about Halifax.

A significant amount of the work of magistrates courts will be conducted online. That will of course mean less attendance at courtrooms. It will increase the speed of the process, save money and remove the need for defendants to attend court at all. Our ambition is for attendance at a court building to be reserved for the more serious cases, in which there is to be a trial or there is a serious issue of sentencing.

We are making a lot of progress. The common platform programme has already introduced the ability to plead guilty online for certain traffic offences, as part of the single justice procedure whereby one magistrate deals with the cases. We have introduced wi-fi into all criminal courts, and the programme will continue so that we get an end-to-end digital process. The police will build a digital file, which will go to the CPS, which will put it into the right condition for court. Then, once it is going to court, all the users of the system will be able to draw down that information, that case file. The judge will be able to give directions online. We will have far fewer ineffective hearings and hearings that it would be possible to avoid by using technology.

Many vulnerable people come into contact with the courts, and it is important, through the changes, to ensure that they are helped to access digital services. We are currently consulting on how to improve their access to the digital process, as part of the announcement that was made in September.

The hon. Gentleman for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney represents a constituency in south Wales. He will know that, during the consideration of court closures in that area, particular efforts were made to find suitable alternative provision; we have discussed places such as Dolgellau.

I appreciate that some individuals may find themselves in difficult circumstances when needing to attend court. Anyone who has a concern about travelling to court on the same transport as the person they are accusing or anything of that sort should make it clear to the police and the CPS that they have that concern. Arrangements will always be made to ensure that witnesses can get to court in a satisfactory way.

It is right to thank the hon. Gentleman for initiating the debate. It is important to recognise that we are in a period in which crime is falling, the number of cases is falling and the way in which we do the work is changing, so he is right to say that, when it comes to legal aid for criminal cases, there is a case for discussion and seeing whether it is possible to improve the two main legal aid schemes: the advocates scheme and the litigators scheme. I can assure him that the Ministry of Justice is in productive discussions with both parts of the profession—the Bar and solicitors—to see whether we can find legal aid schemes for their work that are more attuned to modern needs, but that also fit in with career progression and all those things that are of concern to the Bar and solicitors. We are doing that actively at the moment; we are in discussions with them.

The hon. Gentleman recalled some remarks that were made at the time suggesting that judicial review would be dead following the changes made by the then Lord Chancellor, who is now my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport. In fact, more than 4,500 cases were started the following year, so I think he is right to feel that that did not happen after all.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the review of employment tribunal fees. I cannot tell him the outcome yet, because we are still doing it, but I think it is good that the Government are prepared to review that issue, just as we are also reviewing the immigration fees at the moment. I do not think that should be criticised; I think the hon. Gentleman should welcome it.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
ESA and Personal Independence Payments

[NA DINE DOR RIES in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered employment and support allowance and personal independence payments.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Dorries. First, I wish all my constituents a happy St Andrew’s day. It is a privilege to bring the difficulties of many of my constituents to the House for consideration, and those of the people across the UK who have experience of trying to access support when they need it most through either employment and support allowance or personal independence payments. Since I became an MP, a large percentage of the constituency casework that I or my staff have dealt with has been a result of ESA and PIP issues.

Owing to the very nature of the benefit that they are trying to access, these people are vulnerable. Many are experiencing serious illness for the first time in their lives and are facing a huge process of adjustment. That is hugely stressful, and this process is hugely stressful for those individuals, who often feel dehumanised and part of a process. The assessment procedure only serves to make things worse. Of the ESA and PIP cases that my office has dealt with—I will discuss one particular case in detail today—many have involved complaints about the assessment process. These assessments are often inhuman, needlessly stressful and unfair to claimants. Many other cases have required intervention following unsuccessful personal independence payment claims, the vast majority of which have been overturned on appeal.

My constituency is sadly not an anomaly when it comes to appeals figures. The latest statistics on appeals against PIP decisions show that 65% of appeal decisions found in favour of the claimants. Not only does that highlight a deeply flawed system, but it clearly shows that a number of people who are subjected to these highly stressful and often prolonged, protracted processes to get the support that they need are ultimately entitled to that support. The statistic of 65% of appeals overturned evidences that, and unless the Government can tell me statistics to the contrary, I am going to assume that their system is not working. It suggests that the system needs to be radically reformed. The high appeal and overturn rate is unacceptable—and unsuccessful on the Government’s part, if they are trying to drive down the number of illegitimate claimants—particularly when it impacts so negatively on the claimants who require this support the most.

If you will indulge me, Ms Dorries, I want to turn to the case of my constituent, Donna. I have the permission of my constituent to raise this issue, and they have asked me to do so in order to illustrate the impact of the benefits system on their life and to highlight the serious inequality they face. Donna, who lives in Carluke, is a mother of two children. She has a supportive husband. She established a café called the Hope Café, which is a mental health charity, and she is an advocate and a champion for supporting those with mental health problems. I commend Donna on her bravery in opening up to me so fully about her experiences with the Department for Work and Pensions. She has given me permission to share her story in full, because she hopes that it will illuminate the effect of malpractice and the effect that the assessments had on her life.

Donna became seriously ill with severe depression and anxiety 10 months ago. She told me that her mental illness made her believe that her two young children, aged eight and 10, would be better off without her in their lives. She told me that her mental illness made her believe that she was useless and worthless and had no skills worth sharing with the world. It made her think that her close friends and family were ashamed of her for being weak. That is the mindset of someone in the grip of depression, and it is incredibly difficult to break out of. Months later, thankfully, she is recovering, and as her background is working in mental health, she is keen to use her personal story to highlight the flaws in the benefits system and hopefully improve the process for others.

Donna went through the application process for both personal independence payment and employment and support allowance, which she found, in her own words, extremely harrowing. She first contacted my office to ask whether we could intervene to support her, as she was required to attend capability assessments for ESA and PIP. Donna, being logical and thinking that this would be an end in itself, asked whether she could endure one assessment. We are aware that this is not how the process works. Instead, Donna underwent an employment support work capability assessment and was asked back for a further personal independence assessment. On both occasions, she endured the lengthy assessment procedures, because these are classed as two separate benefits and the assessments are carried out by two separate providers. She found both assessments incredibly difficult. She told me that the questions she was asked made her re-live the worst days of her life, and she felt that if she had not got the award, it would have been overwhelming. At points, it made her want to give up.

Let me make the point clear: people experiencing severe depression already feel worthless. Being rejected for financial support gives concrete evidence for what they believe, in their minds, to be fact. For many people, it is the last straw. Donna told me that she was not surprised that, as a result, the suicide rates that she deals with every day are increasing.

Donna told me that her illness affected not only her, but her whole family; however, she has been lucky to have great support from her family and friends. Many others are not so lucky. For many people, where would they be without family support? At the point of rejection from the benefits system, who are they supposed to turn to? Donna’s case highlights the fact that no consideration is given to the detrimental effect of the system on the already overwhelmed mental state of a person going through the assessment process. The reason they are in that position in the first place is often because of circumstances beyond their control. Consideration must be given to each individual applicant and their circumstances. The recent film “I, Daniel Blake” by Ken Loach highlights both the hard-hitting, honest and gritty reality and the brutality of this Government’s policies.

Donna also brought up the fact that assumptions are made about claimants based on the observations of the health care professionals. She asked for a copy of her
medical assessment report and was disgusted that comments were noted about her appearance, personal grooming and whether claimants are tired or sweating. The comments were as follows:

“Looks tired...looks thin...underweight, clothing loose, dark circles under eyes ... unkempt, untidy ... unwell ... troubled ... sweating ... pale ... facial expression showed no emotion but was tearful ... restless ... fidgety ... difficulty coping due to anxiety ... seemed agitated ... poor rapport, poor eye contact ... withdrawn ... self-harm thoughts identified ... no delusion ... no obsessive ideas ... unable to complete five rounds of ‘serial sevens’ ... unable to calculate correct change when asked a sum ... unable to spell ‘world’ backwards ... unable to remember three objects first time ... had insights into their illness.”

I ask the Minister: is this the kind of system that the Government have set out to achieve? Is this a system that offers fairness, dignity and respect? Where, ultimately, is the humanity in that process? Although many of those factors may be indicative of illness, many are circumstantial and subjective, given the particular illness that someone may or may not be assessing. For example, how would Donna’s entitlement have been affected if she had been immaculately dressed, had been having a good day or did not exhibit some of the behaviours outlined in that prescriptive list?

It has taken Donna 10 months to feel better. For seven of those months she has been awarded personal independence payment, and for the past four months she has been receiving employment support allowance. Access to those benefits has been vital to her recovery. Donna wishes to return to work when she can, and she can manage her own health. She knows her limitations, yet at this stage, due to her recovery, she faces the prospect of losing those benefits, which help her to sustain her family at this already difficult time. She is all too aware that if the support is removed too soon—which could mean pushing her back to full-time work—while she is at a vital stage in her recovery, she could end up right back at the beginning again.

Like physical illnesses, mental illnesses take a long time to heal, and there is no consideration of that in this process. Donna suggested that it would be helpful to her to have a phased return to work—as a professional in this area, she knows only too well about recovering from depression—whereby she could still claim benefit and return to work slowly to build up her strength. Permitted work was explained to Donna, but as she knows only too well from her professional experience and from talking to others, as soon as a claimant lets the Department for Work and Pensions know that they are able to work for a few hours, they are ultimately called for reassessment and asked to go back to work full time. Donna told me that she would like to do a few hours a week volunteering, to get back herself back on her feet, but the criteria apply even to voluntary work. There is no middle ground.

Donna’s case illustrates that the work capability assessment is not fit for purpose. Sadly, that chimes with the calls from mental health organisations across the country, including Citizens Advice, the Disability Benefits Consortium, Mind and the Scottish Association for Mental Health. They have highlighted that the tick-box method of the work capability assessment fails to identify claimants suffering from debilitating mental health problems, and it certainly fails to take their needs into consideration.

I mentioned figures for personal independence payments earlier. Similarly, the latest figures show that 59% of initial ESA decisions were overturned on appeal. The Government have made one small concession on ESA by scrapping the retesting of chronically ill and disabled claimants—so one small part of the system now relies on common sense over bureaucracy—but that has simply fixed one part of an altogether broken system. Although exemptions from repeated assessments for chronically ill claimants and those with long-term illnesses are welcome, it is extremely disappointing that the Department for Work and Pensions and the Secretary of State have not considered that for PIP claimants.

I hope the Minister will take heed of the problems I have discussed with the work capability assessment and consider the effects that the process can have on the mental wellbeing of claimants. I respect the hard-working staff at the Department for Work and Pensions who ultimately are asked to administer this Government’s policy. My constituents and people up and down the UK deserve a social security system that is designed to offer people dignity, respect and fairness. It is time that the Government stepped up to their responsibility. We are all citizens, we are all human and we all deserve respect.

Let me add that when the responsibility for personal independence payments is devolved to Scotland—I am sure the Minister will come to this point—we will look to design the system appropriately. As she will be aware, it takes time to get the system right, because ultimately we are talking about the most vulnerable people in society. They deserve a social security system that gives them fairness, dignity and respect. I am sure we can all agree on that.

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): I now call Mr Shannon—

you are on the list, Mr Shannon. Did you put in to speak?

2.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I did indeed, Ms Dorries. Absolutely. I am more than happy to be called—I am just surprised to be called right away.

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): You are first on the list today; I know it is unusual.

Jim Shannon: The first shall be last and the last shall be first. Whenever it happens, it is always good to be called. Thank you very much, Ms Dorries—I actually thought that the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) might have been asked, so I was looking at him, but no doubt he will participate at some stage.

I thank the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for setting the scene well. We are back to discuss this matter again in Westminster Hall, and it would be remiss of me not to give a Northern Ireland perspective on where we are, where we are. I am grateful that the Minister is in her place and all of us in the House appreciate it when she responds. I will give my opinion today—and others will give examples—of where the system is falling down. I have to highlight those key issues because my staff and I deal with them every day.
of the week. We see people across the table from us with angst and anxiety and all the associated issues of stress, and we say, “How can we help them and do things better?” I will speak about some of those things today.

I have recently spoken about the changes to the employment and support allowance work-related activity group and what that means for people. The biggest issue is that the Government need to understand the difference between “ill” and “unable to work”. That, in a nutshell, is what the debate is about—the interpretation by the Department for Work and Pensions of what it means to be ill and what it means to those people who sit across the table from me every day and tell me they cannot work. The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East referred to people being pasty, sweaty and anxious, and my staff and I see those things every day of the week.

In the last month, we have seen in my office a former ward sister, a former construction business owner and a social worker, all of whom are now on ESA. Let me be clear: I do not believe for a second that those people are choosing not to work out of laziness. Who would want to go from earning £500 a week down to £75? People do not, but that is what happens.

The inference from the Government in this whole policy is insulting—I say that with respect—and more importantly, is based on a false premise that cannot be allowed to stand. I have to challenge that in the House, respectfully and kindly, and say it to the Minister and Government directly. As hon. Members know, I do not criticise—I do not feel that that is necessarily what I do—but I need to highlight the issues and ask nicely for genuine compassion and understanding.

The rationale seems to apply to PIP applicants as well. PIP is supposed to be for the help that people need to work. Apparently, the PIP assessment is intended to provide

> “a more holistic assessment of the impact of a health condition... on an individual’s ability to participate”

in everyday life. It covers sensory impairments, development needs, cognitive impairments and mental conditions, as well as physical disabilities. Those five categories cover everything—medically, physically, healthwise—that there can be. The assessment looks at the extent to which the individual is capable of undertaking various activities. For some activities, someone can score points to help to meet the threshold for PIP if they can undertake that activity only by using an “aid or appliance”. That could include such things as artificial limbs, colostomy bags, walking sticks and non-specialist aids such as electric tin openers and long-handled sponges.

I want to highlight two cases, one of which involves a young lady who has ulcerative colitis. My age is such that I can probably remember the day she was born. I have got to know her very well over the years due to her diagnosis with this unseen disease, and how it has affected her and other people in my constituency. She worked in the civil service but was granted medical retirement before 30 because her employer could no longer facilitate her working. A Government employer could not accommodate her ability to work one day and not the next, as her illness dictated.

I understand the reasons why the Government and the civil service had to take a decision and say, “Look, we are going to have to terminate your employment.” However, that is where the problem started, and I cannot understand how they expect someone else to employ her when they let her go. It should be understood why this lady is no longer able to work and why her employer, the civil service—she was Government-employed—had to let her go. Why is this young lady in this conflicted position? She is asked, in respect of PIPs, “What job can you do? Where can we find you some work?” Let us be honest: that we lassie would love to work if only she had the opportunity, but she cannot because of her disability. She is on ESA and is dealing with the stress of the proposed changes. We should never underestimate the impact of the stress of this position. I stress that as strongly as I can, because I see that all the time. She rang to make an appointment for her PIP form to be filled out. How will she be assessed? That is the question I am asking. She is currently on the higher-rate DLA—deservedly so, by the way. Will that be taken away from her? Ministers would say no, but the experience we have had so far in my office is raising fear in our mind and the minds of constituents. I see that all the time.

The young lady’s condition has not improved one iota since her last DLA application. If anything, I would suggest that it has worsened, and there is real concern that the PIP changes will not help. The stress makes her even more ill. It is a vicious cycle that is repeated over and over again. The PIP is for people who need help for hygienic purposes and for safety issues, but the problem is that that is not being translated into the new proposals. I genuinely hold the Minister in the highest esteem. From her previous employment—I understood how the system works and how it can help the people on whose behalf we are here to make a plea, so that we can take away the stress and hassle.

On 11 March, it was announced that the number of points awarded in the PIP assessment would be halved for aids and appliances for “dressing and undressing” and “managing toilet needs”. Why would the Government reduce the points for things that are needed? I cannot understand that. As a result, 290,000 claimants will no longer receive the daily living component, and a further 80,000 will receive the standard, rather than the enhanced, daily living component. Budget 2016 estimated additional savings of £1.3 billion a year by 2019-20. That is great but where does it leave my constituent, who needs help during the night?

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. Mr Shannon, lots of people wish to speak. Would you try to keep your speech to about nine minutes so everybody has an equal amount of time? Thank you.

Jim Shannon: I did not realise that. I will try to go at my Northern Ireland speed, which is very fast. The young lady I was talking about needs her sheets changed at night, and often replaced entirely, as well as someone to come in and take care of her during her bad periods. Her DLA paid for a carer to help her. Will PIP do the same? The answer should certainly be yes, but the points system is not set up for illnesses such as ulcerative colitis and Crohn’s disease. The Crohn’s and Colitis UK website contains a link to a PDF offering help and advice on the PIP for sufferers. The PDF is 70 pages long—that is how complex the system is and how much help people need to fill out the application. If that does not put off someone who is seriously ill, I do not know what would.
[Jim Shannon]

Is this what was intended by the Government’s welfare reform? Did they intend to make it so complex and intricate that many people will give up and live in sub-standard conditions, rather than get the help they need to live with their illness? We should be concerned about people retreating inwards, their lack of confidence and the problems they face.

Ms Dorries, you have given me a time limit. I just have two more paragraphs to get through very quickly. I wholeheartedly believe that the new system is failing people. I had a doctor on the phone to say that his patient’s decision was made without the assessor taking the time to request any information about the patient from the surgery. The doctor said, “Jim, if he doesn’t get this help he will have to go to a nursing home at 46 years of age.” The care packages that health trusts put in place are not sufficient to handle people who are not able to pay privately for the additional support they require. On their behalf, I again ask the Minister, most sincerely, kindly and humbly: please look at this benefit, remember why it was set up and understand that, for many, it is the difference between having support to live and simply being able to exist. Do not continue to push these ill people, many of whom suffer from mental health problems due to the stress and strain of long-term illness. In this House, MPs are called to protect and help the vulnerable, but that is not what this new ESA and PIP system does.

2.54 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, which seems almost a daily occurrence this week, Ms Dorries, given the Bill Committee I am also serving on. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley). This is an important debate and a topic that regularly comes up, particularly in this room, which shows the importance of Westminster Hall. We are fortunate that we have a Minister who is very engaged and proactive when it comes to listening—particularly when the system is not quite working as it is intended to—and when it comes to acting and working with experienced charities, policymakers and all sorts to bring us all together. What we all want, regardless of which side of the House we sit on, is a fair system that supports the most vulnerable in society. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who, during my time as a Minister, was really proactive and constructive on this issue. I had many good meetings with him to discuss specific issues and lessons we could learn from Northern Ireland, and to share best practice.

Two issues have been raised: PIP and ESA. I gently remind Scottish National party Members that Scotland could take responsibility, certainly for PIP. During my time as a Minister, I had a good relationship with my counterpart in the Scottish Parliament. He was aware that Scotland could take on that responsibility as and when it was ready.

Some 1.8 million people have already gone through the PIP process, which is considerably better than the old DLA system, and that is widely accepted by the vast majority of charities who represent people who have been through the system. Under DLA, only 16% of claimants got the highest rate of the benefit. Under PIP, it is 23.5%. It is far better at identifying hidden impairments and fluctuating health conditions. For example—this has been highlighted in the two previous speeches—under DLA, only 22% of those who had a mental health condition accessed the daily living component, yet under PIP, 66% did. For the higher rate of mobility, it was 9% under DLA; it is 24% under PIP.

The new system is far better and more streamlined. The assessors are there to help people to fill in the forms. The fundamental problem with DLA was that it was, in effect, self-diagnosis. People would fill in a very long, complicated form. A lot of people did themselves an injustice by not highlighting all the issues they faced, often because they took them for granted. For example, they might think, “I can’t sleep at night. That’s just the way it is”, but they did not then highlight that in their forms. The forms were complicated, so people would not necessarily know which were the right bits to put down.

Even worse, 70% of claimants on DLA had an indefinite award. It is very attractive for MPs to say, “We don’t want anybody ever to go through an assessment”, but the reality was that, under DLA, 70% did not. That sounds great, yet one in three claimants’ condition changes so significantly within 12 months that they should be on a different benefit. The vast majority of people who go through the system have a deteriorating condition, so if their condition has changed, it has probably changed for the worse and it is highly likely that they would therefore go from the lower rate to the higher rate of benefit.

That was the single difference that contributed to why, under DLA, only 16% of claimants got the highest rate, and 23.5% get it under PIP. There were people who, for 10 or 20 years or more, were on a benefit below that which they were entitled to. They were unaware that they could have had an opportunity to go up. It is right, therefore, that we assess people to ensure that they are given the correct benefit.

Now, common sense kicks in. If someone is on the highest rate of benefit, they have a deteriorating condition. Unless there is some miracle cure, they are likely only to be reassessed at the end of the 10-year period, and it would probably be very light touch. In effect, someone would phone and ask, “Has there been a miracle cure?” The answer would probably be no, and they might ask, “Can you provide the GP’s evidence that there has not been a miracle cure?” That’s fine. You will go through.” It is those who are on the cusp of going from the lower benefit to the higher benefit who will have another assessment. The system is programmed to say, “This person nearly meets the highest rate of benefit. We suspect they will need it in nine months’ time.” It will automatically trigger a reminder to people that there is a reassessment, so they are not left languishing. I urge hon. Members to be careful in trying to stop people having an opportunity for an assessment.

In cash terms, in 2010, DLA delivered £12.7 billion of benefit support. The combined DLA and PIP is now at £16.6 billion. When the scheme was first launched, the time until assessment was terrible. We had lots of debates here on that. I was not the Minister then, but I was warned when I first went into the role that we would have almost weekly debates. Some people were waiting up to a year for their assessment. That was unacceptable. For nearly 18 months now, it has been in a settled state, taking about seven weeks for an assessment and 13 weeks for
the whole process, end to end, which is well below the initial target of about 16 weeks. Again, charities and those with a huge amount of experience accept that the system is working well. The forms have been streamlined. They are still longer than we might like, but it is always a balancing act because, if we do not capture all the information, people could miss out on the benefit they need. I repeat that the assessors are there to help the claimant. The Government set the amount of money and the points that are required, but the assessors are there to ensure that the form is completed.

I have sat through assessments, and I have seen two different extremes. I saw the assessment of a practising nurse, and the assessment was super-quick. They used lots of very long words of which I had no understanding, and they were able to breeze through. At the other extreme, I saw an individual for whom English was not his first language. He had a mental health condition and was socially isolated. If he had self-diagnosed under DLA, he would not have qualified, but the assessor spent one hour and 10 minutes teasing out and piecing together the jigsaw to make sure that all the challenges he faced in his everyday life were accurately reflected. He would have ended up getting a higher benefit than he would have received under DLA.

I urge those who criticise the assessments to go and view one, which can be arranged. They will have their eyes opened, because too many people claim knowledge based on a film that is there to make money, rather than based on the real world. Frankly, that is an insult to the huge amount of hard work that these trained professionals do to help some of the most vulnerable people. The facts are there to compare DLA with PIP.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Rather than commenting on the film, which is a dramatic portrayal, will the hon. Gentleman comment on the “Dispatches” programme? That was not fictional; it was an actual portrayal of the assessment process that people go through.

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Mr Tomlinson, the same applies to you as applied to Mr Shannon.

Justin Tomlinson: I will not be long. I am glad that the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) intervened. I have a feeling that she will not let me intervene on her later, so I can link this in nicely. The “Dispatches” programme showed an isolated incident that was totally unacceptable. The individual was moved, and rightly so. That is why we have external inspectors. Remember that we are talking about 1.8 million people, and I urge her to take up my invitation to go and view an assessment. Hearsay is not the right way to hold Governments to account. This is so important that people in positions of responsibility need to invest some time in going to see what is actually happening.

Debbie Abrahams: That is patronising.

Justin Tomlinson: It is not patronising. This is an important subject.

There have been further improvements, including the removal of the 28-day rule for terminally ill people. That cross-party campaign has made a huge difference to those who are terminally ill, and it is a welcome measure. There is ongoing training, and I would like to see automatic recordings of all assessments, which would help the appeals process. That requires a change in the contract, which I understand is the intention.

It is also right that assessors now encourage people to bring somebody with them into the assessment, which is particularly helpful for people who are not necessarily articulate, for whom English is not their first language or who would not have the confidence to display all their challenges.

As the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East said, the ESA and PIP assessments are not a million miles apart. I have too often heard of cases where someone has done one assessment one month and the other assessment the next month. In respect of the Green Paper, many organisations will lobby for some serious data sharing.

In conclusion, because I have focused on PIP, I will briefly address ESA. The Green Paper is a wonderful opportunity, as the charity Scope said, because disabled people need “expert, tailored employment support”. We need to focus on what individuals can do, rather than on what they cannot do. It is important to provide tailored support, to recognise that people have fluctuating health conditions and to utilise the best parts of the universal credit system to allow for flexibility and common sense, particularly in relation to voluntary work that builds confidence to get people back into work. We need to provide ongoing support, through a specific named coach, when people go into work for the first time. I will continue to pitch, as a matter of importance, the small employer pilot, which was so successful that it should be rolled out across the rest of the country as quickly as possible. We need to unleash the opportunity for disabled apprentices. Everyone agrees it is a great thing, and we have signed it off. We now need to see it making a real difference, particularly for those with a learning disability.

3.4 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for securing this important debate. I will focus on some of the logistical issues around PIP that could be improved at local level, drawing on the experience of the excellent Merton centre for independent living in my constituency.

Merton CIL is a user-led disabled people’s organisation that delivers a range of services to disabled people across Merton. The practical experience and casework of its members has brought together a range of issues in relation to both ESA and PIP that demonstrates how disabled people are facing a significant and unfair disadvantage when accessing the benefits to which they are rightly entitled. Disabled people have been disproportionately hit by welfare reform, with the cumulative cuts to benefits and social care affecting them, on average, 19 times more than non-disabled people.

Merton CIL’s experience has shown that PIP assessment centres are amazingly inaccessible. Some of my constituents in Mitcham and Morden in south-west London have been asked to travel as far as Deptford and east London to get to their assessment centre, journeys of about two hours each way, which is unacceptable. It is difficult for many disabled people, many of whom pass their local centre on route to faraway destinations. Even the local centres in Wandsworth and Croydon are difficult to get
to, because many disabled people in south-west London lack transport links. Unbelievably, some centres have no disabled parking, and others are not accessible for wheelchair users. Most have cramped and unpleasant waiting areas. All that demonstrates a lack of consideration and thought into practicalities. It is imperative that all PIP assessment centres should have an audit of accessibility and should be fit for purpose for use by disabled attendees.

Research has also shown that the practice of overbooking appointments for assessment centres is commonplace and is based on the assumption that some people will not turn up, but the practice causes great distress and inconvenience to those who do. Shockingly, an assessor told Merton CIL that she had 20 assessments on her list per shift but that she expected to do only six in the time available.

Many of my constituents have had to wait hours to be seen, or have had their appointments suddenly cancelled less than an hour beforehand. Many disabled people need to wait a substantial length of time even to get an appointment, and then to be kept waiting for hours on end, or to have a last-minute cancellation, after weeks of preparation and after getting someone to provide transport and to attend the appointment is completely unacceptable.

Finally, and perhaps most worryingly, inaccurate assessments for both PIP and ESA are widespread, making the wrong decisions and causing a lot of pain to individuals who are entitled to those benefits. PIP works on a points system, and Merton CIL has witnessed many assessments in which people are assessed as having zero or very few points, with the result later being overturned in tribunal. For some of my constituents, their assessments were so far removed from their lived experience that they felt sure that their notes had been mixed up with someone else's.

Some of the disabled residents to whom I have spoken say that they have felt intimidated by aggressive assessors. Meanwhile, Merton CIL advocates who have attended appointments with residents have sometimes been prevented from asking questions or taking notes, in direct contravention of DWP guidelines. It is crucial that providers address that at local level by working with individual centres and staff.

There is a range of other ESA-related problems, such as the practice of arranging unnecessarily frequent repeat assessments, the unfair and sudden stopping of ESA payments and the difficulty of successfully contacting the DWP to correct issues. We all know of the terrible pain and hardship that come with the appeals process, after weeks of preparation and after getting someone to provide transport and to attend the appointment is completely unacceptable.

I hope the Minister will address some of the basic practical issues with the administrative process and with access to assessment centres in order to ensure that every centre is reasonably accessible by public transport and has disabled parking. People should expect to be seen when they receive an appointment.

I am sorry that I will be unable to be here for the Minister's speech, but I wish those practical issues to be addressed.
sceptical when they insist on pressing ahead with cuts to the ESA work-related activity group. The Government claim this will incentivise disabled people into work, despite the evidence to the contrary. The priority is the safe and secure transfer of social security powers to Scotland to ensure that everyone who relies on benefits will receive the right amount at the right time. Noble Lord should not fall through the gaps, and everyone should be treated with respect and dignity. That is the social security system I would like to see, but on current form I think it is unlikely that that is the system that will be seen in the 85% of the system still reserved here at Westminster.

3.15 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I wish to offer my thanks and congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) on securing this debate. I am delighted to participate, although I really wish it was not necessary. I intended my contribution to be brief, but I am afraid that my efforts to help the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) will make it a wee bit longer than I thought it would be.

I wish that the austerity agenda—a political choice—did not fall so heavily on the shoulders of those living with disabilities. I wish that the UK Government would put an end to the revolving-door culture of work capability assessments for those seeking to claim personal independence payments, although I think we all welcome the removal of the merry-go-round of reassessments for those with chronic conditions. I wish that those who find themselves grappling with a health condition or a disability that limits their ability to work—indeed, their ability to live as full a life as they would wish—did not feel as though they were being punished for it. I wish that those claiming personal independence payments, or seeking to claim this benefit, which is gradually replacing disability living allowance, were not confronted with such a flawed system that needs radical reform.

Justin Tomlinson: I am sure the hon. Lady will welcome the fact that an extra £3 billion is now being spent to support those on DLA and PIP compared with DLA alone in 2010, and the fact that 23.5% are on the highest rate compared with 16% on DLA. That is good news.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman would do well to remember the fact that, according to OBR figures, although more money is being spent, that is down to the fact that demand has increased, so we should treat those figures with a little more caution.

The fact that the system is flawed is demonstrated by the fact that 65% of appeal decisions found in favour of the claimants, which means that that 65% initially had their application turned down, causing untold stress and anxiety about how they would cope in future. The hon. Gentleman spoke of work capability assessments as an opportunity. Well, I am afraid that my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran did not see this process as an opportunity. Perhaps the constituents of North Swindon found it so, but certainly in my part of the world, that was not the case.

Justin Tomlinson: To be clear, I said PIP assessments were an opportunity; not the work capability assessments for ESA, which need to be reformed.

Patricia Gibson: Surrounded by such a wealth of opportunity, it is hard to keep up. Nothing in the system that my constituents experience is seen as an opportunity. It is seen as extremely negative, intimidating and humiliating. When the hon. Gentleman talked about the assessments, perhaps I misunderstood him, but if I have I certainly am not alone. One might think that these assessments always resulted in somebody’s entitlement or benefit being increased, but I can assure him that in my constituency that is almost never the case.

The hon. Gentleman, perhaps in the interests of trying to be helpful to the Chamber, talked about how we should go and see an assessment taking place. Perhaps this is just me—I have not done a survey or anything—but these assessments are not a spectator sport. We are talking about people’s lives. The people who go through them very often find them humiliating and damaging. If I were to go through one of those assessments, the last thing I would want is an audience. Perhaps I might want a member of my family, or a close friend, but I certainly would not want my MP, who would in effect be a stranger, although their name might be well known to me. I certainly would not want the occasion to become a spectator sport. We must be careful about MPs filling the galleries when people are having their lives exposed and deconstructed by strangers.

This is a debate about social justice. Employment and support allowance is a form of financial support for people with life-limiting conditions whose ability to live a fully satisfying life, something we would all hope for, is effectively removed. That should be remembered during debates such as this one—and during the assessments. The hon. Member for North Swindon has informed the Chamber that the assessors are there to help, and I am sure that they think so too, but claimants feel stressed. They are confronted by assessors who are, by definition, strangers and who have little or no knowledge of their condition. We have all heard stories: for those who have not heard them, Parkinson’s UK can keep them going
all day. There are stories, for example, of people with Parkinson’s being asked by the work capability assessor, “How long are you likely to have Parkinson’s for?”

We know that the criteria for work capability assessment are flawed and that people whose conditions fluctuate are always at risk of what might, strangely—as it is all relative—be called a good day. Such things are not taken into account by the work capability assessment, and nor is the impact of pain and fatigue, or the degenerative nature of conditions such as Parkinson’s. As a result, too many employment and support allowance applicants are placed in the work-related activity group, instead of the much more appropriate support group, which recognises that the claimant is simply not well enough to work. I reassure the hon. Member for North Swindon that I know that the Government have reversed the need for repeated work capability assessments for the chronically ill—that is welcome, but it simply does not go far enough. It is a matter of great concern to all fair-minded people that from April 2017 people placed in the employment support allowance—I could mention a range of conditions associated with a degenerative nature of conditions such as Parkinson’s—will receive £30 a week less than someone in the same situation today. That makes the failure of the system more alarming.

Flawed criteria are a particular difficulty for people with conditions such as Parkinson’s in receipt of disability living allowance—I could mention a range of conditions but time forbids it—when they are being assessed for PIP. Under DLA, if a person could walk no more than 50 metres they would be eligible for support. For PIP, that distance has arbitrarily—randomly, it seems—been reduced to 20 metres. That is such a short distance that it is not a useful or helpful estimate of a person’s mobility. Given the fluctuating nature of some conditions and the failure of the process to register such fluctuations, many people are losing their Motability vehicles, on which they rely heavily.

The hon. Member for North Swindon will be interested to know that recent investigations found that under DLA 82% of people with Parkinson’s received the full mobility payment, whereas under PIP that has dropped to 40%. That is a massive drop, and those people lose their vehicles within 28 days of an assessment decision being made against them. I do not see how anyone can come to this Chamber and say that that is acceptable. Those people are being isolated in their own homes and effectively punished for their illness. Their dependence on family members increases.

**Nadine Dorries (in the Chair):** Order. Will the hon. Lady apply the restriction of nine minutes to her speech?

**Patricia Gibson:** Yes, Ms Dorries.

**Justin Tomlinson:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Patricia Gibson:** I am being pressed by the Chair to conclude my remarks.

Everyone welcomes the Green Paper. What we do not welcome is the headlong rush to cuts before there can be proper analysis, which could be used to correct the system. We need an evidence-based and compassionate approach. Frankly, I do not see that. We should all want the same thing: we should all want to support people with disabilities into work, and to support those who cannot work. We need to make sure that we do that properly, and I urge the Minister to reflect on that and on all the suggestions made today.

**Natalie McGarry** (Glasgow East) (Ind) **rose—**

**Nadine Dorries:** Thank you, Ms Dorries; that was an oversight, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I thank the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for securing the debate. She made an excellent speech, in which she articulated her constituency case well. She opened the debate in good style, with a lot of information.

Two weeks ago, there were two lengthy debates in the House of Commons on the Government’s punitive welfare reforms—specifically cuts to the ESA work-related activity group; 127 MPs laid down a marker and said that the Government must pause, reflect and reconsider the cuts. The Government did not oppose the motion, and some would be forgiven for thinking that it was a sign that they were listening to our concerns. It feels as if we have debates such as this one week in, week out; but if we have to keep bringing the matter back to the Chamber we will. The time for conciliatory debate that does not powerfully challenge the Government is over. It is right for constituents and Members to be angry, especially when there is no evidence that cutting ESA WRAG incentivises people into work.

The people of Glasgow East—like people across Scotland and throughout the UK—listened to the Prime Minister speaking on the steps of Downing Street when she promissed to fight injustice and lead a Government for the many, not the few. However, by the time the Chancellor stepped away from the Dispatch Box on Wednesday, the benefit of the doubt had evaporated. Sometimes what a person does not say is more telling—or more damning—than what they do say. The Chancellor of the Exchequer spoke at length—6,092 words—but failed to mention ESA once. He could even find the time and words to ask whether the shadow Chancellor could dance, but no words could be found for disabled people or ESA.

Since the Government announcement of punishing cuts, MPs of all colours and stripes have railed against them. The matter is so important that it keeps being brought back to the Chamber, and the Minister is constantly called back to answer. I appreciate that the Minister of State is present to do that today. The case seems to be devoid of logic and compassion. Reducing ESA to the rate of jobseeker’s allowance is wrong for a number of reasons. People on ESA are already assessed as unfit for work, whereas people on jobseeker’s can actively seek work. It is therefore unsurprising that ESA recipients should need more support, for longer, than JSA recipients. Indeed, more than half of ESA WRAG recipients are on welfare support for more than two years. Such long time periods are linked to higher associated costs of illness and disability.
It is extraordinarily perverse and callous to expect those with illness and disability to suffer on £73 a week for a prolonged period of two years. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made that point forcefully: why would someone with a job at £500 a week want to go down to £73 a week, if they could help it? I cannot, and I never will, understand how any elected representative or Government could support proposals that serve no purpose other than picking the pockets of the sick and disabled, and putting them through the trauma of a broken and unfair PIP or ESA assessment. Where is the humanity in that? Like other hon. Members, I look forward to seeing the Green Paper; but before then it is time for the Government to rethink the assessments, and to pause the cuts to ESA WRAG.

3.28 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate, Ms Dorries. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for securing the debate and for the way she set out the case, highlighting how pressing the issue is, as our postbags show. She raised a case of great concern—the experiences of her constituent Donna. The assessment notes that my hon. Friend read out struck me as closely mirroring a constituency case that I am now dealing with. A gentleman, who had been in work, suffered mental health problems and as a result of them fell out of work. He was assessed for social security support and failed. Some of the notes from the assessment that my hon. Friend quoted were very similar to his. Sadly, my constituent committed suicide. The harrowing cases that we have heard today are very concerning.

I also note the contributions from other Members today. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly asked why on earth someone who had previously had £500 a week would choose to receive £73 a week. That is not a choice that anyone would make. He also highlighted the apparent dichotomy that is at play: the Government are telling his constituent that they are not able to employ him, while expecting employers to employ people who are in a similar position. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that.

I listened carefully, as I always do, to the contribution of the former Minister, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson). He gave a stout defence of the Government and of his own record in government. As always, I want to be as constructive and as consensual as possible, but I must remind him that the accounts that we have heard today and in previous debates are personal testimonies from constituents, not just hearsay. I do not know whether that was a slip of the tongue from the former Minister, but the experiences of the constituents that were highlighted today are not just hearsay.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) rightly highlighted the disproportionate impact that welfare cuts are having on those with disabilities. They are affected many times more than those without disabilities. That appears to fly in the face of the commitment from the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, to protect those with disabilities in the social security system.

I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) to her place as the Scottish National party’s new disability spokesperson. She highlighted another very troubling constituency case: I hope the Minister has taken heed of it and will commit to looking into it.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) is absolutely right that this debate is centrally about social justice. She also rightly highlighted the indignity felt by our constituents when they go through these processes. If the Government are to get this right, they need to look at how people feel they are being treated. Whether the Government agree or not is irrelevant; what is important is what the people who experience the system feel, which is clearly different from what the Government feel.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) rightly said that, when it comes to ESA WRAG, we are not going away. I will focus on ESA WRAG for the majority of my speech, because this is a further opportunity to quiz the Minister on her plans. On 17 November, a motion on ESA that I moved in a Backbench Business Committee debate with the support of eight other parties was carried by Parliament. In that debate, the Minister took an intervention from the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), who supported the motion. He pressed her on potential financial mechanisms that would “fully compensate for the loss of the WRAG payments for new claimants”.

The Minister replied:

“Yes. Let me give my hon. Friend that reassurance.”

Perhaps my interpretation of “fully compensated” is different from the Minister’s, but I understood from what she said that new ESA WRAG claimants would be getting equivalent financial support through the mechanisms outlined by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate: “the hardship fund, the flexible support fund and the third-party deals”.

I tested that in a written question but I did not get a clear reply, so I hope that today the Minister will take the opportunity to say what she understands “fully compensated” to mean.

The Chancellor appeared in the autumn statement to undermine the Minister’s apparent pledge. The Chancellor said in response to the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), that the savings of £330 million from the ESA WRAG cut would now be invested in a package of support, as opposed to direct financial help. Presumably, he meant the Green Paper package, which is currently being consulted on and which was previously budgeted as £60 million next year. That is as clear as mud to me and to the many others who are looking on and trying to understand what the Government are going to do, how much they will commit and the mechanism by which that will be implemented.

The only thing that the Government have been clear about is that they want to cut ESA WRAG. They have not said what is coming in to replace it. They have really put the cart before the horse. I understand that fresh Ministers are perhaps flogging that horse to catch up, but the plans for halving the disability employment gap appear to be falling away; we do not know whether that is still a commitment. The cuts to ESA WRAG and the system to replace the Work programme should have been consulted on first.

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The point has been made across this Chamber today and it has repeatedly been made across the House in previous debates: the Government have it the wrong way round. It is like announcing that they are going to scrap the TV licence in April, but only now going through the process of deciding how it should be replaced, with no guarantee to the BBC of how much financial support it would receive. In fact, this will probably receive a third of the public funds, but get practical support in order to generate better outcomes. That just does not wash. It may be a policy that appeals some people, but it is clearly not the way to treat anyone. It has no evidence of being any fairer or delivering better outcomes, because we have no idea how the system is going to work.

I must critique what appears to be the Government’s main motive, which is that for someone to get an extra £29 per week on top of jobseeker’s allowance is a disincentive to work. Here is what my constituent Janice had to say when she got in touch with me this week:

“Being unemployed and reliant on benefits is demeaning and depressing. Employers need to focus on what people CAN do rather than on what they can’t. There are ways to work around: many can work from home with flexible hours and would jump at that opportunity.”

Does Janice strike the Minister as someone who chooses or wants to be out of work? Of course not. She is like hundreds of thousands of sick and disabled people up and down the land who desperately want to work. Cutting the money they could receive will not change their minds or incentivise them any more than what already motivates them: dignity, self-worth and getting a job that they can sustain. Cutting away that vital support will add an layer of stress and worry and, with additional work search costs, will hinder their ability to find the work that they so desperately crave. The MS Society points to research published last year by Scope’s extra costs commission, which says that living with neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis can cost people an extra £200 a week.

I plead and hope that the Minister will say what she and the Government plan to do to help people by providing additional employment support and financial support. She must realise and accept that people who are in ESA WRAG are in that category because they are currently unfit for work; they have an illness or a disability that means that they cannot currently work. ESA WRAG is often their only income and yet, from April, people on ESA WRAG who are sick or disabled will somehow be expected to sustain themselves on the same rate as jobseeker’s allowance. The Government must think again.

3.38 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is lovely to serve under your chairmanship again, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) on securing an excellent debate. It has been really constructive and has brought to light more cases to show the Minister and the former Minister, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), how people experience the cuts. How sick or disabled people go through the process and the indignity they too often face. I wish Donna all the very best and I hope she continues to recover. It is the personal stories that bring this issue to life.

I thank all hon. Members who have contributed so well today—I should have started by saying happy St Andrew’s day. It is so important to understand what people are going through and to put a human face to it. The former Minister said, “Go and observe one of these assessments.” He is right that we should all try to do that, but I am sure he is aware of observational bias. We should not take our own observations as the only form of evidence. Up and down the country, we are hearing and seeing examples of what sick and disabled people are going through every day.

This is the first opportunity that I have had to discuss this issue with the Minister, and I want to focus on what the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) also focused on. We will not go away and this issue will not go away. We will continue to campaign on it, because it is a real injustice: £1,500 a year from the most vulnerable people, the poorest of the poor, some five million people—I will not continually repeat the statistics that we repeated in the two debates just two weeks ago.

What is so disappointing is that all the evidence—from the UN committees investigating human rights concerns and breaches of the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, from our own Equality and Human Rights Commission, from the Government’s Social Security Advisory Committee, from a whole list of well-respected charities, such as Parkinson’s UK, Scope and so on, and even from the Government’s own Back Benches—is being completely ignored. We heard about the Backbench Business Committee debate, when the motion was carried without contest, which is almost unprecedented.

The strength of feeling in this House has been expressed, yet what was so absent in the autumn statement was anything that sick or disabled people could grasp for how their lives would be made better. Their lives have been made a misery over the last six years and it will get worse. I know that the Minister is new in her post and she has said some very positive things. We have also heard very warm words from the Prime Minister, but when it comes to doing anything, the Government have put their hands in their pockets and turned away. We cannot have that. It needs to change.

The Government have put forward arguments about incentivising claimants and argued that cuts will incentivise people into work, which is quite disgraceful, really. It implies that people are making a choice. As we have heard, people are not making a choice to live on £70-odd a week when they have had a decent living before. They do not choose to do that. As the fifth richest country in the world, we have an obligation to treat people with dignity and respect. It is about choices.

I want to pick up on the point that other Members have made about what other discretionary funds people might be able to draw on. I was going through the Minister’s earlier speech last night, and the flexible support fund was mentioned. We need to understand some things about that fund. First of all, it was investigated recently for fraud. The former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), tried to claim that it was being supplemented by £15 million a year to cover the costs. That is not the case; it is actually £15 million from 2015 alone. That fund does not go anywhere near to matching the loss that people will experience and the in-year deductions that will be made as a result of these cuts.
Penny Mordaunt: If the shadow Minister will forgive me, I will make some progress.

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Minister give way?

Penny Mordaunt: If the shadow Minister will forgive me, I will make some progress.
We are rolling out that trial. The past presence test will no longer apply to claims for DLA, PIP, attendance allowance and carer’s allowance with regard to refugees, people with humanitarian protection status and their families. We are extending hardship payments. The ESA appeals process has been reformed, with mandatory reconsideration clearance times down from 35 days to nine. The number of weeks and the percentage of case load having to go to appeal to get the right decision are both reducing. Huge strides have been made in identifying hidden impairments, including through training of staff.

The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East spoke at length about the factors of appearance. Many people might look perfectly together and presentable but have deeply hidden issues. We have done a huge amount in training staff to recognise that, and more is planned. The Secretary of State has announced his focus on the use of sanctions with those with mental health conditions, and the Green Paper gives us the possibility of major reform to different parts of the system in unison. In that consultation, we want to examine how we might simplify and improve the assessment process and how we can use information better to effectively support people, such as sharing data—with claimant consent—with support organisations and other state services. The reform of the work capability assessment—which we have not been able to do to date because it requires primary legislation—is a focus of the Green Paper. We could separate out decisions on entitlement to employment support and entitlement to financial support.

**Penny Mordaunt:** Will the Minister give way?

**Neil Gray:** Will the Minister give way?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I will just make a little progress, because I have some announcements to make.

The Green Paper also looks at statutory sick pay and other issues that would have benefited people such as Donna—if I have understood her situation—by enabling a phased return to work, which is obviously what people need. Rather than having someone continually jump through hoops, we want that support to be wrapped around the individual, whatever situation they have been landed in. Not only does that support need to be exactly what they need, when they need it and personalised—whether it is delivered by a jobcentre, a GP practice nurse or another—but their experience of the whole system has to be what they need, when they need it. Having to wait for an assessment to be carried out before someone can have a conversation about their situation and hopes is not smart. We need a joined-up, common-sense approach in all we do. We should not just start thinking about what assistive technology or equipment someone might need when they hit the employment market. We need to think about that when they are at school or college and receiving careers advice.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Forgive me, but I will make some progress.

That kind of quality support can be reached only through stellar local working. That is why the Green Paper consultation is more than an information-gathering exercise; it is a call to arms. We have to build new commitments and shared outcomes locally. I urge all Members to help us in the consultation process and to come along to the drop-in event in the House on Monday between 3 o’clock and 5 o’clock. It will offer information specific to Members’ constituencies, guidance on how to run an event or get involved in one, as well as bringing partners together to respond to the consultation and thinking about what needs to be done in the local area. During the consultation process, we will continue to develop those networks, facilitated by the flexible support fund, and also busting some of the myths about what local services we will commission to support those on benefits.

I briefly turn to Motability, which the hon. Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) particularly focused on. Members will know that a scheme has been set out—I am very grateful to Motability for doing that—to try to help with the transition from DLA to PIP. It is a challenging time for individuals. That scheme is the £175 million package that Members will be familiar with, which enables individuals to keep their car for seven weeks, allows them to buy back their old vehicle and offers a one-off payment of £2,900 to help meet their continuing Motability needs. Motability is also helping to pay for new adaptions to non-scheme cars, with insurance thrown in. We are aware of how difficult it is—despite that mitigation and the other sources of transport subsidy that might be available—for an individual to be told that they will lose their vehicle with only a few weeks to make alternative arrangements.

There are other problems too. I want to outline one that is of particular concern to me. It relates to people leaving the country for extended periods longer than 13 weeks. That is a problem for students, but it is also a problem for someone who might want to take up a career opportunity, a sabbatical or other opportunities that require travel. Our systems must be able to support someone following their dreams and ambitions. They must enable a person to thrive, so this situation should not be left to stand. We have been discussing with relevant Departments ways to enable PIP claimants to keep their vehicle pending appeal, and we are exploring options to allow those who are not in receipt of the higher Motability component to have access to the Motability scheme. I am also exploring how claimants who are out of the country for extended periods can be better supported. We have a plan and the Treasury’s blessing. This week I have written to Motability to ask for its help in delivering that plan. I anticipate that the plan will require some changes to its processes, but I know that it will do all it can to help us in this matter, as it has in the past. We have a remarkable and unique partnership with Motability, and I hope in my tenure to maximise that.

I have spoken at length about the work-related activity group. Time is short but, briefly, we are looking at a range of measures to help to ensure that someone’s experience of these systems—that is fundamentally the heart of what Members have been discussing today—can be improved and that we are aware of all the issues. That includes looking at developing service user panels to create a real-time reporting mechanism on people’s experiences. We can use those panels to design our benefits systems. There are a raft of other measures that I do not have time to outline today, but they will help us to do that. I will bring forward measures shortly.
The final thing I will do before I hand over to the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East is reassure her that I will be there to assist when devolution transitions further powers to Holyrood. I am already talking to her colleagues there about how we can get the best outcomes for the issues she mentioned. Again, this comes down to all Members of this House—whichever part of the country we represent and whatever our political hue—working together to get the best outcomes in the systems. I hope that all Members will come to the drop-in session next Monday.

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Six seconds.

Angela Crawley: I thank you for that, Mrs Dorries. I thank all hon. and right hon. Members—

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Road Safety: Sentencing Review

[MR ADRIAN BAILEY IN THE CHAIR]

4 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered road safety and the Government’s proposed sentencing review.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. In January 2014, I stood before the House of Commons and called on the Government to review the sentencing guidelines for maximum penalties for driving offences that lead to death or serious injury. I urged the Government then to make changes to the rules and guidelines set out by law that mean that drivers who end the lives of innocent people on our roads sometimes have their sentences reduced to mere months.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): In Bradford, our local “Stop the Danger Drivers” campaign calls for tougher action to tackle these criminal drivers. Does my hon. Friend agree that tougher action is needed to tackle dangerous driving, which blights so many of our local communities?

Susan Elan Jones: I agree with my hon. Friend 100%.

Right across the country there are people concerned about this issue.

4.2 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.15 pm

On resuming—

Susan Elan Jones: It is again a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

In January 2014, I raised the issue of the need for a sentencing review for maximum penalties for driving offences that lead to death or serious injury. Many Members of Parliament stood with me and explained why the issue mattered to their constituents and why the review is so desperately needed.

Let me begin by talking about why this issue matters so much to me and my constituency. In the village of Overton in my constituency, a nine-year-old boy was tragically killed in 2009 while crossing the road. The driver who so carelessly mowed young Robert down was unlicensed and uninsured. He hit Robert, took his life and then drove away. He did not stop to help and did not report the accident. He resprayed his car to hide the evidence, attempting to cover up his crime. The driver who took Robert’s life incurred a pitiful sentence of 22 months, yet that was the very limit of what was possible under the law for that offence. That man hit a young boy and took his life, and after driving away and leaving that child to die he was sentenced to a grand total of 22 months and a four-year driving ban.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): My constituent, Sean Morley, was similarly knocked over and left to die by a driver who left the scene. Does the hon. Lady agree that the sentence needs to reflect the severity of the crime? Currently, it is prosecuted under hit and run, so people get the same sentence that they would have got if they had knocked off a wing mirror.
Susan Elan Jones: I agree totally. That shows that this is a cross-party issue that affects communities across the country.

That driver served only 10 months in jail. Clearly, that cannot be right. Almost two years ago, I asked the Government to reconsider the arrangements for sentencing. Currently, those who cause death by driving in the way I have described face a number of charges and a wide scale of sentences, ranging from mere months to 14 years, but the reality is that sentencing guidelines mean that there must be a large and, frankly, improbable series of aggravating factors for a judge to issue anywhere near the maximum sentence. Tougher penalties are not being used, because judges are being held back by guidelines that prevent them from handing out longer sentences. I know from the many families I have spoken to that there are instances when tougher penalties were very much needed.

In 2004, the Labour party was right to fight for higher maximum penalties. The Government, encouraged by the tireless campaigning of many Members from all parties, were equally right to incorporate new rules on drug taking while driving into the Crime and Courts Act 2013 and to amend the Road Traffic Act 1988. We know that there is a tremendous amount of cross-party support on the issue in this House. Both of those Governments can be rightly proud of having introduced changes that go in the right direction, but there is much further to go.

I have spoken about Robert Gaunt from Overton in this House previously, and I wish I could say that that case is tragic but unique, but it is not. Innocent people have been killed by drivers who have been given low sentences across our country, and it has continued since I raised this issue in 2014.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing this important subject to this Chamber. I just wish we had longer than half an hour to talk about it. My constituent, Joseph Brown-Lartey, was, sadly, killed by a dangerous driver. I have talked about him before and I am working on the Justice for Joseph campaign. I want to make the point that, as my hon. Friend said, she and indeed all of us present have been working on the issue for many years, but we do not seem to be getting anywhere with the Government. I hope that this debate will push it forward.

Susan Elan Jones: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. Again, that highlights the point about diversity—she represents an urban constituency, mine is predominantly rural. These issues occur absolutely everywhere.

The average sentence served by a driver who kills or seriously injures another human being while driving is, believe it or not, only 11 months. Families are losing loved ones because of reckless, dangerous and negligent driving, and the law is not doing enough to hold those responsible to account. Innocent families are being let down by the system and the punishments given simply do not fit the crimes committed.

Let me explain the situation. If a driver is caught driving with “a deliberate decision to ignore (or a flagrant disregard for) the rules of the road”, the starting point for judges when sentencing is eight years. That can be longer for a number of reasons, such as when a person is killed or when the driver is driving a stolen vehicle. Let us reflect for a moment on how subjective that is—“a deliberate decision” about, or “a flagrant disregard for” the rules of the road. If a driver is seen to be creating significant danger—the lowest level of seriousness—the starting point for a sentencing judge is three years and the maximum term is five years. If a driver is injured, the sentence is shortened. If the victim was a friend, again the sentence is shortened; and on and on we go.

As I said in 2014, it is absolutely right that our criminal justice system differentiates those who make a mistake, commit a crime and acknowledge it, and those who flee, hide and pervert the course of justice, as in the case involving Robert Gaunt in Overton. I wholeheartedly support the provision of a range of different sentences for driving offences—indeed, our country’s justice system is built on that—and I am calling for a logical development of the existing system and more consideration of the sentences given.

As a result of the rules and guidelines set out by the law, drivers who end the lives of innocent people on our roads have their sentences reduced again and again until, bit by bit, they decline to mere months. Drivers who plead guilty before their trials have their sentences automatically reduced by a third, and most will be released on licence after serving only half their given sentences. For the families of those who are killed, that is clearly not justice—nor is that justice for the rest of society.

After the injustice of cases such as that of Robert Gaunt and many others like it nationwide, people from my constituency launched a petition calling for sentences for this sort of crime to be increased. More than 1,300 names were added online and a further 2,000 collected on paper. The campaign continued, even though a change of Government meant an early closure of the online petition. Many of those who signed had probably never signed a petition before, and perhaps have not since, but they did so on that occasion out of a passion for justice for Robert and for other victims of road accidents throughout our country.

Almost two years ago, as I said, I asked the Government to look at the maximum penalties for driving offences that lead to death and serious injury. I asked for the same thing that the family of Robert James Gaunt was calling for back in 2009—but we are still waiting today.

In response to a recent parliamentary written question on this issue, the Government stated: “It is our intention to commence a consultation before the end of the year which will look at driving offences and penalties.” I welcome that, and I am pleased that the Government are still willing and open to do something. However, almost two years ago, that consultation was made to me when I brought the issue to the House of Commons. I and other Members of Parliament who were passionate in support of a sentencing review were told that one would take place and that justice would be offered to those who had lost loved ones so tragically.

If we change the law and the sentencing guidelines are reformed properly, that will bring some measure of justice. I hope that that would give people who are uninsured or unlicensed grounds to pause before they
get behind the wheel of a vehicle. So let me be absolutely clear why I am here today; we urged the Government to act; the Government promised to hold a review; and the review has not taken place. It is taking far too long.

Since 2009, my constituents have been calling for changes, and many others across the country and across party have been making the same plea. At a recent meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for transport safety, I had the opportunity to ask the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who has responsibility for road safety, why that has taken such a long time. He admitted that there had been considerable delay. In response to a recent question in the House of Lords by Lord Berkeley on this issue, the Government responded that the criticism that they had taken too long was “fair”.

The Government keep telling the House their intentions. I am pleased that they intend to conduct a review. I am pleased that their intention is to take this matter as seriously as everyone in this Chamber does, but it has been almost two years since I was promised in the House of Commons in 2014 that a review would take place. On that occasion, the Government told me that a sentencing review would start, but for all the promises we have been given, I have yet to see anything actually happening. Intentions are grand and fine things, and they are to be welcomed, but they are not much use if we do not get a real review and if sentencing guidelines are not reformed. It is now time to see real results.

I have been urging the Government to look at the issues since 2011. I will continue to raise them again and again until action is taken, and many, many colleagues in this House feel similarly. It is time for the Government to give us the review that Members of Parliament are calling for. It is time for the Government to deliver on the promises they made to me almost two years ago. Most important, it is time for us to give families the opportunity to receive the justice that they have waited so long for. It is time for a review, and I and many others will keep asking for it until it arrives. This is not about politics; it is about justice. It is time for us to move on with the issue. I have left the Minister a considerable amount of time in which to respond and, I hope, to make some commitment on a timeline for when justice can be expected.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I understand that Mr Jake Berry wants to contribute. To be clear, the revised time for the conclusion of the debate is 4.43 pm. We want to hear the Minister’s reply, so brevity would be much appreciated, but before I call Mr Berry, may I confirm for the record that you, Susan Elan Jones and the Minister, are quite happy for me to do so?

Susan Elan Jones indicated assent.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah) indicated assent.

4.28 pm

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Thank you, Mr Bailey, for calling me. I congratulate the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) on an exceptionally good, thoughtful and thought-provoking speech. I want to add to it only briefly—I, too, want to give the Minister as much time as possible to respond. I want to draw attention to an issue that I raised in Prime Minister’s Question Time on 25 November 2015. On 3 August 2015, an intoxicated John Morton offered Amy Baxter, aged 27, and Hayley Jones, aged 32, a lift home in his car. He crashed that car. The injuries that Amy Baxter suffered are so severe that she did not see her children for seven months, because of her head injuries. Even after that, it was too distressing for those children to see her. She is paralysed from the neck down. Her injuries have been life-changing. The issue is not just about death; it is also about serious injuries caused by dangerous driving.

Unbelievably, when Mr Morton pleaded guilty in March 2015, he was simply sentenced to a three-year driving ban, a fine and a 20-week overnight curfew. That is an appalling thing for the family to deal with. They feel that he really has had no punishment whatever for causing life-changing injuries to one of their family members.

But it gets worse than that. Three weeks after Mr Morton was given his overnight curfew, he went to Bolton magistrates court to have his tag removed to enable him to go to a stag party in Portugal. When the family came to see me, they said they felt like that was another sentence with which the magistrate had slapped them in the face. That is absolutely disgusting behaviour by our courts. I do not for one moment blame the magistrates, because I do not believe that they have the sentencing guidelines or flexibility to attach real punishment to people such as Mr Morton.

I wanted to contribute to the debate to say that I certainly have not forgotten Amy Baxter’s tragic injuries and the fantastic campaign that her mother, my constituent Pauline Baxter, has run. Following my question at Prime Minister’s questions to the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, I went to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who was at the time Secretary of State for Justice, and he told me, as he told the hon. Member for Clwyd South, that something would happen and there would be a review of sentencing. Amy Baxter’s is just one more appalling case, and I say from the Government side, reflecting cross-party support for the hon. Lady’s call: “For goodness’ sake, let’s get on with it.” We have had promise after promise. How many poor mothers like Amy Baxter have to see the drink-driver who caused them life-changing injuries not punished properly before the Government will take action? I hope that the Minister will respond with something concrete, because there is frustration on both sides of the House about the intolerable delay in the Government’s review of these sentences.

4.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): May I say how wonderful it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey? I thank the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) for securing this debate on road safety and the review of driving offences and penalties, and all hon. Members for their contributions. She first highlighted the tragic death of her constituent, Robert Gaunt, as far back as 2008. Young Robert’s death, which could have been avoided, must have been devastating for his family and friends, as she rightly and understandably outlined.

...
Many of us have had road deaths in our constituencies that need not have happened. It will be no comfort to victims and their families, but we should not lose sight of the fact that despite the significant increase in road users, our roads are getting safer and road deaths are at their lowest ever. In the time allotted to me, I will look at some of the issues that the hon. Lady raised.

On sentences and sentencing guidelines, once offenders are charged and convicted, their sentencing is a matter for the independent courts, which decide on sentences having considered the full details of the case and the offender. The courts are best placed to decide on just and proportionate sentences. My hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) also referred to the sentencing guidelines in his passionate speech. Those guidelines are produced by the independent Sentencing Council, and the courts are required to follow them in deciding on a sentence, but it is worth stressing that a judge may depart from them if it is in the interests of justice to do so. The council plans to review those guidelines in due course. One good thing about them is that they lead to greater transparency about the sentences that are imposed and ensure that there is some consistency. A review of the guidelines for motoring offences involving death is on the Sentencing Council’s work plan, as I have alluded to. That review was postponed following the Government’s own review, which I will talk about. New draft guidelines will be subject to a full public consultation shortly.

Both hon. Members raised the question of maximum penalties. It is worth stressing that although sentencing is a matter for the courts, we all know that Parliament sets the legal framework within which the courts operate. Maximum penalties are set by Parliament to cover the most serious imaginable behaviours for specific offences, which is why the maximum penalty is rarely imposed. When deciding what sentence to impose, the courts are required to take account of all the circumstances of the offence and the offender, and any mitigating or aggravating factors. Some people have suggested that the courts should impose the maximum penalty in every road traffic case that results in death. However, imposing the maximum penalty for any death in any circumstance for any offence would be contrary to our system of justice. Making all sentences the same would remove the courts’ ability to single out and highlight the most serious cases and offences.

The issue of release was raised, and it was suggested that those who plead guilty can get up to a third off their sentences at the judge’s discretion. In fact, under statute, all offenders serving determinate sentences are released automatically at the halfway point; that is not the case just for driving offences.

Despite what was said, the Government have taken some action, although we want to ensure that the courts are able to respond appropriately to the full range of cases that they are likely to face. Changes have recently been made to the law. In the past, where offenders caused very serious injuries, the offence with which they were charged related solely to their driving, not the harm they caused to the victim. The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 created a new offence of causing serious injury by dangerous driving, with a five-year maximum penalty. In addition, in the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015, the Government increased the maximum penalty for causing death or serious injury when driving while disqualified. The previous maximum was only two years; that has now been increased to 10 years. That came into force in April last year. Those changes mean that there is now a range of offences dealing with dangerous driving that have appropriate maximum penalties and more properly reflect the harm caused.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of failure to stop in the event of a so-called hit-and-run. Failure to stop is a summary-only offence with a six-month maximum penalty, because it is designed to deal only with drivers who fail to stop and report an incident. Where there is evidence that the driver caused death or serious injury, or the driver was found to have been driving carelessly or dangerously, separate charges apply. Where the driver seeks to evade detection, they may be charged with perverting the course of justice, which has a maximum penalty of a life sentence.

I touched on reduction of sentences as the result of a guilty plea, and I want to expand on that slightly. The sentencing guidelines provide a sliding scale of reductions, depending on the point at which the plea is made. The maximum reduction is a third, for a plea at the first reasonable opportunity; the recommended reduction falls to 10% when the offender pleads guilty on the day of the trial. Where the case against the offender is overwhelming, the guidelines provide for discretion on the part of the judge to give a lower reduction.

Susan Elan Jones: I am rather perplexed. The Minister is not providing total support for the existing guidelines. We are all very much under the impression that the Government want the sentencing guidelines to be reviewed. Can we have absolute clarity that they will be reviewed, and may we have a timescale for that?

Mr Gyimah: If the hon. Lady will bear with me, I am trying to deal with the points she raised and how the law stands. I will then come on to what further action the Government will take.

On murder and manslaughter—an issue that has been touched on—I understand why in many cases causing death by driving is thought to be equivalent to attacking someone with a weapon. Under the current law, the Crown Prosecution Service can and will charge a person with manslaughter when the evidence supports that charge, it is the public interest to do so and there is a reasonable prospect of a conviction. Successful prosecutions have secured manslaughter convictions in driving cases.

Careless and dangerous driving has come up in such debates and there have been suggestions that the distinction between careless and dangerous driving should be abolished and replaced with one offence of bad driving. What amounts to dangerous driving is determined not by considering the driver’s state of mind or intentions, which in the context of driving is often difficult to ascertain, but by examining the nature of the driving.

The law sets out an objective test designed to compare the driving of the defendant in the specific circumstances of the case against what would be expected of a notionally careful and competent driver. In general terms, if the court considers that the driving falls far below that standard and it would be obvious to a competent and...
careful driver that the manner of driving was dangerous, it will find that to have been dangerous driving. Our law needs to reflect that while the harm caused in homicide cases and fatal driving offences is the same because someone has died, the culpability of the offender for the death may be significantly different.

Of course hon. Members want to know what happens next in the Government’s review. There can be nothing more tragic than the loss of a child, or any life, especially when that loss was avoidable. I know that there are concerns about sentencing for some driving offences and about the maximum powers available to the courts, as we have heard in the debate. It is important that those serious offences are considered in relation not just to the range of driving offences but to the full range of criminal offences to maintain proportionality within sentencing.

As I acknowledged in a debate only two months ago in this place, for too long those concerns have not been acted on. At that time, I reaffirmed the Government’s commitment to consult on the offences and penalties for driving offences resulting in death and serious injury and I do so again today. It is very much the Government’s intention that the consultation will be delivered, as promised in the previous debate, before the end of the year. I intend to honour that commitment.

4.42 pm

Susan Elan Jones: I hope that the review comes soon, because people have been waiting for it for a very long time.

Question put and agreed to.

4.43 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Before I call Stuart Andrew to move the motion for the next debate on homophobia in sport, I should inform Members that, owing to an administrative error, reference to evidence taken by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee relevant to the debate has not appeared on the Order Paper as it should have done. I convey the apologies of the House Authorities to that Committee and to hon. Members present for the debate.

4.44 pm

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered homophobia in sport.

I point out that the error on the Order Paper is not my fault—promise. I am pleased to have secured what I think is an important debate, because, for me, sport has the potential to be a great equaliser in society. It brings together people from many different backgrounds to participate and spectate in the best possible spirits—although, indeed, as a Leeds United fan, shall I say perhaps the spirits have not always been the best of late?

We have made great progress. There are great examples of some of our leading athletes who have felt able to come out. I am proud to mention two from my county. Nicola Adams, whom I am proud of, said at the time that she was worried about how everyone would react, so she used to say that she was single rather than that she was with a girl. She felt like she was lying all the time, and she did not like having to do that, so, in the end, she thought, “Well, this is who I am. And if there is nothing I can do about it, why should I hide it?” Keegan Hirst, the rugby player from Batley, said:

“I tick every macho box. How could I be gay? I’m from Batley for goodness’ sake. No one is gay in Batley.”

Those are two brave individuals who have come out and brought a bit of a spotlight on to the issue.

We notice most sharply that we have a problem when one of our nation’s most successful athletes thinks that sexism and homophobia are still huge problems in sport and that they are inextricably linked. Sue Day, the former women’s rugby captain, said:

“If she has got physical strength or something that is not perceived to be feminine, then she must be a lesbian. If a man is gay” people think

“he can’t possibly be good at sport because he is not masculine enough”.

She went on to say:

“There is a huge amount of sexism in sport. The men have been allowed to play sport for many years whereas the women haven’t. Sexism and homophobia are so inextricably linked.”

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that many of those views start at an early age? At school, when we divide our children into certain genders and certain sports, that only reinforces these things. I played football growing up, but there were not many girls playing it—I had to play hockey. I was not allowed to play football at times. Do we need to widen access to all sports so that all genders get the opportunity to experience sports of all kinds?
**Stuart Andrew:** I am grateful for that intervention and I certainly agree. We can look at some of our successes—I think of the England women’s football team and the British hockey team—which are fantastic, but we need to encourage more choice in sport for all genders.

The perception that Sue Day spoke of is widely expressed in sport at all levels by professionals and spectators alike. I cannot emphasise enough how welcoming and inclusive sport is becoming, and much credit for that must go to the spectators. The vast majority of fans find the shared bonds of loyalty to their team far more important than anything else, but we must aim for the best on the field as well as off it. There is clearly some significant work to do.

I do not want to be perceived as being only critical of the situation in our sports clubs and among our spectators, because I am not. There is much good practice from clubs and governing bodies and great examples of spectators working together on the issue, but we need to pull all of that work together. When clubs get behind such initiatives they can have a huge impact, but we need some national direction. I would be interested to hear from the Minister on what the Government are doing in that respect and what progress there is from national governing bodies.

A great deal of good work being done across the country by fans, clubs, coaches, professional leagues and governing bodies, but now is the time to bring that together. With the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport undertaking an important inquiry on this issue, we must build on the momentum to take a bold and strategic step forward so that we can start tackling the problem at all levels.

**Iain Stewart** (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I agree that some central direction is necessary to bring together all the good work happening at club level. One thing that prevents senior sporting stars from coming out is a feeling that they might lose corporate sponsorship if they were to reveal their true sexuality. Would it not be useful for the big corporate organisations to say it would be a problem. He makes a strong point that I can understand why some players may fear that would be a problem. He makes a strong point that I think all sponsors need to think about when drawing up those deals.

To come back to the inquiry that is happening at the moment, I commend the previous Culture, Media and Sport Committee report into racism in football, which also highlighted the prominence of homophobia in football and has done much to bring the issue into the open. I look forward to the important report from the current inquiry. Its terms of reference touch on some of the things I will raise, including looking at the experience of gay sportsmen and sportswomen and what those tell us about different sports and the progression of attitudes in general; the approach of governance bodies throughout sport; and how homophobic abuse compares with other forms of harassment.

I will also look at how successful governing bodies have been in tackling the issue; how homophobia is being tackled at school; what action is being taken by teachers and coaches involved in youth and amateur sport to ensure homophobia is challenged at an early stage; and whether football has a particular problem with homophobia in comparison with other sports. I will outline some of the problems that we still have in sport, including the effect on athletes, the potential loss of great talent, and the general lack of participation and the drop-off rates among LGBT athletes.

One thing that triggered my effort to secure the debate was a recent BBC Radio 5 live survey. I have to say that it included some positive figures, but one thing that struck me was the finding that 8% of football fans would stop supporting their team if one of its players came out as gay. The majority were obviously positive about it, but when we consider the huge number of spectators who go out and watch football every weekend, 8% is a significant number. Knowing how passionate and loyal many supporters are about their teams, the fact that something like that was a trigger to stop them supporting their team alarmed me.

The “Out on the Fields” report is one of the world’s biggest studies of homophobia in sport. It studied gay and straight people worldwide. Statistics from the UK in the survey showed that 77% of participants have witnessed or experienced homophobia in sport; 85% believe that an openly gay person is not safe as a spectator; the most likely location for people to hear abuse in sport is in the spectator stands, followed closely by the school PE class; and that most people surveyed believe that sport is more homophobic than the rest of society.

**Mrs Helen Grant** (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing such an important debate. Does he agree that this type of behaviour is abhorrent and inexcusable? Whether in the locker room or the playground, it should not be explained away as “banter” or simply “having a joke”, or that the person on the receiving end is overly sensitive. Such behaviour often amounts to hate crime or harassment, which carry serious criminal penalties.

**Stuart Andrew:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Language is incredibly important, and the wrong language can lead to much more dangerous actions if we are not careful. She is absolutely right that that needs to be tackled and understood, and washing it away as banter is unacceptable.

The “Out on the Fields” survey also found that 70% of gay men are completely or partially in the closet when playing youth sports, with many making the choice to give up sport so that they can lead an open life. What a sad choice that is. An online survey of more than 1,200 sports fans across Britain conducted this year for Stonewall looked into homophobic, biphobic and transphobic attitudes and experiences among sports fans. It found that 72% of football fans had heard homophobic abuse while watching live sports in the past five years. Disappointingly, 22% of 18 to 24-year-olds said they would be embarrassed if their favourite player came out as gay, while 22% were likely to agree that anti-LGBT language is harmless if meant only as banter. However, there were some positive trends. Some 88% would be either proud or neutral if their favourite player came...
out as gay, while 63% said more should be done to make LGBT people feel accepted in sport, so there is a basis of positive work for us to build on.

YouGov polled some 2,000 LGBT people for Stonewall’s 2013 “Gay in Britain” report, which found that more than 60% of gay and bi men, and nearly 40% of lesbian and bi women, expected to face discrimination from opposing teams, spectators, officials and fellow teammates when taking part in sports. LGBT young people frequently felt unwelcome or had negative experiences when taking part in sport. Research by the University of Cambridge involving more than 1,200 young people, again for Stonewall, found that 23% had been bullied while taking part in sport. Furthermore, METRO Centre’s 2014 “Youth Chances” survey found that 24% of trans young people felt that their gender identity had stopped or reduced the chances of their participating in sports groups or organisations locally.

I will come on to football, because it is the one sport which thousands of people go to watch every week and is followed as a national treasure. I think, if we are honest, it is the focus of concerns about homophobia. Those concerns are not limited to football, but it does seem to have a particular problem. As I said, it is by far the biggest sport in the country, so it could therefore be the leader in this area and drive change across sport and throughout society. Some great work is happening. Stonewall greatly welcomes the FA’s four-year action plan, which runs until this year and outlines the FA’s plans for the inclusion of LGBT people in football. It covers key areas, including education, sanctions, steps to encourage reporting and partnership working. It is vital that progress on the plan is reviewed and a clear series of next steps is put in place.

There has also been some fantastic work by some of our clubs, such as Crystal Palace, which has a full-page LGBT fan group page in its programme for each match. Fan groups, such as the Proud Lilywhites of Tottenham Hotspur, the Gay Gooners of Arsenal and the Proud Canaries of Norwich City are all good examples, because visibility is valuable in tackling some of these issues; I believe that fan groups are a key element of that strategy. Last weekend, the Premier League, the Football Association, the English Football League, the Rugby Football Union and sports clubs across Britain hosted a rainbow laces takeover organised by Stonewall. Teams such as Manchester United, Arsenal and Liverpool laced up during training sessions and showed public support for the campaign on their social media channels.

However, to go back to that survey and the reasons why I tried to secure the debate, an article was printed in the Daily Express, the online version of which attracted some appalling comments. I am not going to read them out because I do not think they are appropriate. As ever with these things, these people hide behind an anonymous name and have not got the guts to come out and say these things publicly. If people suggest that there is not a problem, those words prove otherwise.

I mentioned the survey finding that 8% of fans would stop supporting their team if it had a gay player. That, together with the sponsorship issue, may be a reason why no major footballer in this country has felt able to come out as gay. That concerns me. As I said earlier, that means we do not get the best of them, but I am more concerned about their mental health. It must be incredibly difficult for someone to understand their sexuality but feel that they cannot come out. As a gay man myself, I know how difficult it is to not have the confidence to go public and the relief you feel once you have done it.

When that survey came out, Greg Clarke from the FA said that now may not be the right time to come out. I am a fairly level-headed person, and I always try to give people the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he made those comments from the perspective of wanting to protect players. I can sort of understand that, but saying, “Now’s not the time,” is a very different point and sends quite a negative message to the players and the general public. Now is exactly the right time for us to address this.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. He is a well-known and very vocal defender of LGBT rights in the Chamber. Does he agree that the FA and the Scottish Football Association will be left behind, given the fact that our society is far more forward-thinking than they are with their reactionary and homophobic attitude to LGBT rights in sport?

Stuart Andrew: Absolutely. They need to catch up with the times. I look back in awe at how far society and this country have come in my lifetime. When I was in my teens, which feels like a billion years ago, the age of consent was 21, and now we have equal marriage in our country. That is fantastic. To say that now is not the time for gay players to come out is just not acceptable. The hon. Gentleman is right.

It is really important that there should be an onus on the clubs to support players and develop LGBT-inclusive stadiums and friendly environments. We talked a moment ago about banter. Football can sometimes lead the way. Show Racism the Red Card was a great campaign that has changed attitudes. People are now careful about what they say when they are watching football, but if someone makes a homophobic statement, how do they know the person next to them is not from the LGBT community? They need to think about that and how it makes people feel. That campaign showed how we can change and challenge racist attitudes, and we need to do exactly the same with homophobia.

There is a clear business case to be made to clubs about how detrimental concealing any aspect of a player’s identity is to their wellbeing, to their high performance and to attracting and nurturing new talent. We should push for more co-ordination between the FA, the Premier League and other leagues across the country. As individual clubs have a great deal of autonomy, the leagues need to be the driving force behind this work. I want to outline what action should be taken by sport’s governing bodies, which have to drive this if we are to achieve consistent progress across all levels of sport.

National governing bodies of sport have a responsibility to ensure that steps are taken to tackle homophobic, biphobic and transphobic abuse in sport and to increase LGBT participation. It is essential that that is done at both a grassroots and professional level. They should start by researching why we have such low participation rates. Unless we understand that, we cannot get to the root of the problem.

NGBs should take a clear zero-tolerance approach to this abuse by ensuring that appropriate sanctions are in place and that cases of abuse are monitored, recorded and
dealt with appropriately. That means training staff appropriately—everyone from stewards and match officials at games to coaches and players. The most common place that we hear this abuse is, unfortunately, on the terraces. We must tackle that homophobic banter. The invisibility of gay people in the crowd can be a real issue.

We must make significant investment in supporting that work, with key deliverables for the short, medium and long term. NGBs should develop action plans to encourage wide participation. Those should be produced in partnership with LGBT sports organisations, clubs and supporters. The Amateur Swimming Association ran LGBT roadshows to get people to engage with its audit in partnership with the Government Equalities Office steering group, Pride Sports, Ditch the Label, Transsexuals in Sport and Stonewall. More of that should happen.

It is key that NGBs support grassroots clubs. Targeted guidance, training and resources should be produced that are easy to implement in these environments. Stonewall has developed a plain-English best-practice toolkit for grassroots sports clubs and would welcome input from NGBs in developing and promoting that further. I hope they will take it up on that.

The FA should lead the way on this issue. It is the wealthiest governing body, with the most participating clubs, and it can lead the charge, following the best practice of smaller organisations such as the Amateur Swimming Association. A co-ordinated, consistent and maintained strategy to deal with this is important. We need joined-up working and consistent pressure to apply and spread much of the excellent best practice. Crucially, we need to investigate the participation and drop-off rate as part of that strategy. The loss of talent because people feel that their sexuality is not compatible with their sport is alarming, but no governing body is looking into that.

I am aware that there has been some great work. The “Out on the Fields” report came about following calls from SportScotland, with the support of the Australian federal Government. We ought to work with the FA and others to renew the charter that is coming to an end this year and ensure that we have clear and achievable objectives and expectations. We must also make gay people more visible through the support and promotion of LGBT fan groups. We need to achieve a situation where we fully understand the issues and are committed, in a measurable and achievable way, to achieving the positive outcomes that most of us want to see, not only for the sake of LGBT people in sport but in order for sport in this country to flourish.

Nobody should have to make a choice between being open about who they are and continuing to take part in sport. That choice will ultimately cost people personally and will leave sports across the country without talent that could be adding so much to our future success. I hope we will be able to do as much as we can. All of us were very proud when Britain came back from the Olympics with so many medals. Let us be proud of every area of sport that truly reflects every part of our society.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. The debate must conclude no later than 5.43 pm. We need to get on to the Front-Bench speeches no later than 5.23 pm. The Chairman of Ways and Means ruling is that the Scottish National party and official Opposition Front Benchers have five minutes and the Minister 10 minutes in a 60-minute debate. That leaves the Back Benchers with approximately five minutes. I hope Members will bear that in mind.

5.9 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on securing this debate and on his excellent speech, which was detailed and heartfelt. I could not help but agree with everything he said.

Perhaps I should declare an interest in this subject, as an openly gay MP who plays a lot of sport, in particular football. I grew up playing football as a wee girl in West Lothian, and I have to say that at the age of 11—which was probably about the peak of my football talents—there were not many girls playing or a huge amount of encouragement.

Although I thoroughly enjoyed running rings round the boys in my school and the local community, it was unfortunate that, up close, there was a lack of support for girls. It was not until I got to university that I was able to play alongside other young women in a proper, structured setting. Funnily enough, in my University of Stirling team was a Scottish women’s national team player, Leanne Ross. The rest of us might have been a bit below par, but Leanne made up for it and she will be part of the Scottish women’s team when it goes to the European championships.

I care passionately about diversity and equality, particularly in football, because I played it growing up and still play occasionally. I worked at my local club, Livingston football club, selling everything from pies to pints, and I have been to my fair share of international and Scottish and English premier league matches. It is fair to say that in general terms women’s football does not have anywhere near the sort of issues that the men’s game seems to have. I have found that women’s football is generally very welcoming to women, whatever their sexuality. However, as the hon. Member for Pudsey identified, for women to show sporting prowess seemed to define their sexuality. I tended not to find that when growing up, and I did not receive abuse in that realm. When I played football and a bit of rugby, for the first time in my life I met other women who were gay—and straight—and I felt in a safe space and among people who reflected similar ideals and values as me.

However, I can tell Members—sadly, from personal experience—that hearing homophobic jokes and jibes, and a general lack of acceptance in other parts of my life, prevented me for a very long time from dealing with my sexuality. The major societal shifts of recent years helped me to feel I could come out and that it would be okay. With the support of friends, family and peers in this place, I came out just after I was elected. It was personally challenging, but ultimately liberating. I am extremely lucky—I am always conscious of how lucky I am—not to have experienced much homophobic abuse. I stand on the shoulders of those who came before me and fought so hard for equality. For me, sport in its
various forms was a haven and sometimes a sanctuary in the years when I was struggling with and confused about my sexuality, and I felt safe.

It makes me very sad that today we are debating those who experience homophobia in sport and cannot come out and be who they are in their chosen sport. However, there are exceptions—there are moments of light, and the hon. Member for Pudsey alighted on some of them. I hope that discussing and lifting the lid on the issues will challenge people like Eric Bristow, the darts player who made some horrendous comments this week. I hope he sits at home thinking about what he said and realises that such comments and views should be consigned to the dustbin of history.

The Culture, Media and Sport Committee found that abusive posts are sent to football players on social media every 2.6 minutes. I am sure that many footballers do not want to add to that, but when the English Football Association’s chairman made his comments about footballers not coming out, he did himself and the sport an injustice. Believe me, Scottish football is in no way immune from offensive behaviour, but in Scotland the Equality Network has developed an LGBT sports charter to which a number of Scottish Premier League clubs have signed up. I do not doubt that a lot of good work is being done across England—we have heard a lot of it—as in Scotland, but it is incumbent on us all to work with those organisations across the political divide and the various nations of the UK to stamp out homophobia in sport. I am sure that colleagues share a desire to see that happen.

At a time when record sums are spent in football, which is something the hon. Member for Pudsey referred to—Paul Pogba was recently transferred to Manchester United for £93.25 million—how can governing bodies share a desire to see that happen. I am sure that many footballers do not want to add to that, but when the English Football Association’s chairman made his comments about footballers not coming out, he did himself and the sport an injustice. Believe me, Scottish football is in no way immune from offensive behaviour, but in Scotland the Equality Network has developed an LGBT sports charter to which a number of Scottish Premier League clubs have signed up. I do not doubt that a lot of good work is being done across England—we have heard a lot of it—as in Scotland, but it is incumbent on us all to work with those organisations across the political divide and the various nations of the UK to stamp out homophobia in sport. I am sure that colleagues share a desire to see that happen.

At a time when record sums are spent in football, which is something the hon. Member for Pudsey referred to—Paul Pogba was recently transferred to Manchester United for £93.25 million—how can governing bodies and premier league clubs not have the funding or resources to put into this issue? That cannot be the case. I hope that in years to come, the sexuality of those of us in the public eye—in sport or whatever other walk of life—will be no more significant than whether we have Marmite on our toast in the morning.

5.14 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): As Chair of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, I want to talk briefly about its inquiry and to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on securing this debate on this important subject. When we look back at the incidence of racism in football, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, it is clear that society has moved on hugely. That is something that the Committee has considered throughout its inquiry so far. The sort of racist banter and chanting from the stands that was commonplace at football grounds in the 1980s is simply unacceptable in society today.

The football bodies have strict rules that they enforce against people who engage in racist talk at matches. Fans can be evicted from stadiums and clubs may face sanctions if complaints are upheld. However, there is a consideration of whether there is consistent racism chanting from the stands. That is simply not tolerated because it is not tolerated by society. So the question is: why should it be any different for homophobia? Why is there still more progress to be made?

The chair of the Football Association, Greg Clarke, told the Committee—the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) mentioned this—that he did not believe that now was the right time for a footballer to come out in England. That does not mean that he does not believe the FA’s job is to try to support players who want to come out, but he felt that now was not the right time and that football was probably a couple of years away from the right time. He directed his remarks to the attitude of fans in the stands. I do not think the issue is as simple as that. First, we have received evidence suggesting that there should be more training for stewards and people who work in football grounds to ensure that they are aware of homophobic abuse and tackle it if they hear it from fans, so that those who engage in such behaviour know that they will be ejected.

There is a second question about the culture within a sport like football. Why can Keegan Hirst, a rugby league player from Batley, play rugby league at a Huddersfield football stadium when a Huddersfield football player would find it impossible to come out and play in the same location and the same community? It is a myth that community support for football is not accepting enough, and it is clearly nonsense when seeing Keegan Hirst playing.

Hannah Bardell: The 8% of fans who were identified in BBC’s Radio 5 Live survey were allighed upon by Gary Lineker. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with him that it would be no bad thing if those 8% of fans just stayed at home and kept quiet?

Damian Collins: The hon. Lady is quite right. People engaging in racist abuse would be evicted from the ground. They would have their membership card taken from them. Why should it be any different with homophobic abuse and why should the whole of football bow to a very small vocal minority? If someone like Keegan Hirst, a rugby league player, can come out and play with the support of his club and his team mates, why can a football player not do so as well?

The Committee took evidence from John Amaechi, the Englishman who played National Basketball Association basketball in the United States and who, as a sportsman, came out as a gay athlete. He said it is the job of the managers and trainers of premier league football clubs and elite athletes to know everything about their players. They know what they eat, where they live, what their home life is like and how stable their relationships are because all that has an impact on their ability to play. He said it is impossible for a club not to know that a player is not straight, but whether they know they might be gay is a different matter. It may be wrong for a club to confront an athlete about their sexuality, but they should know enough about them to understand there is a likelihood of gay players in their squad, so they should be able to police the culture and banter in the training ground and the locker room to make sure there is no discriminatory or discouraging language or behaviour.

A number of excellent organisations are seeking to promote the right attitude and to stop homophobia in sport. We should not think the solution to the problem is one or two premier league football players coming out and that the rest of society will fall in line. That is not the solution. There must be a broader movement across society to change the attitudes and behaviour of people who participate in sport and attend sporting events. Stonewall campaigned massively on the issue
and will be giving evidence to the Select Committee shortly. My hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey mentioned the rainbow laces campaign. There are also organisations such as Athlete Ally and Sport Allies, which seek to use all participants in sport—all athletes—to support the cause of promoting, supporting and giving respect to gay athletes and encouraging and supporting people if they come out, to change the nature of the debate and the culture as part of a broader change in society.

I welcome this debate. The Select Committee hopes to conclude the oral evidence sessions for its inquiry on 13 December, when the Minister herself will give evidence, and we will produce our report in the new year.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I call Stuart C. McDonald, who has four minutes.

5.20 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) for initiating this incredibly important debate and I welcome the work being undertaken by the Culture Media and Sport Committee on this issue.

Sport can be an immensely positive pastime or, for a lucky few, a profession. It brings immense enjoyment and huge health benefits, and can also be an incredibly positive social experience, but sadly, as we have heard, for too long sport has had an uneasy relationship with the LGBT community. That is not just a problem at the top of sport; it is quite possible that at grassroots level, away from the public eye, the level of homophobia is even greater. That creates a real problem with participation of LGBT people in sport, and in some sports in particular, whether as players or supporters or in any other capacity.

One piece of research mentioned in submissions to the Select Committee inquiry suggested that 40% of LGBT people have been discouraged from participating in sport. Another concluded that almost 60% would be more likely to participate if sport was more LGBT-friendly. That is bad for the LGBT community, but also for sport in general. I know that you will be very concerned, Mr Bailey, at the prospect that homophobia means that we will miss out on an LGBT player scoring the goal that finally takes Scotland to the World cup finals, for example. Perhaps more realistically, it means fewer supporters paying large sums of money to be badly disappointed yet again.

To increase the chances of either type of participation by those in the LGBT community, we need serious and persistent action to be taken to ensure that football and all other sports are as open and accessible as possible to the LGBT community. Hon. Members have highlighted various ways in which that could be done, such as by challenging attitudes and the language used in the school sports environment. There is also the significance of professional role models and the need for leadership from governing bodies and politicians and for a broad-based campaign against homophobia.

My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) mentioned safe spaces, so in the short time that I have left, I want to highlight and pay a wee tribute to the outstanding volunteers across the country who have indeed created safe spaces in sport for LGBT people—homophobia-free places where they know that their participation will be welcomed. No doubt facing a good dose of scepticism and a decent dollop of ridicule, these men and women across the UK are, week in and week out, grafting hard in setting up and then running LGBT-friendly sports clubs. In some ways, they are doing all the things that we have asked for in the debate: showing leadership, providing role models, tackling prejudice and stereotypes, and boosting participation.

Almost certainly the best example of that is the Gay Football Supporters Network national league and each of its member clubs. Established in 2002, 15 clubs from Scotland, England and Wales now take part, and five more take part in a cup competition. From London Titans to the Nottingham Lions, and the Cardiff Dragons to the Leicester Wildcats, opportunities exist for LGBT players across the UK.

I can speak personally from my experience with Edinburgh’s HotScots football club. If you were to watch one of our games, Mr Bailey, you might argue that there was not much “hot” about some of the football that we play, the weather we play it in or, indeed, anything else about the club. However, I can never speak highly enough of the fantastic and supportive environment that the club has provided for me and for so many individuals since its foundation a decade ago. It is a place where no assumptions are made about a person’s sexuality just because they play sports and where two huge aspects of the player’s identity no longer seem to collide badly. That club and others not only provide a safe and supportive space, but do important work in challenging perceptions about LGBT people in sport by regularly taking part in matches against other, so-called mainstream clubs and by running a five-a-side tournament open to other clubs and teams across the United Kingdom. Other clubs, such as Stonewall, Village Manchester and Glasgow’s Saltire Thistle, participate in “mainstream” leagues.

HotScots has a positive relationship with the Scottish Football Association, and I encourage all governing bodies and all hon. Members who have such clubs in their constituency—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I have to move to the Opposition spokespeople now.

5.24 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on initiating this vital debate, not least because I applied for the exact same debate myself for this week. It has been an excellent debate, with excellent contributions, not least from the hon. Gentleman, who spoke of the challenges facing individuals, such as Nicola Adams, in deciding whether to come out and of the upcoming CMS Committee report on homophobia in sport.

In a good intervention, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) spoke about corporations playing a role by creating an environment that makes it easier for sportsmen and women to come out.

My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) spoke of reaching the peak of her football powers at the age of 11, of her history of playing alongside current Scottish internationals and of the women’s game...
not having quite the same problem as the men’s game. She also spoke movingly of the time when she was struggling with whether to come out.

The Chair of the CMS Committee, the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), spoke of the Committee’s review and of his disagreement with the FA chairman’s rather one-eyed approach to the problem. I look forward to the report being published and to analysing the recommendations. My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) spoke of volunteers creating safe spaces for LGBT sports clubs and of the Gay Football Supporters Network national league.

Last Sunday marked 38 years since the assassination of San Francisco city supervisor Harvey Milk. The Human Rights Campaign notes: “Harvey Milk dedicated his life to advocate for a better and more equitable society, not just for LGBTQ people, but for all who had been marginalized—whether it was because of their race or ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity, age or socioeconomic status.”

Harvey’s vision, in which everyone receives the same dignity, respect, rights and protections, is a vision that we should all work towards.

“Hope will never be silent” was Harvey’s famous cry. Thirty-eight years is a long time, and although considerable progress has been made, it is clear that the barriers and homophobia that Harvey Milk battled against still exist in our society and, sadly, in certain sections of various sports.

I regularly talk about the power of sport to evoke positive change. Sport can help to improve an individual’s physical and mental health. It can help to lift people out of poverty. Sport can bring people together, as we have heard. The power of sport can also bring about important political change. We witnessed that when the newly elected President of South Africa, Nigel—[Interruption.] Nigel? That is something we would not want to see. Nelson Mandela used the 1995 rugby world cup to unite all of South Africa following years of apartheid. That was around the time I started playing the game.

We should never underestimate the positive change that the power of sport can bring about. The Show Racism the Red Card and Kick It Out campaigns, which have been referenced already, have done a fantastic job in helping to tackle racism. The work that these organisations do helps to make football a safe and more welcoming space for all fans, regardless of their backgrounds. Showing the same attitude and commitment as these organisations is the way we will eliminate homophobia from sport. Tackling homophobia is not the responsibility of one particular group. Rather, it is the responsibility of us all to tackle it head-on and help to eliminate it.

I welcome the work being done by Stonewall to help to make sport inclusive of all. Its Rainbow Laces campaign, which has also been referenced already, is one that we can all support. However, a recent article by PinkNews highlighted the abhorrent abuse on social media meted out to players, teams and Stonewall following premier league football teams donning rainbow laces. That happened just recently—last week, I think. It shows that we still have a long way to go to achieve the vision of football being a safe environment for everyone, regardless of their background.

Following the BBC survey that several hon. Members have referenced, I contacted a range of bodies to find out what they are doing to tackle this important issue. I am pleased that all organisations are doing proactive work in this area and that agreement exists on the need to continue taking action to eliminate homophobia from football and sport more widely.

The worst thing that we can do about homophobia in sport is ignore it or kick the issue into the long grass. That is why I, too, was bitterly disappointed by the comments of the FA chairman, Greg Clarke. He suggested that he was “cautious” of encouraging a player to come out because they might suffer “significant abuse” from fans. He also said that he was unable to offer the required support if a player did come out. To my mind, that is even worse than discouraging players from coming out. It is completely the wrong attitude to take and shows a complete lack of leadership on the issue. Instead of urging people to remain silent about their sexuality, the FA chairman should be doing all that he can to ensure that football is a place for everyone. I know that the Minister feels strongly about that and I hope that she will outline what she and her Department are doing to encourage the FA to come into the 21st century on this issue.

Harvey Milk said:

“Hope will never be silent.”

His words are as true today as they were in 1970s San Francisco, so let the majority of decent, well-natured and friendly supporters speak out against anti-LGBTI remarks made at matches, online or on the training ground. Let us speak out and say that football and sport more widely is for everyone to enjoy, without fear of abuse.

5.29 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) for securing this important debate and for ensuring that it takes place today. This is a cause that I know everyone here cares deeply about. I also put on record my support for colleagues in the Culture, Media and Sport Committee for their continued work in examining homophobia in sport.

Personally, as a non-white woman who spent many years playing county-level sport, I know that prejudice can be deeply divisive. However, as a previous report on racism in sport showed, homophobia is becoming a bigger problem than other forms of discrimination. Like racism, like sexism—like any form of discrimination—homophobia has no place in sport. It has no place in our society. As the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) said, all too often homophobia is painted as banter or laddish behaviour on terraces and in the playground. A Culture, Media and Sport Committee report stated:

“The FA should work with relevant organisations and charities to develop and then promote a high-profile campaign to highlight the damaging effect of homophobic language and behaviour in and around football at every level.”

The term “at every level” is key here, but it should not just be limited to football; we need to ensure that that happens in all sports.
[Dr Rosena Allin-Khan]

Tackling homophobia throughout society starts with education. A child believes only in the equality that they are taught by their peers. More work needs to be done to emphasise what is not appropriate in the classroom and in the playground. We need to ensure that our coaches and professional players lead the way in promoting equality and speaking out against all forms of discrimination.

When a young LGBT person has a negative experience, it can have lifelong consequences, such as a rise in mental health issues, including self-harm and depression, failure to attend school and low participation in sport. That is what we cannot afford to see in our country. In a survey of LGBT students who did not participate in sport, almost half said that sport culture was too intimidating and too unwelcoming. A similar number stated that negative experiences led them to avoid sport in school. That can go on to have a long-term, knock-on effect on educational attainment.

All too often, we hear stories about sportspeople posting homophobic tweets. These players are role models to aspiring, young children; these role models are message carriers and children look up to them. If a child sees their favourite player using homophobic language, they will deem it acceptable and attitudes will just not change. These attitudes will transfer over when that young person plays in their junior league. Social networking sites can play a big part in helping to combat homophobia and other forms of discrimination. I was pleased to add my name to a cross-party amendment to ensure that more action is taken on abuse on social networking sites. Many LGBT people continue to feel excluded from sport when it should be the other way round. As the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) said, we must open up sport to anyone who wants to participate and not tolerate racists and homophobes.

Rugby has been a pioneer for LGBT inclusion. That was highlighted by the partnership between World Rugby and International Gay Rugby with the aim of eliminating homophobia in the sport. They have published a memorandum of understanding in which they agree to promote inclusion, celebrate diversity and tackle discrimination in all its forms, from grassroots to the playground. One of the actions was to ask Rugby England to emphasise what is not appropriate in the classroom and in the playground. We need to ensure that our coaches and professional players lead the way in promoting equality and speaking out against all forms of discrimination.

Football has seen Stonewall’s Rainbow Laces campaign take off in recent years. Just last weekend, we saw players, managers, officials and fans show their support across many of our top divisions. An article in PinkNews this week highlighted the abuse directed at clubs that supported the campaign on social media. Yet let us not believe that this abuse just occurs online; there would have been spectators in the terraces sharing exactly the same vile views as we saw in those tweets. Homophobic remarks are all too common and are unacceptable. Some 50% of football supporters say that they have heard homophobic abuse at matches. Fans can take a lead here, as whether or not we eliminate homophobia from sport is reliant on the response from spectators. I was as shocked as most that 8% of football fans stated that they would stop watching their team if it signed a gay player. However, let us appreciate that nine out 10 fans would not see it as a problem. Let us make it clear that the people in that 8% are in a minority and that their views have no place in football or any other sport.

Up and down the country, from football fields to hockey fields, in the playground or on social media, we must ensure that homophobia is tackled head on with tougher punishments, better education and stronger campaigns endorsed by our sporting role models. We have all heard Greg Clarke’s recent comments, which were met with anger on both sides of the House—I really do believe that. We need to channel our anger into positive action. As the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) for securing this debate, I am also grateful for the excellent contributions that he and others have made today.

Next year marks the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of male homosexuality in England and Wales. Much progress has been made since then, including the introduction of equal marriage during the previous Parliament. Although my Department welcomes this debate on homophobia in sport, as it does the inquiry by the Select Committee, it is sad that in this day and age we are still having it. My Department has submitted written evidence to the Select Committee inquiry on behalf of the Government, and I look forward to giving oral evidence to the Committee next month. If, because of the time limitations, I do not cover all the issues that were raised during this debate, I am sure that we will do so during the Select Committee evidence session. I have been really impressed by the breadth and quality of the oral and written evidence submitted to the Committee so far, and also by the bravery of those who have spoken out in public about the challenges that we still face.

As hon. Members will be aware, we published our Government strategy for sport and physical activity last December. The strategy committed Sport England to placing “equal emphasis on the support for LGBT people in sport as it does for other characteristics protected by the Equality Act 2010.” It includes a number of other actions to ensure that all under-represented groups can take part in sport and wider physical activity. One of the actions was to ask Baroness Grey-Thompson to carry out an independent review of the duty of care that sport owes to all its participants at all levels. The review is wide-ranging, but I have specifically asked the Baroness to consider any particular issues relating to minority groups, including LGBT people. She will be reporting shortly and I look forward to receiving her recommendations.

Colleagues have asked about the role of NGBs in sport. In our evidence to the Committee, we pointed to some of the progress being made by our sporting bodies to promote inclusion, celebrate diversity and tackle discrimination in all its forms, from grassroots to the elite. We also provided evidence of the support given by the sport NGBs to clubs to carry out a number of anti-homophobia initiatives, working with established organisations such as Pride Sports, Stonewall, Kick It Out and Football v Homophobia.
At the same time, we recognise that homophobia in sport continues to be an issue and does need to be addressed with further action. It should be acknowledged—as others have done—that it feels like this issue is more prevalent in men’s competitive team sports than in women’s. However, I noted from the statistics provided by my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey—nearly 40% of lesbian and bisexual women expected to face discrimination—that maybe the reality is quite different.

As others have acknowledged, sport and physical activity provide enjoyment, improve physical and mental health and wellbeing for millions, and contribute to the country’s economy. Data from the last Active People survey suggested that the percentage of people who play sport regularly who are gay, lesbian or bisexual is slightly less than that of the heterosexual population. Research with the LGBT community in the UK shows that homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in sport are still prevalent, and barriers remain to participation.

We recognise that there could be under-representation or specific barriers to taking part in sports and physical activity for some LGBT people and that that may not be apparent when looking at overall participation levels. My officials and I are working closely with the Government Equalities Office and others across government to identify measures to address that under-representation and breakdown those barriers. The Government are also working hard with sports bodies in this area. We will measure the success of programmes to increase LGBT participation through the Active Lives survey, which is Sport England’s new way of measuring engagement in sport and activity in England.

I will mention two things briefly in the time that is left. We should acknowledge not only that we broke records in the medals tables at the Rio Olympics and Paralympics, but that Team GB broke another record. Rio 2016 had a record number of out Olympic athletes—44—almost double the number competing at London 2012—and nine out Paralympians. My hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey mentioned Nicola Adams. We had the gold-medal-winning hockey team, which included Helen Richardson-Walsh and Kate Richardson-Walsh, the first married couple to stand on the top step of an Olympic podium together. Tom Daley has made history on a number of occasions, but since he announced that he was in love with a man, after he competed in the Olympics in 2008, he has been publicly supported by very many people, including his fiancé at the games. Lee Pearson, our 10-time Paralympic gold medallist, who has been supported by UK Sport for over 17 years, was chosen as the Paralympic GB’s flagbearer for Rio 2016. He has been openly gay throughout his time competing. Of course, Team GB walker Tom Bosworth, who gave evidence to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, is the first British track athlete to come out as gay. He proposed to his partner on the beach during the Rio games; that is one of my favourite memories of the summer.

The recent launch by Sport England and UK Sport of the sport governance code fulfils a major commitment in our sport strategy. It keeps us at the forefront of global work to ensure good governance in sport. Improving leadership and diversity in the workforce and in governance is central to ensuring that we have the very highest standards of governance across all sport bodies that receive public money. To be reflective of wider society, we need to increase diversity among sporting organisation leaders and to help the sport sector to be more inclusive and welcoming to all.

I want to turn to football, because many people have mentioned it. It is fair to say that football has made a great deal of progress, but it clearly has a long way to go. English football continues to deliver the “Inclusion and Anti-Discrimination Action Plan” for the whole sport. That includes the implementation of football’s protocol to support LGBT players, managers, referees and other participants who decide to come out. The Football Association reports to my Department about the plan every six months, on measures relating to education and guidance to clubs, players and managers, stewards and spectators. Football is assisted in its efforts to address homophobia in the game by well-established anti-discriminatory groups. However, there is evidence to suggest that homophobic chanting and language are still an issue at football grounds, and that, of course, can have a serious impact on those who play football.

Let me turn to the comments from the chairman of the FA that hon. Members have mentioned. When anyone comes out, it is a personal decision. Now could be as good a time as ever for somebody to come out, but the chairman’s saying that is the complete opposite of the kind of support that a player needs. I hope that that will be reflected upon. As others have said, we cannot let a small but vocal minority spoil the game for everyone else.

In conclusion, we have had an excellent debate; I am grateful to all those who have contributed. I am looking forward to appearing in front of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. Rio 2016 showed us we are moving in the right direction in some sports. Clearly, we have a long way to go in other sports—
Westminster Hall

Thursday 1 December 2016

[Mr David Nuttall in the Chair]

Prison Safety and Security

Relevant documents: Sixth Report from the Justice Committee of Session 2015-16, Prison safety, HC 625, and the Government Response, HC 647, Session 2016-17; oral evidence taken before the Justice Committee on 15 July 2016, HC 417, on radicalisation in prisons and other prison matters, and on 29 November 2016, HC 548, on prison reform; and letters dated 19 May 2016 and 30 June 2016 from the Secretary of State for Justice to the Chair of the Justice Committee on prison safety.

1.30 pm

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered prison safety and security.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. This is a very last minute debate; it was only on Monday that we knew it was going to take place. I am grateful to the Deputy Speaker for finding time for the debate and to the Minister for making time for it.

In the introduction to the White Paper on prison safety and reform, the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice made a very important statement: “We will never be able to address the issue of re-offending if we do not address the current level of violence and safety issues in our prisons.”

Today’s debate aims to focus on some issues around that and to try to tease out what the Government’s objectives are on prison safety and prison violence. The Minister has been round the House quite a bit on this matter, not least at the Justice Committee on Tuesday. I know that he will want to do his best to respond to the issues. I know also that those who work in the service, from Michael Spurr through to the prison officers on the wings, will also want to do their best to ensure that we improve prison safety and security. However, I start from the premise that something is not quite right.

All the indicators on key issues of prison safety and security that the Government look at have been going in the wrong direction over the past few years. Let us look at some of the issues in our prisons at the moment.

In 2015-16, nine men absconded from category B prisons, four women and 80 men absconded from open prisons and eight prisoners absconded from male open youth offenders institutions. In the last few weeks—I know these individuals have been recaptured, for which I am grateful—two men, in the early hours of the morning, hid dummies in their beds, sawed through bars with metal drills brought in illegally, avoided CCTV, climbed over a wall and escaped from Pentonville prison; as the Minister confirmed to the Select Committee this week, that was not discovered until 12 noon the following day.

These are serious issues.

As of 29 July 2016, just over 60%, or 76, of our prison establishments were officially listed as overcrowded. In total, overcrowded prisons held 9,700 more prisoners than they were originally designed to hold. Ceilis meant for one person have been accommodating two people, while those meant for two people have been accommodating three, and that has added to the stress in prisons.

I know, accept and understand where the Government are coming from; they have announced large amounts of increased prison capacity and are looking at closing older prisons and opening newer prisons, such as HMP Berwyn, which is shortly to open in north Wales near my constituency. The removal of old capacity is, however, well ahead of the replacement in terms of the building of new capacity. The chief operating officer of the National Offender Management Service, Michael Spurr, said to the Justice Committee this week that it will be a considerable time before the overcrowding is dealt with.

More seriously, and more challenging for the prison system as a whole, there were 324 deaths in prison in the 12 months to September 2016, which is a rate of 3.8 deaths per 1,000 prisoners: an increase of 57, or 21%, on the previous year. Many of those deaths were due to natural causes—that is to be expected because of the growing population of elderly prisoners—but 107 were self-inflicted deaths, an increase of 13% from the previous year’s total of 95. There were five apparent homicides, including one in Pentonville recently. Some 33 deaths are currently awaiting further information before being classified.

I am grateful to the House of Commons Library for these figures. On the issue of self-harm in prison, in the 12 months to June 2016, 36,440 reported incidents of self-harm occurred, an increase of 7,509 or 26% on the previous year—a rate of 426 self-harm incidents per 1,000 prisoners, compared with 338 incidents per 1,000 prisoners the previous year. Some 10,544 prisoners self-harmed last year, up 1,943, or 23%, on the previous year.

The indicators on hospital attendance show that there were 2,500 hospital attendances, an increase of 35% on the previous year. The proportion of self-harm incidents requiring hospital attendance has thankfully remained consistent, but the indicators are showing that there are more deaths in custody, more self-harm incidents and, sadly, a significant number of homicides in prison at the moment.

The indicators on assaults show that in the 12 months to June 2016, there were 23,775 assaults in prison, an increase of 6,078, or 34%, on the same period in the previous year, and a rate of 278 assaults per 1,000 prisoners, up from 207 assaults per 1,000 in the previous year. There were 3,134 serious assaults, an increase of 26% on the previous year. There were 17,782 prisoner-on-prisoner assaults, up 52% on the previous year; 2,462 serious prisoner-on-prisoner assaults, up 28% on the previous year; and 5,954 assaults on staff, up 43% on the previous year, from 4,177. The ratio of 70 incidents of assault on staff per 1,000 prisoners, up from 49 per 1,000 in the previous year. Of those assaults, 697 were classified as serious assaults on staff, up 20% on the previous year.

Those indicators are not going in the right direction. All those indicators have seen a significant increase—not one of 1% or 2%—in a 12-month period. I will be fair to the Minister; I know that in the recently published document, recognition of that fact is paramount. I will return shortly to further figures.

What is lost in the figures on assaults are the significant increases in certain types of assault. Let me point the House to three particular issues. The use of dangerous liquids as an assault mechanism on prisoners and staff has gone from zero incidents in 2010 to 193 in 2015. The use of blunt instruments in assaults on prisoners and staff has gone from 246 incidents in 2010 to 666 in 2015: a 170% increase. The number of spitting incidents—an
issue, given some of the conditions that many people will have in prison—has risen from 12 recorded in 2010 to 394 in 2015: an increase of 3,000%. Knife and blade incidents—prisons are not supposed to be places where knives and blades are available in the first place—have risen from 212 to 491 last year over a five-year period: an increase of 131%. I am grateful to the Prison Officers Association for some of those figures. Again, those are serious issues, and the trend is in the wrong direction.

There is an argument that some of those issues are related to drug abuse and new psychoactive substances. In 2010, there were 16 recorded incidents involving new psychoactive substances in prisons, but in 2014, the last year for which I have figures—the Minister may have more up-to-date ones—the figure was 436: a 2,625% increase. Spice has gone from 15 to 430 cases; mephedrone has gone from zero to two cases; and ketamine—ket—has gone from one to four cases. Again, that is the wrong direction of travel.

I held the Minister’s job for two years and one month some time ago, so I know how difficult it can be and about the challenges, but the level of disturbance in prisons has increased in the past few months and is causing noticeable pressure. It is greater than it was in the past. There have always been prison disturbances, and there probably always will be, but in the past couple of months alone there has been, for example, the incident in Lewes prison. The chairman of the Prison Officers Association said that at the time of the incident there “were only four staff on that wing and all four had to retreat to safety” because they were concerned about their safety.

In November, 200 inmates in Bedford prison went on what was described in the press as a rampage or a riot—we will determine what it really was when the investigation is completed. It took six hours to bring the disturbance under control. That happened only days after the Justice Secretary said that she was going to introduce a range of measures to tackle violence in our prisons. The question for the House is: what can we do about those issues?

The Justice Committee, of which I am pleased to be a member—my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) are also members—has looked at this issue in detail. In their White Paper, the Government accepted this premise: in the past six years, they have presided over a reduction in prison officers of some 7,000 at a time when attacks on the workforce have increased by 41%. The prison workforce in March 2010 was 49,230, but as of March 2016 it was 43,530.

The Prison Officers Association and the assessments we heard in the Justice Committee suggest that the benchmarking figure is now 800 officers below its required level, and that the service is losing 1,600 officers every year. The level of prison officer resignations increased by 128% over that six-year period, and officer retention remains challenging, as we discussed with the Minister in the Justice Committee on Tuesday.

On Tuesday, the chief operating officer of NOMS, Michael Spurr, told the Committee that, although the Government are going to increase the number of prison officers by 3,500—although I am a Labour MP, I acknowledge that that is thanks to welcome investment for the Ministry of Justice in the autumn statement—he is going to have to recruit, with the Minister’s support, 8,000 people to get a net figure of about 3,500.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that this is about not just the number of prison officers lost and the need to recruit replacements, but their level of experience? It will inevitably take time for new recruits to learn the skills they need to do what is now an extremely complex, dangerous and demanding job.

Mr Hanson: That is a serious point. I do not want to be too flippant, but we will have a cohort of inexperienced prison officers and a cohort of experienced prisoners, which will lead to a mismatch in expectation. Those officers will lack experience when dealing with some of the initial problems. Officers need face-to-face engagement with prisoners to build the relationships that can prevent the kind of activities that I have been talking about.

Many people have expressed concerns about where we are. The Howard League for Penal Reform said that we have seen “the highest death toll” in prison “in a calendar year since recording practices began in 1978.” It said:

“The number of people dying by suicide in prison has reached epidemic proportions.”

The organisations that have a statutory duty to look at the Prison Service also expressed concern. Nick Hardwick, former chief inspector of prisons, said on 14 July 2015:

“You were more likely to die in prison than five years ago. More prisoners were murdered, killed themselves, self-harmed and were victims of assaults than five years ago.”

The current prisons inspector said in his annual report for this year that “there is a simple and unpalatable truth about far too many of our prisons. They have become unacceptably violent and dangerous places.”

Nigel Newcomen CBE, the prison and probation ombudsman, who is in the process of leaving or has just left, said in his 2015 annual report:

“Unfortunately…I have identified a fundamental lack of care, but, more often, I have found caring and compassionate efforts by staff to support the suicidal. What is clear, however, is that more can and should be done to improve suicide and self-harm prevention in prison.”

He went on to say that “what is already clear is that there is an unacceptable level of violence in prison.”

This is not scaremongering by Members of Parliament. It is a shared concern, which the Ministry itself recognises and has been expressed by the prisons ombudsman, the prisons inspectorate, external agencies, the Prison Officers Association and, indeed, the Justice Committee, three members of which are here today. We recently produced a cross-party report that was supported by the Scottish National party, Labour and Conservative Members, including the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who often has a different view to those of the members here today, and the Chair. Our conclusion was clear:

“This is a matter of great concern, and improvement is urgently needed.”
We said that
"it is imperative that further attention is paid to bringing prisons back under firmer control, reversing the recent trends of escalating violence, self-harm and self-inflicted deaths...It is a matter of particular concern that despite a sustained recruitment exercise...the net increase in public sector prison officers was only 440 last year."

I will return shortly to how we are going to manage that recruitment exercise in the future. We want, among many other things, a regular report on safety in custody statistics to look at indicators of disorder, staffing levels, NOMS performance ratings and the activity of prisoners.

The Government have—let me be churlish—belatedly responded to the pressure. In my view, they caused the pressure themselves by reducing prisoner officer numbers and putting pressure on prisons, but they have belatedly looked at the issue. In the autumn statement, and on the back of the “Prison Safety and Reform” White Paper, they allocated additional resources to address prison safety issues. The programme of governor devolution is ongoing, which may or may not help—the jury is out on that. There will be operational improvements, which may include body-worn video cameras, staff training, a multi-disciplinary approach to violent prisoners and improvements during the early days and weeks of custody. We have looked at the recruitment issues. The Minister will no doubt talk about the 3,100 new officers, but we need to recruit 8,000 to make sure we reach the net figure. We have looked at the issue of mobile operators and illicit phones in prisons.

Ultimately, there are still challenges that we need to face. I want to look at what the White Paper means in practice. The Government have said, for example, that they will improve legislation on psychoactive substances. What does that mean? They have said that they will "strengthen search capability". Well, that will take boots on the ground. What does that mean?

The Government have said that they will:
“fundamentally reassess our wider approach to tackling the supply and demand for drugs in prisons”;
and
“reduce supply and demand for illicit mobile devices; and...work with industry...to detect and block drones”.

What does that mean in practice? It is up to the Minister to spell out clearly and effectively what is in the White Paper.

The Minister has said that the Government will “enhance our intelligence capability”. Fine, but let us see what that means, what the progress is and what the timescale is. He will:
“devise and implement a strategy to address staff corruption in 2017”.

What does that mean? What is the investment? What are the intended outcomes?

We need to look at a range of measures, which we certainly can do, although the situation is complicated and challenging. I therefore want to test the Government with some discussion of at least four or five key areas, and I will start with staffing. Perhaps the Minister will reflect on my questions and, if he does not answer them directly, look at Hansard to bring something back to us later today or in the future.

Will the Minister undertake a review of benchmarking in prisons to see whether staffing rotas are right? He has picked the 10 prisons with the highest levels of violence, but will he look at other prisons or prisons as a whole?

What measures will he introduce to retain staff who are in post? That means looking not just at salaries or, potentially, enhanced payments, but at valuing people’s work, or discussing with members of staff the retirement profile of those who are leaving, to see whether we can keep experienced staff.

What pay challenges are there? On Tuesday, the Minister indicated to the Select Committee that he was considering allowing governors to enhance pay and to use such things as positive inducements, but various people are sceptical about whether that can be done within the Government’s public sector pay policy and the pay cap, so will he reassure me about how Government pay policy comes into play on staffing? What autonomy will governors have on pay and retention measures designed to keep staff in the 10 or so prisons that are to have governor autonomy? After all, in future, there may be more such prisons.

In the White Paper, the Minister indicated—he repeated this clearly on Tuesday—that he expects ratios of six prisoners per prison officer. When does he expect to reach that target? How far away from it is he now? Will it apply only in the 10 prisons, or will it apply in all prisons? What will happen with the fluctuation of numbers in prisons, and how will he plan for that in future?

One of the key issues for prison security has been mobile phones, which have been a challenge for years—since the day the mobile phone was invented. When I was the Minister, we had BOSS—body orifice security scanner—chairs and lots of other measures. Prisoners, by their nature, want to have a mobile phone, but the Minister can do things about that, which he alluded to in the prison reform White Paper. I want some more clarification. For example, what steps is the Minister taking to trial phone blocking? That has been looked at by some prisons—public and private sector.

In the White Paper, the Minister suggested no-fly zones for drones over prisons. Let us examine that for a moment: what does it mean in practice? How will he operate a no-fly zone? What does it mean? How will it work? What about additional measures on entry and security? He alluded to them with a nice easy sentence on page 48 of the paper, saying that he would: “reduce the opportunity and attractiveness for visitors to smuggle drugs”.

and mobile phones, into prisons. What does that mean exactly? What measures back up that statement?

To look at drugs generally, the Minister stated in the White Paper that the Government would:
“ensure that the perimeters of prisons are secure and maintained in a state that can help deter items from being thrown into the prison”.

What does that mean? What policy change next year will that mean? Ensuring that the perimeters of prisons are “secure and maintained” is a nice phrase, but what does it mean in terms of resources, focus and activity?

Also, on page 46 of the same document, the Government state that they will:
“continue to pursue and evaluate technology that can detect drugs including body scanners and drug trace detectors.”

What does that mean next year? What does that mean in practical terms for the Minister at the moment?

The Minister said on page 48 that he would look at telecommunications restriction orders to disconnect mobile phones or SIM cards permanently. That is fine and
good, and according to the Minister the first disconnections will take place before the end of this year, but what steps is he taking to achieve that? How many disconnections does he expect? In how many prisons will telecoms restriction orders be available? How many phones does he expect to decommission?

Over the summer the new Secretary of State produced that nice, blank statement in the White Paper, and the aspiration is great, but I am interested in the beef behind it. I share Ministers’ aspiration to block mobile phones, but what does that mean and, if I went a year ahead through the magic of a “Doctor Who” TARDIS, how many prisons would have those restriction orders? How many phones would be disconnected? The White Paper is sending out signals about aspirations, without necessarily having any beef behind them.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way; and I hope that my intervention allows him to get in a sip of water. I am listening to his powerful speech, but he has criticised the Government for being long on aspiration, but not focused on delivery. Would he outline in detail in my speech, but I want to say up front that a team that is long on aspiration but not focused on delivery would not have got the biggest—and only—increase that a team that is long on aspiration but not focused on delivery would have. I share Ministers’ aspiration to block mobile phones, but I want to do more: to do something in a more focused and efficient way. If I may, I will keep him updated on the steps we have already taken.

Mr Hanson: The Minister heard me say that I welcomed the additional resource, but if the Government cut 7,000 prison officers over six years and only decide to put something in urgently once the estate starts to creak—all the indicators that I mentioned are now heading in the wrong direction—in a sense, that is backtracking on a problem of the Government’s own making. However, I am saying to the Minister, “Let’s put that to one side.” He has some aspirations, and I am trying to tease out from him what the beef is so that he can build on them.

Some things are costly and cost-effective. Simple things can be done in the prison estate to help support the aspiration of the Secretary of State. We cannot address the issue of reoffending if we do not address the levels of violence or the safety issues that exist in our prisons. For example, what assessment will the Minister make of the lock-up regime, in particular in those prisons with serious levels of violence? If prisoners are locked up for 23 or 24 hours a day, of course they will face frustrations. What if no elements of support are in place for training, employment or drug rehabilitation, or if prisoners are not out of their cells doing things that might punish them, because they are in prison, but help with their reform so that when they leave prison they are in a better place? If such things are not in place, the Minister will again have a kettle that is boiling furiously. That shows the difficulties we face.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is making a characteristically powerful speech. Does this not cut to the heart of the issue? If a substantial proportion of the prison population is locked up for 22 or 23 hours a day, prisoners’ frustration and the decimation of the relationship with the officers will be causing the tension. The officers are powerless to stop that, and it is directly triggering the increase in violent disorders.

Mr Hanson: I thank the hon. Gentleman—or my hon. Friend as I will call him—for his support of that particular assertion of mine, but it is one factor in a range of factors. Fewer officers are dealing with frustrated prisoners who have more and more challenging needs because of drug abuse and mental health problems and cannot participate in any important training, support or even recreation. That is part of the pressure cooker that is the Prison Service.

What strategy does the Minister have for looking at safer custody issues, the risk assessment changes or the prisoners coming in? When I was Minister, I regularly chaired a safer custody group. I do not know whether the Minister does that. Will he tell us whether he does, and if he does not, why? He should focus on what we can do to make custody safer. What assessment has he made of the pressures created by gangs in prisons? Such gangs cause difficulties, which prison officers, given their smaller number, are finding it more difficult to deal with. What innovations will he introduce to tackle prisoners’ mental health problems? We have an ageing prisoner population because of historical sex offences. What impact is that having on the care given by prison officers? Are they unable to deal with other types of prisoner because they have to invest more in that cohort of older prisoners? What assessment has he made of prisoners with sentences of imprisonment for public protection, whom we have talked about? Everyone agrees that those prisoners need to be released if they are over tariff and able to be released into society, but the assessment of support for them is not being carried out to the extent that we want it to be, so there is an element of frustration there as well.

All those things are in a difficult and challenging pot. Prison is never an easy place for the people who are in it, the people who work in it or the people who have policy responsibilities for it, but I want the Minister to put some more meat on the White Paper. I want more discussion—a discourse—with him and I want him to explain where he is heading. The Harris review made wide-ranging and simple recommendations, but the Government have accepted only 29 of those. Will the Minister revisit some of those recommendations to see whether they would help reduce the pressure on prison populations?

Finally—I have had a good run at the time available—as the Minister knows, there are measures that could be taken to help address the problems in prisons but that would be difficult to manage politically. If overcrowding is part of the problem of violence and stress in prisons, there are groups of people that we could look at removing from prison or sentencing to less time in prison. This is not an attack on the Government, who have indicated that they want to look at reducing the number of prison sentences of less than 12 months. There is no point sending someone to prison for 14 days or 30 days when they will come out and find their whole life in a skip in the centre of London, Birmingham or Newcastle; they will reoffend. There is no point giving many of the women my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston is particularly concerned about short prison sentences for not paying their television licences, or for offences linked to their lifestyle, perhaps involving drugs or

[Mr Hanson]
prostitution, which could be tackled with a firm community sentence. The Lord Chief Justice told the Justice Committee as much last week.

There is a whole cohort of foreign national prisoners, which we talked about on Tuesday. In my experience, ministerial drive is needed to secure the removal of certain foreign national prisoners from the UK to their home nations, so which countries is the Minister focusing on? What efforts is he making to secure the transfer of such prisoners? Every prisoner who goes out to a foreign country leaves a space and allows pressure to be taken off the UK system.

I hope I have not rambled too much. The Minister’s role is difficult and challenging, but every indicator is going in the wrong direction. The Government have responded in part—they have set a series of aspirations. My purpose in securing this debate was to give the Minister a chance to flesh out those aspirations and allow other hon. Members to hold the Minister to account and ask him what he is going to do in the next 12 to 15 months, so that we can see whether there is going to be a change. I say to him in a non-threatening way that if, despite the actions he takes, the indicators continue to go in the wrong direction, the House will hold him and the Secretary of State to account for the actions that they could, should and must take to alleviate those pressures.

Prisoners and people who work in prisons have a right to safety, and the public whom we all represent have a right to see the people who leave prison after their sentences—I remind hon. Members that that is ultimately most prisoners—return to society in a way that does not lead to further reoffending and prison sentences.

2.5 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Nuttall. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) for creating the opportunity for this matter to be debated.

We can all agree that we are at an acutely dangerous moment in the management of our prisons. I know that the Minister and his ministerial colleagues are not in the least bit complacent about that, but it has been some years since such a cocktail of problems has created such a sense of instability, insecurity and danger in our prisons. As my right hon. Friend clearly exposed, that is being driven by several complex and interlinked factors that require both immediate action by Ministers and long-term reforms to address some of the underlying drivers of the situation we find ourselves in.

My right hon. Friend talked about some of the most pressing issues that the Minister faces. He talked about overcrowding and the difficulties that creates for managing prisons and engaging prisoners in effective and purposeful activity. He talked about the dramatic staff reductions, particularly the loss of experienced staff. The Minister has ambitious recruitment plans to replace many of the officers who have been lost over the past couple of years. That is welcome, and I join my right hon. Friend in congratulating him on securing additional funding in the autumn statement. However, as we have heard, not only will we inevitably need to over-recruit, but time will need to be spent training and equipping new staff to carry out their roles in prisons. I would be grateful if the Minister said a little about the training that new staff will undergo.

There are other factors that relate less to the decisions that Ministers have taken over the past couple of years and more to the external things that are having a bearing on our prisoners. My right hon. Friend mentioned the dramatic rise in the use of vicious new psychoactive substances and the changing make-up of the prison population, which is making management of prisons an even more challenging task. I do not underestimate the difficulty for Ministers of dealing with that range of complex and pressing problems—I understand that it is difficult to deal with those all at once with immediate effect—but we cannot tolerate another day of the current danger and insecurity in our prison system. We are sitting on a tinderbox, and urgent action is needed to get our prisons back under control.

I do not think the answer can be toughening the regime alone, although it is absolutely right that prison staff and officers have effective control of our prisons; control must not be ceded to prisoners or groups of prisoners. Our prisons work when there is a management model that emphasises consensus between those in custody and those who control them, but in the end prisons must be in the hands and under the absolute control of governors and staff.

Too often, the kinds of activities that we have seen recently—in Bedford and Pentonville, for example—give us a sense of control being lost. As the past year or so has shown, toughening the regime alone will not address that. Under previous Lord Chancellors, aspects of the regime have been toughened. The incentives and earned privileges regime was toughened, and there has been a more restrictive approach to release on temporary licence. Appropriate use of such mechanisms may have a part to play in the good management of a prison, but it is clear that in and of itself, that will not be sufficient to return our prisons to the state that we want to see them in.

My right hon. Friend talked about the particular pressures that Prison Service staff experience. I am well aware that theirs is always a challenging and difficult job, and one that perhaps does not command the respect that it should in wider society. Indeed, prison officers have said that themselves and that was referred to in the evidence that Michael Spurr gave to the Justice Committee earlier this week.

When the Minister responds to the debate, I will be interested to hear about not just what he intends in terms of recruitment, training and professional development for prison staff, but what we can do collectively and what the Government can do to enhance the professional status and regard in which prison officers and prison staff are held across wider society; that is one way in which he can fulfil his ambition to recruit more easily and recruit high-calibre staff with the skills, competences and attributes he would look to have in our prisons. I hope he will be able to say a little on how he intends to improve prison officers’ status, remuneration, incentives—my right hon. Friend talked about that—and training, and what will he envisage will be activities for staff who are under great mental and physical pressures, to ensure their continued and improved wellbeing.

Overcrowding is obviously a problem that has been building up over many years. The Minister will say quite correctly, that the prison estate still has many old Victorian, unsuitable prison premises in the portfolio. It takes time to replace those with modern, fit-for-purpose buildings. I welcome the new build programme that
Ministers have in train, but no matter how much rebuilding, repurposing and refitting of our prison estate Ministers are able to undertake, the underlying problem is the size of the prison population. We need to look at a means of addressing that.

I am afraid I am one of the people who just cannot see any objective case for our prison population having gone from about 45,000 20 years ago to more than 85,000 today. I know that crime has fallen in that period—I readily accept that—and some of that may be attributable in part to the use of custody, but the case for that correlation has not been compellingly made to me or, I suspect, the wider public in a way that demonstrates that the substantial increase in custody in the past 20 years can be wholly justified or explained. It really is time to be prepared to answer some hard questions about the number of people we incarcerate—something I was concerned to hear the Minister was only half-willing to grapple with when he was in front of the Justice Committee earlier this week; in some ways, I think it is still felt to be in the “politically too difficult” box.

I welcome what the Minister talked about when he came to the Justice Committee on Tuesday: attempts to divert offenders to alternative provision, away from custodial sentences. I also welcome the initiative first brought in under the coalition Government and now being rolled out under this Government of post-release supervision for those who have undertaken short custodial sentences. We have all known for many years that, where such sentences are appropriate—they often are not—the high rates of recidivism among that group of ex-prisoners should give us deep concern. I therefore welcome programmes to put post-release supervision in place for those offenders.

However, one consequence of that approach has been, perversely, to drive up the prison population in relation to the number of those who have been released following a short custodial sentence and then breach their post-custodial supervision arrangements. If we look at the latest offender management statistics, published for April to June, we see that of 5,512 licence recalls, 2,045 were of prisoners who had been serving sentences of less than 12 months before release, which represents an increase of 79% over the same period in the previous year.

There is a particular concern in my mind about the effect on women offenders, because they are more likely to be serving shorter sentences. Therefore, incarceration following breach during supervision on licence is likely to be bearing particularly harshly on them. While, as I said, I welcome the post-release supervision arrangements put in place, it is time for us to start asking the hard question of Ministers of whether we are now seeing an unintended consequence of the way in which the arrangements are implemented that means that more offenders are coming back into custody than might previously have been the case.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the long-standing concerns about IPP, or imprisonment for public protection, prisoners, which I share. I am concerned that, although four years ago the coalition Government removed the IPP sentence—that did not have retrospective effect—the rate of progress since then has been slow in releasing those prisoners in custody on an IPP arrangement, particularly because the report by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons shows progress has been “painfully slow” in releasing prisoners at the appropriate time.

IPP prisoners still form 16% of the prison population, and some have experienced very long periods of incarceration over the length of their tariff, especially those—about a fifth of them as of March last year—who had received an original tariff of less than two years. Bearing in mind that no one after 2008 will have received an IPP arrangement if they had had a sentence of less than two years—it was no longer possible after 2008—we are talking about some people who now, the best part of 10 years after the sentence has been imposed, are still in custody on an IPP arrangement. I venture to suggest to the Minister that that might be a group for early attention in looking at whether there are opportunities for some to be released.

A number of approaches could be taken. Obviously the protection of the public and risk factors will be on the Minister’s mind, and I understand that, but we must look both at opportunities to identify those prisoners who could and should now be released and at those who Ministers do not yet feel confident in releasing. What programmes are being put in place in our prisons to enable them to progress to the point where it will become safe for them to be released?

We know that the Ministry of Justice has set up a dedicated unit to look at the IPP prisoners issue. I have no idea what that unit has been doing, so I hope the Minister will enlighten us on its plans for the future and on the progress and impact it has been able to make to date.

Finally, I want to talk about a group that, as my right hon. Friend rightly pointed out, I am always concerned about in our custodial system: women in prison. It is my firm view that there are many women in our prisons who are there not because they pose a risk or threat to society but because they have been driven there by a set of circumstances in which they have been victims of abuse and traumatic life circumstances. Women in custody are more prone to self-harm, and there are many with complex needs.

There is widespread agreement about the opportunity to try to bring down the number of women in our prisons and the fact that prison closures, such as the recent closure of Holloway, offer an opportunity to reconfigure the custodial estate to meet the particular needs of women offenders. It is now nearly 10 years since Baroness Corston’s seminal report on the management of women in the penal system. At that time, she recommended that it was inappropriate for women to be in large custodial institutions and that most would be much better supervised in the community, making use of, for example, women’s centres, enabling them to stay close to their home, to continue to look after their children and maintain their community and family ties. She also said that, for that small group of women for whom custody is necessary, it would be appropriate to hold them in much smaller, local, secure units.

I want to ask the Minister specifically about his intentions in relation to that group of offenders. When I asked the Justice Secretary about the issue in the Chamber on 3 November, she said that she did intend to replace some of the old women’s prisons with small, local custodial units. However, I understand that that is not necessarily the kind of secure, very small and very local...
2.22 pm

**Richard Arkless** (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I think this is the first time; I may be mistaken. I first pay tribute to the staff who work in our prison estate, not only in England and Wales but across all nations of this Union. At the moment, they are all hard-pressed and they feel demoralised and isolated, and we ought to recognise that—and I think we do. I hope the Minister may say something likewise to reassure them that they are in his thoughts at what is an unquestionably difficult time for them.

We have heard two speeches and on the plus side both were excellent, but on the negative side they have left me very little to say. The right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) gave a characteristically powerful speech, in which he pointed out with great clarity that the direction of travel of the statistics is troubling. We ought to recognise the difficulties for prison officers, not only because it is polite and respectful, but because of the vivid statistic, mentioned by both Members who spoke, that 6,000 prison officers are assaulted each year while at work. That is up 43% on the previous year and translates, on the ground, to 16 assaults a day—three of which are serious assaults. In that context, it is no wonder that they feel demoralised.

The right hon. Member for Delyn began his speech on the premise that things are not quite right, which I think is somewhat kind. He laid out some pertinent questions, and I will be interested to hear the Minister’s replies. He was right to praise the Minister’s aspirations, because there is no doubt that this is a difficult job—a point well made by the former Minister for prisons, the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous). It is not an easy job, and it is right to have those aspirations, but the right hon. Gentleman is also right to ask for some meat to be put on the bones of the White Paper. I hope the Minister will provide some clarity.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), my friend, gave an excellent speech, and she clearly has a keen and detailed interest in the topic. She was right to say that we stand at an acute point, and that a “cocktail of problems” necessitates the change that we all want to see. She was right to say that we need to work towards a consensual model, and that toughening the regime will not work. The relationship between inmates and officers is key, and she put that point very well.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Lady for raising what is not an easy issue to raise, as it is perhaps not politically sexy or attractive—the size of the prison population. I do not believe that we serve society, our prison officers or our youth well by locking people up for short sentences. The Scottish Government have introduced an assumption that short sentences are only necessary in the most extreme of circumstances. The point she made about people going in for short sentences, coming out on licence, breaching that licence and ending up in a perpetual circle in and out of prison, does not serve anybody well. I beg the Minister to have a serious and detailed look at the use of short sentences, and to try to at least recognise that the increasing prison population is a huge contributing factor in the problems that we are speaking about. The hon. Lady deserves credit for making that point.

Why have we ended up in this situation? As has been discussed, a cocktail of factors—including synthetic drugs, mobile phones, drones and other external factors—is causing this problem. However, I want to make it abundantly clear that I see one problem as more pertinent than the others. I am honoured to be a member of the Justice Committee. We travelled to Wandsworth prison a few months ago, and we heard from both prison officers and inmates about the stress...
Prisons are becoming increasingly volatile and dangerous environments for both staff and prisoners. In the 12 months to June 2016, there have been nearly 6,000 assaults on staff, 24,000 prisoner-on-prisoner assaults and 105 self-inflicted deaths of prisoners, an increase of 13% from the previous year. There are 6,000 fewer officers on the frontline than in 2010. Ministry of Justice statistics show that poor mental health and distress among prisoners is higher than among the general public. Incidents of self-harm in prison have increased by over 25% in 2016 from the previous year.

Nick Hardwick, the former chief inspector of prisons, has said that prisons are at their worst level for a decade. We have seen riots breaking out at Her Majesty’s prisons Moorland and Bedford and prisoners escaping from Pentonville. While the prison staff and the tornado teams who deal with these incidents should be commended, it is clear that prison conditions are simply not good enough. Violence continues to increase and safety continues to decrease.

The austerity experiment on our prisons has failed. Working in prisons has become less appealing and more dangerous. The presence of fewer officers, who are overstretched and overwhelmed, means a stricter and increasingly unsafe prison regime. It means that prisons cannot effectively reform and rehabilitate in the way that prisoners and wider society need.

Staff shortages meant that a prisoner was not allowed out to visit his dying mother. He was allowed a phone call, but it was too late; his mother’s life support machine had already been turned off. It has still not been confirmed whether he will be allowed to attend her funeral. Again, that is the result of staff shortages. When questioned on that issue at the Justice Committee on Tuesday, Michael Spurr of NOMS was not even aware of the incident. Will the Minister confirm when he became aware of that incident? How often do such incidents take place in our prisons?

Front-line prison officers leaving their jobs outstripped new recruits over the past year. Almost 14% of prison officers leave the prison after serving less than 12 months. The Government have failed to explain how they will deal with the problem of retention. Even more alarmingly, it appears that the number of deaths will not form any part of the assessment of how safe a prison is.

Mr Gyimah: On that point about whether the number of deaths will form part of how prisons are evaluated under our reform programme, I refer the hon. Lady to the White Paper. It explicitly says that under safety, deaths in a prison will be one of the outcomes looked at.

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank the Minister for that clarification.

Some 324 people have died in prison this year so far, which includes 107 suicides. It appears that assaults on prison officers by prisoners are not being appropriately dealt with. Although the Minister has said there is “swift justice”, and although we welcome a zero-tolerance approach to violence, it is increasingly clear that prison officers do not feel safe at work. Has there been any consideration of what impact consecutive sentences for assault will have on prison capacity and overcrowding?

It is clear that a range of hugely complex issues need to be considered in order to reform the prison system. While I welcome prison reform, I am afraid that the...
Government’s White Paper does not provide the rapid action that our prison system so urgently needs and has long asked for. It is a matter of particular concern that despite a sustained recruitment exercise, described by one Minister as going at “full throttle”, the net increase in public sector prison officers was only 440 last year.

While the commitment to increase the number of prison officers by 2,500 is much needed, it is not a cause for celebration. Four hundred of those jobs have already been announced, and it is 2,500 extra after a reduction of more than 6,000 on the frontline. Where will the first 400 go? How will they be allocated to prisons? How were the 10 most challenging prisons identified? They do not appear to be among the worst prisons for violence and self-harm. As it stands, this is far from being the biggest overhaul of our prisons in a generation.

The lack of detail in the White Paper is worrying. It is difficult to believe that these proposals have been fully thought out. Instead, they seem to have been hastily assembled. That is indicative of the lack of detail in the Ministry’s proposals on, for example, mandatory drug-testing. We are told that the drug testing regime will be enhanced, “supporting governors to enable drug testing on entry to and exit from prison as part of a more extensive testing programme, increasing the frequency and range of drugs tested for”.

Putting aside whether mandatory drug testing has proved effective, given the widespread availability of drugs in prisons, that could add thousands more tests each year, but there is no analysis of the impact on cost and staff resources, especially as both are in short supply.

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Lady seems to be disagreeing with a lot of the proposals in the White Paper. Can she tell us what she would do instead to sort out our prisons?

Yasmin Qureshi: I am not disagreeing with the White Paper; I am saying that it fails to deal with a lot of issues. There are a lot of unanswered questions in it. On one level, the Government want there to be more drug testing, but the question we are asking is: what about the impact on staff and resources? The White Paper singularly fails to provide answers on the details. For example, it says there will be rehabilitation and education programmes, but who will provide those? Where will the resources, especially as both are in short supply.

What do the Government think they will learn from testing on entry and release, given that prisoners will most likely simply avoid drug testing in the run-up to those periods? The argument that counting the problem—and not even counting the problem in a particularly robust way—is the same as dealing with it seems unrealistic, at best.

Overcrowding is another issue contributing to the level of violence in prisons. As of July 2016, 76 prisons—just over 60%—were overcrowded. overcrowded prisons held 9,700 more prisoners than they were designed to hold.

The White Paper sets out a programme for building new prisons, but also points to more prison closures. Since coming to power in 2010, the Government have announced the closure of many prisons, with a combined operational capacity of over 4,100. Again, the Government’s policy is muddled. Are they trying to build their way out of overcrowding or will they address the number of prisoners coming into the system?

Finally, we all acknowledge that the prison system is no longer working and is increasingly unsafe. The Justice Secretary continues to say that prison reform is a priority, but the level of violence in prisons has not even stabilised, let alone begun to improve. Urgent action is needed now, not in a few months or a few years. The matter goes beyond politics. Livelihoods are at stake and lives are at stake, and the fact that we have unsafe prisons must not be ignored.

One of the main reasons why prisons are unsafe is the number of prison officers who were made redundant and the reduction in their number. We have been told that we need at least 8,000 prison officers to deal with prison safety and prison issues. The Government do not seem to have got anywhere near achieving that. Will the Minister think about the prison officers who have been made redundant? Has there been any consideration of the idea of re-employing them, even temporarily? The Government say they are trying to deal with the matter, but if they had not cut the number of prison officers in the first place, we would not be in the mess we are now in.

2.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): I am pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. This debate has been conducted sensibly and the former prisons Minister, the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson), made a powerful case.

The challenges facing our prisons are indisputable. The statistics make grim reading, as do many reports from chief inspectors of different prisons. I do not dispute much of the right hon. Gentleman’s analysis of the problem. He rightly referred to our White Paper, which responds quite well to the challenge, although he was right to challenge us on the detail, as did the Labour shadow Minister, and to ask when implementation will take place.

The White Paper commits us to introducing legislation in the next Session on a number of measures. As I said to the Select Committee, we will introduce a Bill covering some of those measures. However, some do not need legislation and we will crack on with them. Over the next few weeks and months, the Justice Department will make several announcements on many of the issues that the White Paper touched on, demonstrating how we will implement what we have discussed in it.

Our brave and valuable prison officers work hard in our prisons and do a tremendous job. Whenever I visit one of our prisons, I make sure I spend time with the staff. I spend time with members of the Prison Officers Association and other staff to hear their experience of the challenges facing them, because I firmly believe that to understand the front-line challenges there is no substitute for speaking to those who are doing the job.

That is why it gives me great pleasure to announce—the House is aware that we have been in discussion with the Prison Officers Association on health and safety, pay and pensions—that we have come to an agreement with the association’s national executive committee on a new pay and pension package for front-line staff that it will recommend to their members. We have also agreed a significant number of health and safety reforms, as well
as new powers for governors to deploy their staff. That is a big step. Many questions have been asked about retention and how we value our prison officers. Hon. Members will hear the details of the deal after the debate, but it goes a long way to show how we value prison officers and should help to retain the best officers in the service.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate. I was involved in parliamentary business in another part of the estate.

The Minister’s announcement is very welcome. In my constituency, I have three prisons where the staff are represented by the POA, and there is a private prison in Doncaster where the Community union, which I am a member of, represents a number of people working in the justice sector in that establishment. Has the Minister spoken to representatives of the Community union to make sure we have consistency across the prison estate, both private and public?

Mr Gyimah: I am not sure what consistency the right hon. Lady is referring to.

Caroline Flint: I am sorry if I was not clear. Will the terms and conditions, numbers and all the other factors the Minister constructively announced a moment ago be shared by the private establishments as well as the public ones?

Mr Gyimah: Obviously, private prisons determine pay and conditions. The deal we have agreed is for members of the Prison Officers Association in bands 3 to 5. I will write to the right hon. Lady with more details.

I echo the concerns raised by the right hon. Member for Delyn on this important topic. I hope the new of fender management model, which was recommended in the Harris review, which Members have mentioned, and we cannot gloss over that. Those substances are being imported into our prison estate in bands 3 to 5. I will write to the right hon. Lady with more details.

We are implementing it via our new staffing model. As we set out in the White Paper last month, we will launch a number of initiatives to help us to do that. The investment will provide the capacity for prison officers to play a dedicated officer role and to build constructive relationships. As the former prisons Minister is aware, we are talking about a people business: it is about relationships and about prison officers being able to listen to prisoners’ frustrations, to diffuse tensions and ultimately to reduce the level of violence. That is a vital component of our plan to stabilise and then decrease the level of violence, self-harm and suicide, as well as reforming offenders more generally. With nearly half of all offenders going on to commit crime within a year of being released, we believe that giving each prisoner a dedicated officer will help prisoners to turn away from crime in the long term.

We recognise the challenge in recruiting an extra 2,500 staff. That is why, as I told the Select Committee, we will launch a number of initiatives to help us to do that.

Yasmin Qureshi: The Minister says that 2,500 extra staff will be employed, but achieving the things that he has mentioned will require far more than 2,500 prison staff.

Mr Gyimah: That figure is 2,500 new staff over and above what we would ordinarily recruit. In the Select Committee, the National Offender Management Service chief executive, Michael Spurr, made it clear that in practice that means we will have to recruit 4,000 staff next year and 4,000 staff the following year. It is a challenge, but that is why we have new resources and investment. We will also do it completely differently from how it has been done historically. In the past, prison governors did not have the freedom to recruit themselves. They could not hold open days or advertise locally. People who ended up being recruited into our Prison Service had never visited their place of work or met anyone they would work with beforehand. In addition to the national recruitment effort, we will give the governors of the 28 most challenging prisons the power to recruit for themselves, and that will make a huge difference. It is a question of someone seeing an advert on the internet versus seeing that their local prison is recruiting and they could get a local job.

A question was asked about pay supplements and where they would apply. In fact, that is already happening. For example, HMP Feltham can pay £4,000 extra per person in recognition of how difficult it is to recruit there. Many of the people that Feltham would interview might be choosing between a job there and working at Heathrow airport, which they might feel is a less aggravated environment in which to work. That is why in those establishments the governor can use a supplement to attract staff. For our 10 most challenging jails, we had a target of recruiting 400 staff and we allocated £14 million for that. We are halfway to that target already, so we are making progress.

We all need to recognise that prisons today are in a very different place from where they were 10 years ago. The issue of new psychoactive substances has been mentioned, and we cannot gloss over that. Those substances are incredibly dangerous. In one incident, even the officer who went to help someone who was on those drugs had to be hospitalised because of how potent the drugs are. I mentioned in the Select Committee that there are being broken, but we have seen such incidents, including potting. Also, prisons magnify the community outside, so gang violence is being imported into our
prisons. We are also seeing serious cases of mental illness. Yes, staffing is part of the solution, but the problem with which we are dealing, as the right hon. Member for Delryn recognises—he is nodding—is incredibly complex. We must ensure that we deal with it.

Richard Arkless: Of course I welcome the proposal to recruit 4,000 prison officers in each of the next two years. Is that a net figure and, if so, what is the gross figure that the Minister is aiming for? We have a huge retention problem, so to get to a net figure of 4,000, we would need to recruit substantially more. What is the figure?

Mr Gyimah: Four thousand is the net number that we need to recruit to meet our targets. [Interuption.] The hon. Gentleman asks what the gross figure is. A lot of people are leaking through in different areas of the prison estate and I cannot give the overall gross figure.

Mr Hanson: I think the Minister means that the 4,000 each year is a gross figure and, at the end of that, there will be a net figure of the 2,500 to 3,000 he has mentioned. Otherwise, he is committing to 8,000 new prison officers in the next two years. I would welcome that, but I would not want him to commit to it because he might have to increase his expenditure significantly.

Mr Gyimah: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that helpful clarification as I leaf through my notes.

Mr Hanson: I am here to help. [Laughter.]

Mr Gyimah: Yes. The Treasury would not welcome a commitment to new expenditure in this debate.

There are other challenges. We mentioned the challenges of mobile phones, and the right hon. Gentleman asked about the telecommunications restriction orders blocking mobile phones and other technologies. The legislation allows a prison, where mobile phone usage is suspected, to get a court order to block that specific mobile phone. It is a tool in a prison’s armoury, but we need to deal with the problem on the industrial scale that it is happening on in our prisons. The work that we are doing with mobile phone companies to block signals is the most effective way to ensure that we deal with the problem not on an incremental basis, but on an industrial scale.

Mr Hanson: I agree. This matter has been discussed for many years. Will the Minister commit to piloting mobile phone blocking in one or two prisons to see how it works in practice?

Mr Gyimah: We already have mobile phone blocking in some of our prisons. One challenge with mobile phone blocking is that in some prisons in urban areas we could end up blocking the mobile phones of people who are not in the prison. That is why we are developing a bespoke solution, working with the operators, and we have signed an agreement with them to go ahead with three jails early next year and then on that basis roll it out across the estate.

As for psychoactive substances, much has been said about drugs and our approach to them. We have trained more than 300 dogs to detect psychoactive substances. The point of mandatory testing, other than deterrence, is to help, because if someone is on those drugs, they need treatment, and the only way we can know that they are on the drugs is by testing and finding that they need help to come off them, or punishment where that is necessary.

Kate Green: I ask the Minister to keep the effectiveness of mandatory testing under careful review, particularly in relation to those substances, because if they keep being reformed and redesigned to make detection more difficult, the testing will not keep up with the changes in the make-up of the substances being used. I am not saying that he should not be doing mandatory testing and I understand his point about a deterrent effect, but I ask him to keep the effectiveness of that approach under review and to undertake to report to the House regularly on what it is achieving.

Mr Gyimah: Of course we will keep the effectiveness under review. Drugs are such a problem in terms of prison violence, safety and the effect on our prisoners that we ought to do so because we have to deal with the problem, and we will keep it under review.

A question was asked about drones and no-fly zones. We are looking to work with drone operators to programme the co-ordinates of prisons into drones so that if someone buys a drone from the operator and tries to fly it into a prison, it just collapses before it reaches the perimeter. That is technologically possible. On the point about the physical infrastructure, we have seen improved netting and CCTV, which help in dealing with that challenge.

Caroline Flint: Many of these issues affect both public and private prisons. Will the Minister give me an assurance that the Government will take on board some of the issues about staff ratios just as much for contracts for private prisons as they will for public prisons? I would welcome it if he would write to me on that issue.

Mr Gyimah: Of course we look at the entire prison estate when we look at all those issues. Prisons are there to protect the public. All prisons, whether private or public, have the same objectives, and the measures that we are looking at apply across the prison estate.

When it comes to drugs and phones, a lot of crime underpins that activity. People make money from it, which is why we are investing in a new intelligence hub and a search capability. We will say more about that in due course.

I would like to say something about probation, which has not been touched on and is important if we are to turn around offenders. In addition to making prisons places of safety and reform, we must ensure that prisons work hand in hand with probation if we are to achieve lasting change with offenders. It is clear that performance at community rehabilitation companies, which manage low-level offenders, varies widely, and therefore we have launched a review of operations and standards. Public protection is our top priority, and we will take the necessary action to ensure that the probation system reduces reoffending. As with our plans for prisons, I want a simpler, clearer system in which probation is focused on outcomes rather than processes and with increased transparency and accountability. I want specific outcome measures that focus on getting offenders off drugs and back into work. We will look at what additional measures—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered Durham County Cricket Club.

Mr Kevan Jones: I beg to move, That this House has considered Durham County Cricket Club.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a really strong case. Does he agree that the test matches, in particular, have made good days out for families in Durham, and have introduced a lot of young people and children to that standard of cricket, which is very much to be applauded?

Mr Jones: It is, and it is very important that the test matches and other events there have been family events. The other thing that the club has done—I pay tribute to it for this—is that it has actively gone out and worked with local communities and young people. It has not just gone for the easy targets; it has actually dealt with some very difficult-to-reach individuals who have then got into cricket. That has been part of the ethos of the club from the start: it has been community-based in Durham.

We have actually produced some notable successes—Ben Stokes and Keaton Jennings, to name just two—for the national squad. In this country the county sides develop young players and put them forward for our national squads. The ECB’s decision, therefore, to relegate the club to division two of the county championship for the upcoming 2017 season, strip the club of the ability to hold test matches and then punitively deduct 48 points at the start of next season is clearly going to have far-reaching effects on the club’s viability. It is not clear to me whether the ECB had fully thought through the implications of its decision in terms of the cricket fan base in the north-east, the knock-on effect on producing professional international cricketers and the important impact on the local community.

Losing the ability to hold test matches will result in fewer opportunities for the Riverside’s 15,000 capacity to be met. The opportunity to see world-class cricket in the north-east will obviously be diminished, and it will also have a devastating effect on local businesses in Chester-le-Street that are dependent on the cash input that a test match brings to the local town. It also robs the wider north-east of the opportunity to showcase ourselves internationally, which is something that cannot easily be replaced. Certainly, for small businesses, that cash injection from test matches is very important not only for local shops but for local hospitality; I am told that the increased footfall from just one test match can be equivalent to up to a month’s takings.

Thinking about the younger generation of players that are coming into the game, it is quite ironic that the ECB’s current slogan is “from playground to the Test arena”.

Well, the decision of the ECB to penalise Durham in the way that it has will stifle the dreams of many young, aspiring cricketers not only in County Durham but in the north-east.

I need to cover quickly the events that have led to the situation that we currently find ourselves in. Let us start with the test match against Sri Lanka in May. In order to host the test match, Durham had to pay the ECB a fee of £923,000. It is very odd that supporting county grounds have to pay the ECB, but that is the way it has been—although I understand that it has now been suggested that that should change. There were some important impacts and partly because the ECB scheduled that test match so close to a match at Headingley, gate receipts in Durham were dramatically lower than had been hoped.

Clubs in the north-east—and possibly Glamorgan—do not generate the huge corporate interest and money that southern clubs do, but the ECB does not seem to
take that into account at all. I am told that ticket prices for a test match in the north-east have to be lower than they are in the south because of the economic buying power, but the ECB does not regard that as relevant.

If we fast forward to August this year, the chief executive of the club called players, following rumours in the local press that the financial situation was dire, to reassure them that the club was not going bust and all contracts would be honoured. Mr Harker was right. I want to put it on the record that the club has not gone bust, irrespective of what the ECB is trying to say. Talks were taking place between the club, potential investors and the ECB. In October this year the club was forced to accept a £3.8 million financial aid package from the ECB with draconian conditions. It has been described to me by those involved as not only a take-it-or-leave-it option but a gun-to-the-head option, as if to say, “If you don’t take this, there will be no further support.” Those are not the actions of an organisation that is there to foster cricket in all our regions and in the north-east.

Draconian conditions were attached. Durham was relegated from the county championship division one and docked 48 points for the next season, a handicap that would make it almost impossible for the club to make its way back to its former position. Also, points would be docked from future cup competitions. The situation was completely unprecedented in English cricket. This had never happened before. Also, the Riverside ground was told it could no longer hold five-day test matches, which is the only way that clubs such as Durham can raise large amounts of finance. That route has been cut off completely and, as I said earlier, local fans in the north-east have been denied access to first-class international cricket.

As if such penalties were not bad enough, the ECB then imposed a salary cap on the club from April 2017 to 2020. That means that the club will not be able to pay players above a certain threshold. That is to be determined by the ECB board on an annual basis. That will not only have a negative impact in terms of attracting international cricketers to come to play for Durham but place question marks over whether aspiring and developing cricketers will stay at Durham.

The financial difficulties facing Durham are not unique. Other clubs are in a similar situation and have mounting debt. Glamorgan was bailed out by the Welsh Assembly. Hampshire was facing financial difficulties. Indeed, Yorkshire, famous for its cricket ground, has debts of around £18 million, but it is in a fortunate and unique position because it has a very rich benefactor who also happens to be the chairman of the current ECB. Durham’s only crime is that it has not had access to a rich benefactor with deep enough pockets or good enough connections to be able to see it through.

The news has been devastating for supporters throughout the north-east. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and I have had many representations from supporters who are constituents. When the news was announced, I wrote to the ECB to find out why the punishment that the club had received was so arbitrary and punitive. I asked whether the offer was a take-it-or-leave-it option. Also, I wanted to understand how the ECB regulations and the penalties that were imposed on Durham were arrived at.

There is, I understand, a set of ECB regulations for deducting points from clubs that get into financial difficulties, so I wrote to the ECB to ascertain how the regulations have been used in relation to Durham. I wrote to the ECB and asked for a copy of the financial regulations so I could see how its actions had been arrived at. I had a reply from Tom Harrison, chief executive of the ECB, on 18 October. I had asked whether he could furnish me with a copy of the regulations. I thought that would be a straightforward task. I thought the ECB would be able to produce them and explain how the points deductions were arrived at. However, in his reply, he said:

“With regard to points deductions, the ECB Board had to consider the points deductions under ECB’s Financial Regulations and the fact that, but for the ECB’s financial offer, Durham CCC was facing imminent insolvency. We do not currently publish the ECB Regulations governing points deductions, but we are reviewing that…in light of this case.”

So what is the ECB’s big secret? Why would it not publish the regulations? There is clearly a complete lack of transparency which raises concerns for me and many of my constituents. I am quite tenacious in trying to get to the bottom of issues, and my two moles in the ECB have now sent me a copy of the regulations, which make very interesting reading. They cover the issue of a club becoming insolvent, but Durham was not. So I looked at the regulations to see if I could work out how the points deductions were arrived at.

Paragraph 6.4 on page 13 of the regulations states:

“A points deduction pursuant to Regulation 6”—

—the regulation that covers the financial failure of a club and bankruptcy—

“shall be imposed in accordance with the financial failure of a club and bankruptcy.”

So then we go to the appendix at the back. It is a pretty simple system. If a club becomes insolvent, 50 points will be deducted from the current club or its successor club in the county championship. Six points will be deducted in the Clydesdale Bank 40 and four points will be deducted in the Friends Provident t20. If we add those together, that is 60 points that could be deducted from the club.

Durham were relegated and then had 48 points taken away; if 50 points had been taken away, they would have gone into the next division. But where did the additional 48-point deduction come from? There is no mention in the regulations about the penalty of taking away test matches or of caps on salaries, so it is clear to me that the ECB has ignored its own financial regulations. What we need from the ECB as a matter of urgency is a clear explanation of how it arrived at that points deduction. It is not clear to me that it was in line with the financial regulations; my mole, whom I talked to yesterday, said exactly that: that the decision of the board is clearly not in line with those regulations.

The chair of the ECB, Colin Graves, who also used to be the chairman of Yorkshire and was a founder of Costcutter convenience stores, clearly does not understand his own rule book. Two weeks ago, in an interview on the Durham situation in The Daily Telegraph, he said:

“The punishments are there within our rules and regulation of penalties for financial irregularities for not being sustainable. We did not create them on a wing and prayer. They are there in the financial laws of ECB.”
I am sorry, Sir David, but the ECB was on a wing and a prayer, because it was clearly not in line with the regulations. Mr Graves clearly knows quite a lot about cost cutting, but he is not an expert at cutting corners when it comes to interpreting the ECB’s rules. What he told The Daily Telegraph is completely wrong.

As for the draconian measures, the ECB needs to explain how its decision was arrived at. There is no reference to a club in difficulty; the reference is to clubs that are bankrupt. I reiterate that Durham was not bankrupt. In looking at how the decisions were reached, we need to know not only the chronology of the meetings, but who was in the meetings that took the decisions. I am told by another mole in the ECB that the decision to penalise Durham was taken on a train and then endorsed by an ECB meeting conducted by telephone conference. If that is so, it is not the way to arrive at such decisions.

If the ECB was to take such unprecedented steps, surely a document should have been produced to explain the rationale for them, with a reference to the regulations, for the consideration of those taking the decision. I challenge the ECB to publish details of the process. It is not clear to me, or my two moles—or many people in the cricketing world to whom I have spoken—how the decision was reached.

I have been speaking to people in and connected with the ECB in the past few weeks, and I do not think that openness and transparency are the first things that come to mind when the ECB is mentioned. Matters to do with financial regulations should be in public documents. The Rugby Football Union’s financial regulations are published on its website. What has the ECB got to hide in not releasing the information—unless it is to cover up the reasoning for and justifications of the punitive measures it took?

I want to explore how the decision was reached and who took it. The press has raised concerns about the role of Colin Graves, including his role in relation to Yorkshire cricket. It is clear that he, a wealthy man—or his family—bailed out Yorkshire county cricket club. Without that support it would clearly be in the same position as Durham.

Some have suggested that Mr Graves took the action because there would be a financial benefit to Yorkshire and other teams, as there would be one fewer ground at which to hold test matches. I have no evidence to prove that, and I certainly do not suggest that that was the sole reason for the decision. However, in his interview in The Daily Telegraph, Mr Graves claims that he no longer has any financial interest in Yorkshire cricket. I understand that he has put the debt, which is £80 million, into a family trust, which someone else now operates. All well and good, perhaps, but he should explain who the beneficiaries of the trust are.

The actions that Mr Graves has taken as a board member of the ECB will clearly benefit not him directly, perhaps, but his family. In most organisations or companies, an arrangement of that kind would mean absenting oneself from the decision in question. That is not because the individual would personally be trying to gain from it, but because of the idea that someone should not be seen to influence something that they or their family could benefit from directly. Mr Graves needs to explain the relationship.

I understand from my mole that at the meeting in question there were other ECB members who did not take part. In one case that was because the member used to play for Kent, which would benefit from Durham’s relegation. If that applied to one board member, why did it not apply to someone with a family interest in a club that would benefit from Durham’s situation? I do not say for a minute that that is why Mr Graves took the decision, but in any organisation decision making needs to be seen to be open and transparent, and beyond reproach, because of the possibility that decisions will be questioned.

Another thing that came up in the Daily Telegraph interview is the way in which county cricket gets test matches, bidding for them and having to pay the ECB for them. The way cricket operates in this country is that clubs generate players locally, to play at national and international level. The ECB generates large amounts of cash from television rights for covering test matches. I am told that something like 60% of that is retained by the ECB and less than 40% is returned to clubs. That is clearly the wrong way round. The clubs produce first-class players and need support at grass-roots level, and should be getting it. My mole also tells me that the ECB has reserves of £73 million. Money is sitting there that could be used at local level, not just to support existing clubs but to bring tomorrow’s generation of kids into cricket.

There are also allegations—I have no evidence for them, but my mole tells me that this is quite open—that being an ECB member involves quite a good life, as far as the way it spends money to support its executives is concerned. That is up to the ECB, if it is what it wants to do, but if it means starving county cricket of much needed resources, that cannot be right.

I should like the Minister to think about the fact that while the ECB boards money centrally and does not use it to support county cricket, public money is being used to support local cricket. In the case of Durham, there has been £3.9 million from Durham County Council and £800,000 from the local enterprise partnership. Some £6 million was put into Glamorgan on a local basis. Can it be right that in this country the ECB generates huge amounts of money from television rights and other things, which does not go to local clubs, while we expect the taxpayer to support local clubs, because people want them and enjoy them? It cannot be right.

The lack of transparency continues in the way the club operates at the moment. I want to talk about the appointment of its new board. It was announced a few weeks ago that Sir Ian Botham would be the chair of the new Durham board. It is a very strange situation; I was told of his appointment on the day of the announcement about deduction of points and relegation. He was appointed several weeks later. A condition set by the ECB was that he should become chair of the new Durham county cricket club.

Personally, I have nothing against Mr Botham; he has made a huge contribution to English cricket and should be commended on his tireless charity work throughout the country. However, there is a question over how independent he will be as chair. Is he speaking there on behalf of the ECB or on behalf of Durham? Interestingly, in the last few weeks—since he was appointed—he has got good headlines, but he has said nothing at all about the way in which Durham as a club has been treated regarding the points deduction. It will
be interesting to see over the coming weeks whether he will be a real champion for the club or just a mouthpiece of the ECB.

My next point is about the reformation of the board and what role the ECB will have in appointing the board's new directors. Is that yet another condition of the loan? If it is, Durham county cricket club will basically be an arm's length organisation of the ECB, with individuals who do not question anything the ECB does, but simply implement instructions from on high. That cannot be right; it is not in the best interests of cricket in this country, including County Durham, and many fans who loyally support the club will have a very low opinion of it.

What concerns me in all this is that the fans—the important people who support cricket in this country and in County Durham—seem just to have been completely forgotten in this entire process. Have their opinions been taken on board? Have they been consulted? Have they been given information? Clearly not, and that cannot be right if we want vibrant local cricket on a regional level in this country.

On the ECB and its finances, I have mentioned the situation whereby money is kept separate and some is then sent to clubs. The interview with Colin Graves in The Daily Telegraph mentions a change in that clubs in future that do not get test matches will be given up to £1 million. Again, we do not know how that figure has been arrived at. Likewise, the arrangement whereby clubs compete for test matches is to be scrapped. I welcome that, because in future, clubs such as Durham—well, Durham has been taken out of the equation, but other clubs—will not have to pay punitive charges up front to the ECB to secure a test match.

We need a more fundamental look at the way in which English cricket is financed. Clubs such as Durham, which have been completely taken out of test cricket by this decision, will not be helped by the change, but the important thing is that we know how decisions about other clubs are taken. Which club gets which test match will be to be scrapped. I welcome that, because in future, clubs such as Durham—well, Durham has been taken out of the equation, but other clubs—will not have to pay punitive charges up front to the ECB to secure a test match.

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A condition of the Government's providing that money should be that the ECB reforms the way in which it operates. Transparency has to be one of the key issues. Such things as having £73 million in reserve cannot be right in this situation. Is the current model sustainable in the long term? We cannot have a situation in which public money goes into supporting English cricket, but also because of a sense of loyalty to their local team—have been completely disregarded. What is the purpose of the ECB? Is it to protect its own interests and be a cosy club, or is it to support fans and young people who actively want to participate, and to encourage people to get involved in cricket? That is the clear question. This type of secrecy and lack of transparency cannot continue in 2016.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir David? I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for securing the debate. I am not sure that I will be able to continue with the detailed forensic analysis, but I will do my best.

I got to know about this issue, as we all did, from our local press in the north-east and from the volume of emails that suddenly came into my inbox from local people who were deeply concerned about the relegation decision on 3 October. I have pursued the issue alongside my hon. Friend, because I am currently chair of the northern group of Labour MPs.

For those who are not aficionados of Durham cricket club, I will give a quick résumé. It was established in 1882 and had minor county status until December 1991, when it was awarded first-class status. It was the first cricket club to be given the status for 70 years, and it was one of 18 first-class county cricket clubs in England and Wales.

Durham's first-class county status was made conditional on the building of a new test match-standard cricket ground, on which work started in 1990. The Riverside ground, in my hon. Friend's constituency, was completed in 1995, and the headquarters of Durham county cricket club have been there ever since. In 2010, the club signed a sponsorship deal with Emirates airline that gave the sponsor stadium-naming rights for six years. That contract was extended for a further seven years in February.

Durham has won the county championship three times, most recently in 2013 and, before that, in 2008 and 2009. It also won the Friends Provident trophy in 2007 and the Royal London one-day cup in 2014. As a minor county, it won the championship seven times, and was the first minor county ever to beat a first-class county in the Gillette cup when it beat Yorkshire in 1973.
That might be an important point, given what my hon. Friend said about the influence of Yorkshire. When Durham was still a minor county, it went for a record 65 matches without defeat between 1976 and 1982. I could go on with various plaudits about the club. I am trying to demonstrate that it was an extremely good club that did a huge amount for cricket and raised the profile of cricket in the north-east. That has made the relegation decision so very hard to bear for local people.

Durham county cricket club filed its accounts late, and those accounts showed that it owed £7.5 million. The retiring chairman of the club, Clive Leach, admitted that it could not meet its liabilities for the year, but the situation was very much presented as a series of cash flow difficulties, rather than a need to go immediately into insolvency or administration. We also know—I will say more about this later—that the club was applying for some additional funding that would have helped with the situation. Now, the ECB has agreed to help the club with its debt problems by giving it £3.8 million of financial aid, which will go towards allowing the club to maintain its commitments to salaries and to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and to meet operating costs. It will also settle some of the club’s substantial debts, and the focus will then be on restructuring the existing debts.

Mr Jones: Is it not a nonsense that nearly £900,000 of that is actually money owed to the ECB for the test match?

Dr Blackman-Woods: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I will talk later about the letter I have written to the ECB and the response I received. What is most interesting about the letter is what is not in it, rather than what is. The money owed to the ECB is not mentioned.

Currently, there is an offer of support—£3.8 million of financial aid—that is tied to restructuring, but it is also, as my hon. Friend so clearly outlined, allied to a series of sanctions. Durham will be relegated to the second division of the Specsavers county championship and will start the 2017 season with a 48-point penalty in the competition, a four-point penalty in the NatWest Blast and a two-point penalty in the Royal London one-day cup. All non-player related ECB competition prize money due to Durham for the 2016 season is to be refunded to the ECB or withheld until all debts owed by the club to the ECB have been settled. The club will not carry out any future capital redevelopment works without the prior agreement of the ECB, and the club is to be subject to a revised salary cap. There is an indication that all those measures will be subject to review and ongoing scrutiny by the ECB.

As my hon. Friend so clearly set out, this punishment is unprecedented. Never has the ECB imposed such a severe penalty on a club, nor has any punishment been so wide-ranging, including a financial penalty, a points penalty, relegation and the removal of the ability to host test cricket. What Durham can do is quite limited.

Mr Jones: I am very interested in the way my hon. Friend is describing the penalties. Does she agree that Durham cricket club is now basically owned and run by the ECB?

Dr Blackman-Woods: My hon. Friend again makes an excellent point. That is what it feels like, but this is about the hugely damaging nature of the penalties for the future. The penalties will prevent the club from easily getting back to the first division or getting into a position of financial viability. That is the underlying worry that we all have. As the team will no longer be in the top division, it will not have matches with county clubs such as Yorkshire and Lancashire, which bring quite a lot of crowds because they are quite close to Durham. Instead, the club will play counties such as Essex and Kent, and it will be much harder for those supporters to get to Durham. The club anticipates that gate numbers are likely to be reduced because of the penalties, and it will be difficult to increase those.

There will also be a knock-on impact on the local community, because the penalties strip Durham of its right to hold test matches. It is the test matches that bring new people into watching cricket. Some constituents are concerned about an impact on the area’s economy because restaurants, pubs, guest houses and hotels will lose money, and the area is already struggling economically.

As I said earlier, the ECB interestingly failed to mention to me—in fact, it, seemed to have failed to take this into account when it was putting the sanctions in place—that representations had been made to Durham County Council and the local enterprise partnership to see what they could do to help the club overcome its cash flow difficulties and financial problems. The club received a loan—£300,000—from the LEP on 16 October, which was only a couple of weeks after the ECB made the relegation decision on 3 October. Why could the ECB not have waited at least a couple of weeks to find out what Durham County Council was going to do, if anything, to help the club? In fact, the council did a lot on 16 October to help the club, agreeing to it becoming a community interest company, which means that it cannot be sold privately. That was important because the previous private sale of Durham county cricket club brought substantial debt. That did not seem to be acknowledged anywhere by the ECB.

A £3.74 million programme of financial assistance to Durham County Council was agreed; effectively, the council has taken shares in the community interest company. It has also been promised a share of special fee payments. Previously—this does not seem to have been acknowledged by the ECB—the council loaned the club £4.3 million in two tranches. The local community—if we can say this—via the council, was trying to do its bit to acknowledge the difficulty and see the club through a difficult period so that things could improve a bit and the club could accept some restructuring.

I chair the northern group of Labour MPs, which met on 18 October to discuss the issue, ably led by my hon. Friend, who knew some of the details. I agreed to write to the chief executive officer of the ECB and to the Chair of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport to ask whether he would consider having an inquiry into the issue. I received a reply from the ECB on 4 November and from the Chair of the Select Committee on 30 November.

The letter that I wrote as chair of the northern group was pretty similar to the letter written by my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham. We outlined our concerns about how the decision had been made, particularly the lack of transparency on how the matter
had been handled. We outlined our basic understanding of the club’s financial situation, and we acknowledged the need for financial assistance from the ECB, but we wanted to know what discussions had taken place between the ECB and the club before the relegation decision was made. We asked the ECB to set that out clearly so that we could have a better understanding.

We asked how the sanctions were presented to the club. Were the sanctions up for negotiation, with an opportunity for the club to challenge them, or were they pretty much, as we were all told, take it or leave it? We asked for more information about the decision-making process. I was alarmed to hear my hon. Friend say that this might have happened on a train via some sort of telephone conversation, because in our letter we asked how the decision was made and who was involved. In particular, we wanted to know how the ECB arrived at the range of sanctions that were applied and the regulations that had been used. We said that the sanctions seemed rather extreme. We also said how illogical it was to strip Durham of its status as a test cricket venue, because that is the only possible way for the club to get itself out of financial difficulty. The sanctions seem extraordinarily punitive and stupid if the ECB really is interested in keeping cricket going in Durham. We highlighted some issues with the local economy of the north-east, which the ECB does not seem to have taken on board at all.

It is sad that the letter of reply from Tom Harrison did not answer any of our questions. The letter contained little detail. There were some good things, and I will start with those. We asked for a meeting with him, which he has offered. We will take him up on that offer in the coming weeks—we have asked him to come to speak to the northern group of MPs. I will follow that up. He also assured us that the actions had been taken with the “express intention of saving, preserving and growing cricket in the North East; that is…our primary objective.” Well, if that is his objective, he is not going about it in the right way at all. He said that the ECB had been working hard with Durham to find a solution to its financial problems, but there was nothing outlining the nature of that work, what the ECB was doing, or anything like that.

Tom Harrison said that Durham’s financial problems were the “most significant” he had seen but, again, he gave no evidence. That does not seem to chime with what we have heard about the situation at other clubs, or were they pretty much, as we were all told, take it or leave it? We asked for more information about the decision-making process. I was alarmed to hear my hon. Friend say that this might have happened on a train via some sort of telephone conversation, because in our letter we asked how the decision was made and who was involved. In particular, we wanted to know how the ECB arrived at the range of sanctions that were applied and the regulations that had been used. We said that the sanctions seemed rather extreme. We also said how illogical it was to strip Durham of its status as a test cricket venue, because that is the only possible way for the club to get itself out of financial difficulty. The sanctions seem extraordinarily punitive and stupid if the ECB really is interested in keeping cricket going in Durham. We highlighted some issues with the local economy of the north-east, which the ECB does not seem to have taken on board at all.

That is extraordinary. At the time, I did not realise that the regulations were sitting on my hon. Friend’s desk—he got them through another avenue. We will now formally ask for the regulations to be given to us, and we will ask for a more detailed explanation.

Mr Jones: A simple thing that the ECB could do today is to explain to the public not only how the decision was made but how the calculation came together. Clearly, using its own financial regulations, there is no possible way for the ECB to get to this figure.

Dr Blackman-Woods: Absolutely. We need to have far more information in the public domain, particularly on how the decision was made.

Tom Harrison concludes:

“We understand that these conditions are difficult for the club”.

What an understatement. The ECB has plunged the club into a really difficult, if not impossible, situation, and all he talks about is the ECB’s hope that restructuring will help the club. He also says:

“A strong, financially robust Durham County Club is a huge asset for the game.”

He talks about the club’s importance to supporting cricket in the north-east, but there is nothing on how the club will do that.

I intend to write back to challenge most of the points in that letter. I have a helpful response from the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, who has invited us to talk to him about the particular issues with this decision that we think need to be subjected to much more public scrutiny. There are also the issues with Durham County Council, the local enterprise partnership and how the ECB and, indeed, perhaps the Government, will consider support from the public for clubs such as Durham.

The saddest thing in the ECB’s response is that it has consistently failed to acknowledge that the club operates in difficult local economic circumstances. There are not huge numbers of businesses with lots of money to give to the club, and there are not huge numbers of wealthy benefactors. We are in a much more difficult and much more disadvantaged situation than many other clubs. The ECB said in the letter that it had singled out Durham because it wanted Durham to act as a deterrent to other clubs that might think they could get a loan from the board or financial support from the ECB, which is truly shocking. The ECB has failed, at every level, to acknowledge the difficult circumstances that Durham faces. Instead of exemplary penalties, the ECB should have been thinking about how to help Durham address its difficult financial and economic situation. That is the biggest challenge that we need to send back to the ECB today.

3.58 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for raising this important issue. He has always been a firm advocate for his constituency, his county and his region, and on this issue he is no different.

I have a deep love for the game of cricket. I played to county level as a teenager, and I know what cricket can do to unite communities. Cricket is a sport of which the...
UK can be proud. It is enjoyed by schoolboys and girls, and by spectators who may be immobile in their home. I am proud to be talking about such an important issue today.

From what we have already heard, we can agree that the situation surrounding Durham county cricket club is serious and has ramifications beyond the club. Nobody disputes that the club found itself in difficult financial circumstances, but it is fair to say that the rescue package offered by the England and Wales Cricket Board has satisfied few people. It will not be lost on people involved with the club that the ECB has said openly that it hopes that its action will serve as a deterrent to other clubs. Although the club’s immediate future appears safe, it has been stripped of the ability in the long term to generate additional revenue through prestigious test match fixtures under an ECB-mandated ban, depriving up to 15,000 people per match across the region of the opportunity to see English cricket at the very top level.

As we have heard, the knock-on effect to local businesses will be substantial. Businesses benefit hugely from the test series, which brings sell-out crowds and overseas visitors. Publicans and hotel owners have already remarked how their businesses will be hit due to lower footfall, at a time when people in the local tourism industry are already concerned about what will happen post-Brexit.

It is welcome that one-day and Twenty20 international cricket will still be played at the Riverside ground. I also welcome Sir Ian Botham as chair of Durham county cricket club, and I wish him the best of luck in restoring the club’s finances and rebuilding it as a leading force in county cricket. However, for many, that is scant relief and by spectators who may be immobile in their home. I feel that he has put a cat among some pigeons somewhere and an advocate in Parliament, has been clearly heard. I do not know about any moles that he has, but I certainly feel that he has put a cat among some pigeons somewhere.

The points deductions for all competitions mean that the club will start in the second division on minus 48 points, which will hamper its ability to be competitive in future as it struggles to keep its star players. In competing at the highest level and providing the ground and infrastructure required by the ECB to host test cricket in the first place, the club appears to have been a victim of its own success. Some may say that it overreached itself in order to compete with Lord’s, the Oval, and Headingley, but questions have been raised about how the ECB has encouraged clubs to blind-bid for test matches, while guaranteeing a quota for London grounds; ultimately, it has not been an equitable or transparent process.

Can the Minister push the ECB to be more open about how county clubs bid on test cricket, to ensure that it is available to everyone throughout the country and not concentrated at a few clubs? Can he also get assurances from the ECB that it is still committed to maintaining first-class cricket in the north-east of England and making it accessible throughout the country? Furthermore, can he also ask the ECB to detail how it came to decide on the severity of the sanctions taken against Durham county cricket club? Given that other first-class clubs have significantly higher debts than Durham did at the time, will the ECB ensure that rules to maintain the stability and competitiveness of the league are evenly applied in future?

As I said from the outset, we cannot ignore Durham county cricket club’s situation. We must have a sustainable financial model for our top-class cricket clubs. However, many top-flight clubs have high debts that would be unsustainable without test matches or wealthy financial backers, while others have experienced financial problems and required local authority backing to sustain them.

The ECB should take action to ensure a more transparent and equitable funding model for top-class cricket, to keep it accessible to all and fair to our clubs. I hope that the Minister has taken note of the many great points made in this debate, and I urge him to give answers that will be satisfactory to everyone here and those who enjoy Durham county cricket club.

4.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr Rob Wilson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) on securing this debate and on what can only be described as the forthright contributions that he and others have made. The sports Minister would like me to put on record her apologies for not being here; she is attending an international conference in Abu Dhabi on cultural protection. If it is any small consolation, I am a cricket-mad watcher and player, so I have a little knowledge about cricket that I hope to contribute to this debate.

We can be in no doubt about the depth of feeling about the recent challenges faced by Durham county cricket club, which have been described with passion and conviction in this debate. The great interest that the hon. Member for North Durham takes in Durham county cricket club’s well-being, as both a supporter and an advocate in Parliament, has been clearly heard. I do not know about any moles that he has, but I certainly feel that he has put a cat among some pigeons somewhere in London.

I share the hon. Gentleman’s concern about Durham’s situation. The club has made some major contributions to English cricket, as others have said, since it joined the ranks as the newest of 18 first-class counties in 1992. Durham was the first minor county to achieve first-class status in more than 70 years, which highlights the mountain it has climbed in the past couple of decades. The county demonstrated its ambition early, when Ian Botham agreed to play for it in its initial first-class season.

Durham has gone on to bigger and better things, providing world-class, home-grown England players such as Steve Harmison and current captain Paul Collingwood—a former England T20 world cup winner—as well as having won the county championship on three occasions, as others have said, with the last time as recently as 2013. My own memory spans back to Paul Collingwood’s century against the West Indies in the 2007 test match at the Riverside when he became the first local Durham player to hit a test century at the ground.

It is a matter of great regret to all cricket lovers that Durham has had such serious financial problems recently. The fact that it will have to begin next season in division 2 of the county championship is clearly not considered a satisfactory outcome for the county. The ECB contends that it felt that there was a possibility that Durham
would cease to exist, which would obviously have been an even greater loss to the area. The ECB therefore provided a £3.8 million package of funding in what it saw as the most viable way to secure the cricket club’s continued existence. I recognise that many supporters will not agree that the totality of the terms is a good solution, but it should be essential for all parties to share the end goal of securing the future of Durham—not just saving cricket in the north-east, but developing and growing it.

I understand that the ECB has been working with Durham to preserve the club in the face of financial problems that the ECB, as the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) said, regards as the most significant that it has seen in the professional game. I also understand that the ECB has worked with the chief executive and the board of the club throughout the last year and consulted with its stakeholders to ensure that Durham can continue to play in all three domestic competitions.

Mr Kevan Jones: I thank the Minister for how he has responded. Can he ask his ministerial colleague whether she can get an explanation from the Department of how the points were reached? It is clear from the ECB’s own financial regulations that it cannot make those penalties. That is a basic answer expected by cricket fans in the north-east and Durham.

Mr Wilson: I can do better than that. I had a conversation with the sports Minister when I found out that I would be responding to this debate. She has agreed to meet the hon. Gentleman—and the hon. Member for City of Durham too, should that be appropriate—and will do so as soon as it can be arranged to everyone’s convenience. The hon. Gentleman can then ask her those questions directly.

The ECB support included making an advance on the annual fee payment of nearly £1.3 million, with which it intended Durham to be able to meet pressing ongoing salary, HMRC and operating costs. The ECB has informed the Department for Culture, Media and Sport that its board felt that the cricketing conditions attached to that support reflected the scale and gravity of Durham’s accumulated financial issues.

The hon. Gentleman asked about concerns around the decision-making process. Obviously I have not been party to the mechanics of that process or to the entirety of the ECB rulebook—he may have more access to that than I do because of his moles. However, if there is any discrepancy, I urge transparency. I understand that the ECB has offered to meet the hon. Members; I encourage them to take up that offer as soon as possible.

I understand those who primarily see the local impact and who feel that the penalty is particularly harsh. The Riverside has hosted international cricket every year since 2000 and it will host it again in 2017 in a T20 international against the West Indies. Removal of test status may be an unpalatable penalty, but the ECB believes it is an necessary part of the response to enable the club’s financial recovery. It has confirmed that Durham will continue to generate revenue via the TV deal with Sky by hosting international T20 and white ball cricket, despite the removal of test match status.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the hoarding of income from fees. To be clear, the ECB is a full signatory to the Sport and Recreation Alliance code of conduct for rights owners, which pledges investment of broadcast revenue back into the grassroots of sport. I hope that that is of some comfort to him.

Mr Jones: If it is a 60:40 split, I am not sure how that can be interpreted. Obviously I will take this up with the sports Minister when I meet her, but it is about making sure that that revenue is going to grassroots cricket rather than the centre.

Mr Wilson: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, but I think it is best if he takes it up directly with the sports Minister when they meet.

The ECB and Durham will need to work together to bring back viable test cricket to the Riverside at the earliest opportunity. The ECB believes that there is a strong and sustainable future for Durham in meeting the growing demand for white ball cricket that will inspire the next generation, and an attractive growth opportunity to inspire fans to attend and generate a sustainable income for the business, ensuring that the club returns to a firm financial footing.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the ECB does not currently publish its regulations governing points deductions, but in the light of these events it is now reviewing that position. I hope that it will proceed quickly to the right conclusion so that concerned stakeholders can benefit from improved transparency. Indeed, such rules are always better in the public domain.

The hon. Gentleman raised some concerns about Colin Graves. I know that disquiet has been felt in some quarters over the ECB chairman’s role in relation to connections to Yorkshire county cricket club and the awarding of test matches to particular venues. Of course, any allegations of improper behaviour should be taken very seriously indeed, but the ECB has again reiterated that it believes that such claims are entirely unfounded and that the chairman neither derives benefit from the Graves trust nor plays a role in match allocation.

Mr Jones: I must put it on the record that I did not accuse Mr Graves of anything. It is just that he needs to be completely transparent about his relationship with Yorkshire, including how the trust operates. I certainly did not accuse him of any wrongdoing.

Mr Wilson: I am glad that we have been able to clear that up and that it is on the record. I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that absolutely clear. That cat among the pigeons is off on another trek.

It would not be appropriate for the Government to become involved in the financial affairs of individual clubs. However, the Government’s new sports strategy, “Sporting Future”, which was published last December, makes the wider governance of sport a high priority. It contains a requirement for national governing bodies, including the ECB, that are in receipt of public funding to agree to a new code for sports governance. The new sports governance code was launched last December and will come into force from the next funding cycle in April 2017. One of its requirements is that organisations must have strong leadership in place, with the right checks and balances to minimise the likelihood of integrity issues arising.
The Government are fully committed to tackling corruption in sport at all levels. Working closely with our arm’s length bodies, we will continue to work with domestic and international sports stakeholders in the wider fight to eliminate corruption from sport. We expect all sports bodies, including the ECB, to adhere to the principles of good governance, financial stability, and transparency. The new code will help to promote those principles to all bodies in receipt of public funding.

Sport England is providing £20 million to the ECB over the current funding period to help to deliver on its challenging whole sport plan to increase participation in the wonderful sport of cricket, as well as focusing on talent development in the women’s games and in disability cricket.

**Mr Jones:** Is that £20 million conditional on the ECB signing up to that code? It should be, because the transparency that the Minister says the Government want is clearly something that we need to force on the ECB.

**Mr Wilson:** I hope to come to that very point in just a moment.

In addition, £7.5 million will go directly from Sport England to the Cricket Foundation to extend the Chance to Shine grassroots cricket programme, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman is well aware of, for a further three years. Since 2010, Sport England has invested more than £42 million in community projects and facilities to get more people playing cricket, aiming to reach more than 400,000 young people and develop more than 1,200 new satellite clubs on school sites.

In the hon. Gentleman’s constituency of North Durham, more than £67,000 of Sport England funding has been invested into five community projects and facilities since 2010. For example, Burnmoor Cricket Juniors and Chester-le-Street cricket club have benefited from getting more young people involved in the game and from improvements to pitches—this is literally grassroots investment. Across County Durham as a whole, more than £379,000 has been invested by Sport England in 23 community cricket clubs and facilities. These are the kinds of clubs at which public investment must be targeted. Through that investment, we have greater potential to nurture new Harmisons and Collingwoods in the future for the benefit of both Durham and England—although some may argue that we need them out in India right now.

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** It is really helpful to have on record the money going into grassroots cricket, but one of the points that we have been trying to make this afternoon is that inspiring young people to get involved in cricket and building up local cricket grounds partially depends on having a cricket club in Durham that is able to host international test matches. It is a way of bringing world-class cricket to the area to inspire young people and others. We do not want to see that money wasted or given to grassroots cricket without looking at test cricket as well.

**Mr Wilson:** I understand the concern about test cricket and I am sure there will be further debate about it when the hon. Members meet the ECB. However, international cricket will continue at Durham county cricket club with Twenty20 internationals, including against the West Indies next year. I hope that means that international cricket, at least in the form of limited overs games, will be able to continue at Durham, and let us hope that in the not-too-distant future full-blown test cricket can come back to the Riverside ground.

The ECB is the custodian of the game, which must protect its health, and I agree that it is important that cricket in Durham continues to thrive, not only for elite performance but for those thousands of young people and amateur players who look forward to their weekend or after-school games. Increased participation is vital to the lifeblood of any sport, helping to feed the elite level from a healthy grassroots base.

Finally, a strong, financially robust Durham county cricket club would be a highly desirable outcome from this process and a huge asset for the game, allowing Durham to continue to play a vital role in developing England talent, enriching our domestic competitions and supporting the wider growth of the game. As I have already said, I understand that the ECB has offered to meet the hon. Gentleman and the other members of the northern group of Labour MPs at their convenience; I hope that meeting takes place very soon. I also understand that Durham is now looking forward to the coming season with the aim of returning to the top tier of the county championship at the first opportunity. I wish Durham the very best of luck in that ambition, and in securing a more prosperous and sustainable future.

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** Securing a more prosperous and sustainable future.

4.21 pm

**Mr Kevan Jones:** I thank the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) from the Opposition Front Bench for their contributions. The Minister did very well in outlining the importance of cricket in communities such as Durham at a grassroots level, and my hon. Friend also stressed its importance. However, if public money is going to the ECB, it must be conditional on full transparency, because as a result of what has happened there is now a level of mistrust among cricket fans in the north-east and people from other clubs who have spoken to me over the last few weeks. For credibility purposes, the ECB could do itself a great favour if it shone a spotlight on some of the ways in which it operates. In some cases, those ways of operating lead to suspicions and accusations, even if those suspicions and accusations are unfounded.

**Mr Rob Wilson:** I forgot to answer that point when the hon. Gentleman made it earlier during my remarks. The £20 million funding from Sport England is subject to the current cycle of requirements and assurance processes that runs to 17 April next year. The new governance code will go even further and will apply to future funding agreements between Sport England and the ECB. I hope that clears up that particular issue.

**Mr Jones:** It does, and I thank the Minister for that clarification. This is an important issue and it will be one of the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and I will raise when we meet the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). I will put on the record my thanks for the Minister’s courtesy in informing me herself that she was not going to be here. There are some Ministers who could take lessons from the way she interacts with parliamentary colleagues.
The issue of transparency is an important one, because without transparency I do not think any public money should be put into the ECB. As for the way forward for Durham county cricket club, we need a vibrant club. It has a large amount of support from local people, who love it for the sport it provides.

However, the one thing that the ECB could do that would restore some faith in it in the north-east would be to review the points penalty, because, as I think I have explained today, no one can justify how that penalty was arrived at. If the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting, most cricket supporters in the north-east, and certainly my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham and I want a vibrant way forward for the cricket club, then going into the new season without the 48-point penalty would be a step forward. That would be seen as fair and it would mean that the ECB could at least get some credibility back. After the way it has acted over the past few months, it will take a lot of time and effort to get any credibility back among local supporters of cricket.

I will put on the record my thanks to you, Sir David, for chairing this debate, to my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting for her contribution, and to the Minister for his reply.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved.*

That this House has considered Durham County Cricket Club and the England and Wales Cricket Board.

4.25 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*
Written Statements

*Monday 14 November 2016*

**TREASURY**

**Off-payroll Review 2014-15**

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): The Treasury has concluded its annual evaluation of Departments’ compliance with the rules governing off-payroll appointments in central Government for 2014-15. Specific rules implemented in 2012 require Departments’ most senior staff to be on payroll, and Departments now have stronger powers to seek assurance in relation to the tax arrangements of their long-term, high-paid contractors who are off-payroll. These rules do not cover other off-payroll engagements, which will include a broader category of staff and public sector organisations. Below board-level off-payroll engagements

These rules apply where a new off-payroll engagement is for more than six months with a daily rate above £220. All engagements from 23 August 2012 meeting these criteria must include contractual provisions that allow the Department to seek assurance that the worker is either not a disguised employee, or, if they are, that they are paying the right amount of tax and national insurance contributions. If assurance is not provided the contract must be terminated. For any individuals where their engagement has either been terminated, ended as a result of the assurance process, or ended after assurance was sought but before it was received, Departments have been asked to provide personal details of the worker to HMRC for further investigation.

In accordance with the guidance, Departments adopt a risk-based approach in deciding which contractors to seek formal assurance from. In 2014-15, Departments sought assurance on the tax affairs of 3,034 of their contractors and informed the Treasury that they received satisfactory assurances from 2,530 of these engagements. In the remaining 504 cases, contracts were either terminated or came to an end before assurance was received. Referrals to HMRC occurred in all relevant cases across Government.

The review found that not all relevant contracts contained the clause required to allow Departments to seek assurance. At the time of the review period the rules had been in place for over two years, and it is reasonable to expect Departments to have these clauses in place. Departments can expect to be fined if breaches of this nature are found in the next review.

**Board-level and senior appointments**

The rules also specify that board-level appointments and those with significant financial responsibility should be on the payroll of the Department or other employing body, unless there are genuinely exceptional circumstances. Any such exceptions should not exist for longer than six months.

The review has uncovered two cases where there have been breaches of these rules. The Ministry of Defence and Department for Communities and Local Government have brought to my attention instances where a board member or senior official with significant financial responsibility at their arm’s length bodies remained off-payroll for longer than six months. Steps have been taken to resolve these breaches and, as the value of the salaries in question was considerably below the £58,200 annual rate at which Treasury monitors non-board level appointments, I have decided not to impose sanctions this time.

As in previous years, the review found instances where off-payroll workers at board level or with significant financial responsibility have been seconded to the Department from another organisation. Where the full value of payments from the Department to the individual are put through the payroll of the seconding organisation this has not been treated as a breach of the Treasury rules.

**Next steps**

The Treasury will continue to monitor Department’s compliance with these rules and will conduct a similar review for the 2015-16 financial year. The Treasury is keen to increase compliance both with the Treasury rules, and also with the ‘intermediaries legislation’—the tax rules for disguised employees.

While not directly covered by this review, the ‘intermediaries legislation’ will apply to some of the engagements covered by the Treasury rules, and the Government’s overall assessment is that compliance with this legislation, across the contractor population as a whole, is only one in 10. A separate consultation published on 26 May 2016 proposed moving the responsibility and liability for applying the intermediaries rules from the individual to the public sector engager or agency. The government will announce the outcome of that consultation shortly.

The statement and attachments can be viewed online at:


[HCWS252]

**HMRC Contract: Concentrix**

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) has concluded discussions with Concentrix regarding the negotiated early exit of its contract to investigate fraud and error in the tax credits system.

As previously announced to the House, HMRC acted quickly to address the unacceptable level of customer service that tax credits claimants faced when contacting Concentrix and as a result, HMRC took back a significant number of cases. All 181,000 cases HMRC took back from Concentrix have been finalised. As of 13 November HMRC has completed around 28,500 of the approximately 32,500 requests for review of Concentrix decisions (known as mandatory reconsiderations) and will continue to handle any new cases as they arise.

On 14 September, the House was informed that HMRC would not be extending its contract with Concentrix beyond its scheduled expiry date in May 2017. On 26 October, the House was further updated that HMRC had entered into discussions with Concentrix on a...
negotiated early exit from the contract. Those discussions have now concluded and the chief executive and permanent secretary of HMRC has decided to bring the contract to an early close.

As a result of the contract ending, around 250 Concentrix staff have transferred to HMRC following completion of appropriate checks and HMRC has put in place a programme of induction and training. All these new staff are to receive formal training and support from team members, their managers and from subject experts. Managers will also receive bespoke management training to assist them in supporting teams.

The latest estimated saving to the Exchequer from reducing fraud and error as a result of this contract is £193 million. The amount paid to Concentrix over the life of the contract is approximately £32.5 million.

The £32.5 million overall cost of the contract includes the following:

HMRC has paid approximately £15.3 million in 2016-17 with respect to work completed or work in progress at the end of the contract.

As part of this, HMRC has applied the provisions of the contract that allow for reductions in payment when Concentrix has not achieved the required levels of performance against the indicators. For 2016-17, HMRC reduced payments to Concentrix by £1.9 million, and over the lifetime of the contract payments to Concentrix were reduced by a total of £3.5 million.

HMRC has paid approximately £500,000 towards some of Concentrix’s exit costs from its subcontracts.

Tackling error and fraud in the tax credits system remains a priority for the Government, and HMRC will continue to bear down on this. However HMRC recognises that the service provided to tax credit claimants deteriorated in recent months, which is why HMRC has negotiated an early exit from this contract. The National Audit Office has announced a wider examination of the contract, and HMRC will be working with them on their report.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council: November 2016

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): The General Affairs Council (GAC) on Tuesday 15 November is expected to focus on: preparation for the December European Council; October European Council follow-up: the mid-term: review of the EU’s multiannual financial framework (MFF); the Commission work programme 2017 and a joint institutional declaration on legislative programming for the coming year; rule of law; and the roadmap for the European semester 2017.

Preparation for the December European Council

The annotated agenda for the December European Council has been issued and will cover: migration, security, economic and social development—youth, and external relations. In line with the PI’s commitment, the UK will play a full and constructive role at the December European Council and in discussions at the GAC to prepare it.

October European Council follow-up

The presidency will present an update on the implementation of the October 2016 European Council conclusions on migration, trade, Russia and other global and economic issues.

Mid-term review of the EU’s multiannual financial framework (MFF)

Following initial discussions in September and October, there will be a further discussion on the Commission’s proposals regarding the mid-term review of the multiannual financial framework.

Commission Work Programme 2017

Commission first vice-president Frans Timmermans will present the Commission work programme (CWP) 2017. The CWP is adopted annually by the European Commission. It contains a list of the legislative and non-legislative priorities that the Commission intends to bring forward in the course of the following calendar year.

Inter-institutional agreement on ‘better law-making’

The Council, Commission and Parliament are to agree a ‘joint declaration’ on the priorities for the EU for the year ahead, based on the Commission work programme 2017 which was published on 25 October. The presidency will update on progress at the GAC.

Rule of law

The Slovak presidency will present a paper, based on written returns from member states, assessing the effectiveness of the annual rule of law discussions among member states.

European Semester 2017

The presidency will present the timetable for the 2017 round of economic coordination with member states, otherwise known as the European semester.

[HCWS251]

[HCWS250]
Written Statements

Tuesday 15 November 2016

EDUCATION

Higher Education and Research Bill: EVEL


The English votes for English laws process applies to public Bills in the House of Commons. To support the process, the Government have agreed that they will provide information to assist the Speaker in considering whether to certify that Bill or any of its provisions for the purposes of English votes for English laws.

The memorandum provides an assessment of tabled Government amendments to the Higher Education and Research Bill, for the purposes of English votes for English laws, ahead of Commons Report. The Department’s assessment is that the amendments do not change the territorial application of the Bill.

This analysis reflects the position should all the Government amendments be accepted.

I have deposited a copy in the Library of the House of Commons.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

TRANSPORT

High Speed 2

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I would like to update the House on the progress of High Speed 2.

This Government are planning for the future and investing in world-class transport infrastructure to ensure that the UK can seize opportunities and compete on the global stage.

In a clear signal of how work is progressing on HS2 phase 1, this morning I am announcing that the following companies have been awarded the phase 1 enabling works contracts:

Area South—CS JV (Costain Group Plc, Skanska Construction UK Limited)
Area Central—Fusion JV (Morgan Sindall plc, BAM Nuttall Limited, Ferrovial Agroman (UK) Limited)
Area North-LM JV (Laing O’Rourke Construction Limited, J Murphy & Sons Limited).

These contracts are worth up to £900 million in total and cover the whole of phase 1. The works include archaeological investigations, site clearance and the setting up of construction compounds ahead of the start of the main civil engineering work.

Today I have published a command paper, “High Speed Two: From Crewe to Manchester; the West Midlands to Leeds and beyond”, and accompanying maps setting out the detail of my preferred route for HS2 from Crewe to Manchester, and from the West Midlands to Leeds, with junctions onto the existing network. This is known as HS2 phase 2b.

This means that following on from the 2013 consultation and work we have done since, I am pleased today to be confirming the majority of the route. There are also a number of cases, including the proposed route through South Yorkshire recommended by Sir David Higgins in a report earlier this year, where I am proposing substantial refinements. I am launching a consultation to seek the views of communities and other interested parties before reaching a decision on those sections next year.

In all, there are seven refinements on which we are consulting, these are:

On the western leg:

To move the previously proposed rolling stock depot at Golborne to a site north of Crewe;
To move the approach to Manchester Piccadilly 370 metres eastwards with the northern tunnel portal in Ardwick, to avoid direct impacts on residential properties and a school at West Gorton; and,
To move the route in the Middlewich—Northwich area in Cheshire up to 800 metres westwards.

On the eastern leg:

To move the route to the east of Measham in Leicestershire, avoiding the most significant impacts on local manufacturing businesses and development sites;
To go around instead of tunnel under East Midlands airport;
To amend the alignment of the preferred route as it passes through Long Eaton to reduce severance in the local community and reduce impacts on the highway network and existing rail infrastructure; and,
To move the alignment of the route from Derbyshire to West Yorkshire to reflect a change in the proposals for serving the Sheffield city region, as recommended by Sir David Higgins in his report “Sheffield and South Yorkshire” published in July 2016.

In order to ensure our case is robust we have of course considered alternatives to the phase 2b scheme, but we have found no alternative that could deliver the same level of benefit for the country.

I am also issuing safeguarding directions for the whole of the preferred phase 2b route today. This protects the preferred route from conflicting development. But it also means that those people who are most affected by the plans to build phase 2b will now be able to access statutory compensation.

In addition, I will be consulting on discretionary property schemes. These will go over and above what is required by law and give assistance to those who will be adversely affected by the railway. These schemes are the same as those currently in operation for people living along the phase 1 route and I aim to be able to confirm the schemes on which I am consulting for phase 2b next year.

Two of these schemes will enter into operation on an interim basis, from today; these are Express Purchase and Need to Sell. Further information on property schemes can be found at: www.gov.uk/hs2.
I am placing copies of the documents in the Libraries of both Houses. Following consultation I plan to make a decision on these route refinements next year and to bring forward a hybrid Bill on phase 2b to lay before Parliament in 2019.

HS2 is an ambitious and exciting project and we must seize the opportunity it offers to transform our country for future generations. The route decision I have published today takes us an important step closer to realising the full potential of HS2.

[HCWS253]
Written Statements

Wednesday 16 November 2016

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

EU-US Umbrella Agreement: Scrutiny Override

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock):
The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is responsible for the Government’s participation in European negotiations on the EU-US Umbrella Agreement which is a comprehensive data protection framework for criminal law enforcement co-operation. Due to rapid decision making at EU level the explanatory memorandum on the EU-US Umbrella Agreement, submitted for scrutiny to Parliament, was submitted late on 23 May 2016. Decisions on the signature text of the Umbrella Agreement were made by the Council of Ministers before Parliament could complete the process of scrutiny on the agreement. The proposals were:

Proposal for a Council decision on the signature, on behalf of the European Union, of an agreement between the United States of America and the European Union on the protection of personal information relating to the prevention, investigation, detection, and prosecution of criminal offences (8491/16).

Proposal for a Council decision on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Union, of an agreement between the United States of America and the European Union on the protection of personal information relating to the prevention, investigation, detection, and prosecution of criminal offences (8245/16).

The UK voted in favour of the signature part of the agreement at JHA Council on 20 May. This decision to vote in favour of the signature at Council and the delay in submitting the explanatory memorandum on the Umbrella Agreement resulted in a scrutiny override being triggered.

The reason for the delay in submitting the explanatory memorandum was due to negotiations of the Umbrella Agreement being brought forward at short notice, leaving member states with less time than usual to assess the text. I am very sorry that this shortened time scale did not allow normal scrutiny procedures to be followed and I hope that the House understands the reasons.

[HCWS262]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Ministerial Correction

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): My speech on the Opposition motion on the conflict and humanitarian situation in Yemen on 26 October contained two inaccuracies which I wish to correct.

I stated that “President Hadi had formally requested military action to restore his Government, while the Arab League and the Gulf Co-operation Council had both called for “all means and measures to protect Yemen and deter Houthi aggression”. I should have said that President Hadi had formally requested action, as noted in UN Security Council 2216 (2015), “from the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf and the League of Arab States to immediately provide support, by all necessary means and measures, including military intervention, to protect Yemen and its people from the continuing aggression by the Houthis”.

I also stated that “last month my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development hosted an event in New York that raised $100 million for the people of Yemen, on top of the £100 million contributed by the people of this country.” I should have said that in September my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development hosted an event in New York that raised $100 million for the people of Yemen, which included an additional package from the UK of £37 million of support to Yemen, bringing the total humanitarian funding for the crisis this year to £100 million contributed by the people of this country.

[HCWS259]

Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Baroness Anelay of St Johns), has made the following written ministerial statement:

On 1 and 2 November, I chaired the fifth meeting of the Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council in London. The council was attended by elected leaders and representatives from Anguilla, Ascension Island, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Montserrat, Pitcairn, St Helena, the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia, Tristan da Cunha and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

The key themes of discussion at this year’s council were the implications of the UK leaving the European Union, international trade and building the economic development of the territories, anti-corruption and beneficial ownership, governance, human rights and child safeguarding, climate change, pensions and health. Ministerial colleagues from the Departments for International Development, Exiting the European Union, International Trade, Health, Work and Pensions, and Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, as well as the Solicitor General, attended the discussions. The Minister for Europe and the Americas, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), met the Member of the Falklands Islands Legislative Assembly. Territory leaders also met the Foreign Secretary.

The council agreed a communiqué which identified priorities and set out a number of important commitments and areas for joint work in the year ahead. On the important issue of implications for the overseas territories of the UK’s exit from the European Union, we agreed to take forward future engagement through a new framework, the UK-Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council on European Negotiations (JMC-OT EN), to meet for the first time in the first quarter of 2017. Gibraltar will engage separately with the UK on EU exit issues given its different status under the EU treaties. We also agreed a shared ambition for a new UK-overses territories economic partnership, in particular to take the priorities of the overseas territories into account as the UK looks to establish future trade and investment arrangements with the wider world and to explore the inclusion of the overseas territories in future UK bilateral investment treaties.

The communiqué reflects the commitment of the Governments of the overseas territories and the UK to continue to work in partnership to achieve the vision set out in the June 2012 White Paper “The Overseas Territories: Security, Success and Sustainability”.

[HCWS262]
In line with our commitment in the White Paper, we will continue to report to Parliament on progress by Government Departments in implementing the commitments in the communiqué.

A copy of the communiqué has been published on the gov.uk website: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/overseas-territories-joint-ministerial-council-2016-communique.

I have arranged for the communiqué to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. [HCWS261]

**British Indian Ocean Territory**

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend, the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Baroness Anelay of St Johns), has made the following written ministerial statement:

On 24 March 2016 the former Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) informed the House that the Government would be carrying out further work on their review of resettlement policy in the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). I would now like to inform Parliament of two decisions which have been made concerning the future of BIOT.

Parliament will be aware of the Government’s review and consultation over the resettlement of the Chagossian people to BIOT. The manner in which the Chagossian community was removed from the Territory in the 1960s and 1970s, and the way they were treated, was wrong and we look back with deep regret. We have taken care in coming to our final decision on resettlement, noting the community’s emotional ties to BIOT and their desire to go back to their former way of life.

This comprehensive programme of work included an independent feasibility study followed by a full public consultation in the UK, Mauritius and the Seychelles.

I am today announcing that the Government have decided, against resettlement of the Chagossian people to the British Indian Ocean Territory on the grounds of feasibility, defence and security interests, and cost to the British taxpayer. In coming to this decision the Government have considered carefully the practicalities of setting up a small remote community on low-lying islands and the challenges that any community would face. These are significant, and include the challenge of effectively establishing modern public services, the limited healthcare and education that it would be possible to provide, and the lack of economic opportunities, particularly job prospects. The Government have also considered the interaction of any potential community with the US Naval Support Facility—a vital part of our defence relationship.

The Government will instead seek to support improvements to the livelihoods of Chagossians in the communities where they now live. I can today announce that we have agreed to fund a package of approximately £40 million over the next 10 years to achieve this goal. This money addresses the most pressing needs of the community by improving access to health and social care and to improved education and employment opportunities. Moreover, this fund will support a significantly expanded programme of visits to BIOT for native Chagossians. The Government will work closely with Chagossian communities in the UK and overseas to develop cost-effective programmes which will make the biggest improvement in the life chances of those Chagossians who need it most.

Parliament will also be aware that the agreements underpinning the UK/US defence facility will roll over automatically on 31 December if neither side breaks silence. In an increasingly dangerous world, the defence facility is used by us and our allies to combat some of the most difficult problems of the 21st century including terrorism, international criminality, instability and piracy. I can today confirm that the UK continues to welcome the US presence, and that the agreements will continue as they stand until 30 December 2036. [HCWS260]

**HOME DEPARTMENT**

National DNA Database Ethics Group

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): I am pleased to announce today’s publication of the eighth annual report of the National DNA Database Ethics Group. The group was established on 25 July 2007 to provide Ministers with independent ethical advice on the operation and practice of the National DNA Database.

I am grateful to the Ethics Group for their strategic advice concerning the use of biometric identifiers and for their continued oversight of the work of the National DNA Database Strategy Board which contributes to ensuring that robust procedures are in place to minimise DNA contamination and remove systematic errors in the forensic use of DNA.

The Ethics Group’s annual report can be viewed on the website of the National DNA Database Ethics Group and I am arranging for a copy to be placed in the Library of the House. [HCWS256]

Surveillance Camera Commissioner

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today laying a copy of the 2015-16 annual report of the surveillance camera commissioner before the House, as required by section 35 of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012. The report has also been published on the commissioner’s website.

The surveillance camera commissioner is an independent role appointed under section 34 of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 to encourage compliance with the surveillance camera code of practice, review the operation of the code, and provide advice about the code—including changes to it or breaches of it.

The current commissioner is Tony Porter, whose was appointed on 10 March 2014. [HCWS257]

**NORTHERN IRELAND**

Non-Jury Trial Provisions: Northern Ireland

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): Today my Department is launching a public consultation on Northern Ireland non-jury trial provisions contained within the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007. Sections 1 to 9 of the 2007 Act provide for a system of non-jury trial, applicable in particular circumstances, in Northern Ireland. These are temporary provisions which may be extended by order for a period of two years. The non-jury trial system was last extended in July 2015 and will expire on
31 July 2017 unless the “effective period” during which the provisions are in force is extended by order for a further two years.

The provisions for non-jury trial under the 2007 Act allow the Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland to certify that a trial on indictment is to be conducted without a jury in a specific case, provided a strict statutory test has been met. Today in Northern Ireland, there is a strong presumption for jury trials in all cases, with less than 2% of all Crown court cases per year held without a jury. However, the severe threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism and the presence of violent paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland continues to pose risks to the criminal justice system which can necessitate non-jury trials in a small number of cases.

This Government remain fully committed to seeing an end to non-jury trials in Northern Ireland, when safe and compatible with the interests of justice. There are no limits to the number of times non-jury trial provisions under the 2007 Act may be extended. However, the temporary nature of the provisions reflects the Government’s view that this is an exceptional system that ought to be reviewed on a regular basis and be kept in force for as short a time as necessary to uphold the effective administration of justice.

The public consultation being launched today on www.gov.uk and running for a period of 12 weeks will allow us to gather the widest possible set of views on the non-jury trial provisions in Northern Ireland. The responses will be used to inform my final decision on whether to seek to extend the provisions once again in Parliament next year.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Universal Credit

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): Across Great Britain we now have a solid foundation of universal credit delivery in every jobcentre and local authority. Over 400,000 claimants are receiving the new benefit and are being supported to build better futures for themselves.

Alongside this we are continuing our successful rollout of the universal credit full service for all new claimants. On 20 July 2016 I announced our rollout plans through to completion of the programme, including the jobcentres receiving the new service through to March 2017.

Today, I can announce the schedule for the remainder of the jobcentres through to completion of the rollout in September 2018. At this stage the vast majority of people will no longer be able to make a claim to income-based jobseeker’s allowance and employment and support allowance, income support, housing benefit or tax credits.

Details of the sites are in the table and they will be published later today on the www.gov.uk website.

Publication of these plans meets the Department’s commitment to give local authorities six months’ notice of implementation plans in their areas. The Department will make further announcements early in December on local authority funding for housing benefit support.

My Department will bring forward the relevant legislation for these sites in due course.

[HCWS255]
Written Statements

Thursday 17 November 2016

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Housing Policy

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): This week it was announced that almost 190,000 new homes were delivered in 2015-16, with over 30,000 of these as a direct result of “change of use”. This is welcome progress but we know that there is more we need to do. That is why we are working on a housing White Paper that will include measures to ensure more land is available in the right places, incentivise and speed up development, encourage a more diverse housing market and deliver support for ordinary working-class people.

The Government are absolutely committed to building more homes and will be making further announcements in due course.

[HCWS267]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council (21/22 November)

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): The Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council will take place in Brussels on 21 and 22 November 2016. Shan Morgan, the UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU, will represent the UK at the youth section of the Council. I will represent the UK at both the culture and the sport sections of the Council.

Youth

The Council will be asked to adopt draft conclusions on promoting new approaches in youth work to uncover and develop the potential of young people. The conclusions will recommend the need to promote effective and innovative cross-sectoral policies that can help young people realise their full potential. The UK intends to support the adoption of the conclusions.

The presentation will be immediately followed by a policy debate on youth engagement.

Culture

The Council is expected to present a progress report on the proposals for the revised audiovisual media services directive. The audiovisual media services directive seeks to ensure the effective operation of the internal market for television broadcasting services by ensuring the free movement of broadcasting services throughout the EU.

This will be followed by first reading on the proposal for a European year of cultural heritage (2018). The objective of this initiative is to raise awareness of the opportunities that cultural heritage bring, mainly in terms of intercultural dialogue, social cohesion and economic growth. At the same time, the European year aims at drawing attention to the challenges that cultural heritage is facing, including environmental and physical pressure on heritage sites and illicit trafficking of cultural objects. The UK intends to support this proposal.

The Council will then be invited to adopt a proposal to amend the European capitals of culture for the years 2020 to 2033 to extend access to EFTA/EEA countries. The UK Government are supportive of this proposal.

Finally there will be a public debate, “towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations”. This will discuss how the EU and its member states can cooperate to bring about a more strategic approach to culture in external relations.

Sport

The Council will seek adoption of its draft conclusions on sport diplomacy. The conclusions will acknowledge that sport is a possible tool in supporting intercultural, economic and political co-operation, and that its potential can be part of extending and strengthening contacts between the EU and third countries. The UK intends to support the adoption of these conclusions.

This will be followed by a public debate on the impact of sport on personal development. The UK intervention will be to demonstrate the work the UK is already carrying out in this area through participation, Olympic legacy and the sport strategy.

Other business

The French delegation will present information on reform of the European copyright framework. This will be followed by the Croatian and Irish delegations on the European capitals of culture 2020. The Italian delegation will then present information on “Facing crisis in Europe: Investing in Culture”.

The Council will also be presented with information on the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) meeting in Glasgow (19-20 November). This information will be provided by the EU member states representatives in WADA: Belgium, UK and Malta. This will be followed by the French delegation on development and specific features of the organisation of European sport. Finally there will be information from the Maltese delegation on the work programme of their incoming presidency.

[HCWS264]

HEALTH

NHS Professionals Ltd

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Lord Prior of Brampton) has made the following written statement:

I am today updating the House on the future of NHS Professionals Ltd (“the Company”).

The Company was set up as a limited company fully owned by the Secretary of State for Health in 2010. While it is the largest single supplier of flexible staffing to the national health service, with a bank of over 90,000 workers providing more than 2 million shifts every year, it currently works with only around a quarter of NHS trusts.

The Department of Health has therefore concluded that the Company requires significant investment to enable it to expand, so it can deliver improved services to even more NHS trusts and reduce their reliance on expensive agency staff—the bill for which is currently £3 billion annually, which diverts resources that could be better used for substantive staffing and improved patient care.
At the moment the Company works with 55 NHS trusts. As the largest provider of bank staff to the NHS, the Company is in a prime position to respond to the NHS's need for more cost-effective and better planned temporary staffing. It currently saves the NHS approximately £70 million a year by supplying bank staff to hospitals which are more affordable than those staff supplied by expensive agencies. We want to see the Company take advantage of this opportunity to expand its business, acting as a true alternative to expensive agencies. But the Company cannot do this without substantial investment to improve the services it offers.

Over the last year the Department has therefore been exploring a range of potential options to help the Company drive further value for the NHS.

Today I can announce that, following market analysis and a thorough appraisal of a business case, the Department’s preferred option is to create a joint venture partnership to bring in the necessary investment and expertise to the business and give the Company greater operational autonomy. The Department will sell a majority shareholding so that the Company is run and controlled by the new partner, which will carry the majority of the finance and operating risks of the business.

Contractual mechanisms will be used to ensure that the dual aims of creating a profitable business model while meeting the needs of NHS customers—delivering savings and a high-quality service—are correctly aligned and fully agreed upon.

The Department’s retention of a minority shareholding will also ensure there are no significant changes to the agreed purpose and/or objectives of the Company. This is backed up by the right to take back ownership of the Company in the event of any serious breach of the agreed main objectives.

A tendering process to find the right partner is being launched through an advert in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU). Potential investors will be subject to detailed evaluation to ensure value for money to the Government.

There will be no immediate impact on the approximately 600 corporate staff who are employed by the Company. The Company’s bank workers will also continue to book and work shifts for NHS trusts as usual.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Department for International Trade
(Non-executive Board Members)

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): I wish to update the House on the appointment of non-executive board members (NEBMs) at the Department for International Trade.

I am pleased to announce to the House that three independent NEBMs have been appointed to sit on our departmental board. A further NEBM has been appointed as chair of the board for UK Export Finance, who will also sit on our departmental board.

Those NEBMs are:
Mr Simon Walker, outgoing director-general of the Institute of Directors, as lead non-executive board member and also chair of the Nominations Committee.
Ms Julie Currie, chief financial and reporting officer at the Lloyds Bank Foundation, who alongside her duties as a non-executive board member will chair the Audit and Risk Committee.
Dr Pippa Malmgren, founder of DRPM Group, a respected political analyst with trade policy experience who will act as a non-executive board member.
Ms Noel Harwerth, current chair of GE Capital Bank Europe, who will join the UK Export Finance Board as chair, and will also be a NEBM on the DIT departmental board.

This is a significant milestone for our Department and I am proud of the talent and expertise represented on the board. Our NEBMs’ extensive business knowledge and experience of global trade and corporate governance will be of huge value to me and the Government as we shape the Department and forge the UK’s trade agenda and promote the UK as a place to do business with.

The new board members will work closely with me, my ministerial team and the executive team to provide independent scrutiny and advice and to assist the Department in delivering our priorities, which include an effective long-term strategy for the UK’s trade policy; promotion of UK exports; inward and outward investment; take-up of UK export finance; and promotion of the UK through the GREAT campaign. They will also advise on performance and the effective management of the Department.

These appointments come at the end of a highly competitive process. We launched our search for NEBMs in July through advertisements on the Centre for Public Appointments and Women on Boards websites. We received 181 applications, including exceptionally well-qualified individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, demonstrating the high level of interest there is in international trade.
Written Statements

Friday 18 November 2016

DEFENCE

Equitable Life Payment Scheme

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): The Equitable Life Payment Scheme (“the scheme”) started to make payments in 2011 and was due to close in 2014. The then Chancellor extended the scheme in 2014 to maximise the number of payments that could be made. He subsequently announced in the summer Budget 2015 that the scheme would close to new claims on 31 December 2015. From the beginning of 2016, the scheme began the process of winding down and completing all remaining claims. As the majority of these claims have now been paid, the scheme has today published its final progress report, which can be found at: www.gov.uk/equitable-life-payment-scheme. The report gives an outline of the history of the scheme, details the significant efforts that have been made to trace and pay as many policyholders as possible, and provides a distributional analysis of the payments that the scheme has made over its four years of operation. The report gives the final figures compiled by the scheme, which show that, as at 31 August 2016, the scheme has issued payments of over £1.12 billion to 932,805 policyholders. All the payments issued by the scheme have been free of tax. It should be noted that the closure of the scheme to new claims will not affect the yearly payments made by the scheme to with-profits annuitants, which will continue for the duration of those annuities. The scheme has written individually to all with-profits annuitants to make them aware of this.

In the summer Budget 2015, the then Chancellor also announced that, as part of scheme closure, payments to non-with-profit annuitant policyholders who were in receipt of pension credit would be doubled in early 2016. In fact the scheme succeeded in making the majority of these additional tax-free payments in December 2015, and all were completed by March 2016, providing additional help to this vulnerable group of policyholders.

UK Operations in Afghanistan: Reserves Call-Out Order

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mike Penning): With the expiry of the call-out order made on 1 November 2015[1], a new order has been made under section 56(1B) of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 to enable reservists to be called into permanent service in support of United Kingdom operations in Afghanistan.

Under the call-out order made on 1 November 2015, 146 reservists have been called out for operations. We anticipate a continued requirement for reservists, with the right skills and experience, over the period the new order will be in force. This is fully in line with our policy of having more capable, usable, integrated and relevant reserve forces.

The order took effect from the beginning of 9 November 2016 and ceases to have effect at the end of 8 November 2017.

[1] Call-out order authorising the call out of reserve forces for operations in Afghanistan, signed 1 November 2015.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): I attended the General Affairs Council on 15 November. The meeting was chaired by the Slovak presidency and held in Brussels.

The General Affairs Council discussed: the mid-term review of the multiannual financial framework; rule of law; legislative programming—the Commission Work programme 2017 and joint declaration; follow-up of the October European Council; preparation of the December European Council on 15/16 December and the European semester.


Multiannual financial framework

The presidency presented its proposed compromise text for the mid-term review of the multiannual financial framework. The presidency’s proposal allowed for some additional budget flexibility over the remaining years of the seven-year period, while respecting the principles of the original 2013 deal. Most member states agreed with the proposal and it was agreed that it would be used as the basis for a Council common position for discussions with the European Parliament. However, Italy expressed concerns on the level of support for migration and youth employment and placed a reserve on the agreement. The UK abstained.

Rule of law

This was the first evaluation of the rule of law at the General Affairs Council. The presidency presented conclusions which called for a more structured preparation of the discussions and more focused topics to ensure a coherent exchange of views. Most member states agreed with these conclusions. The presidency also suggested a further review in 2019 to consider turning the rule of law dialogue into an annual peer review process—this proposal divided member states and will require further discussion.

Legislative programming—Commission Work programme and joint declaration

First Vice-President of the Commission Frans Timmermans presented the Commission Work programme for 2017. A joint declaration of the EU institutions will outline the priorities and objectives for the year ahead for the EU based on the Commission Work programme. Themes for the joint declaration would be: jobs and growth, migration, energy and the digital single market.

The presidency will now discuss the draft joint declaration with the Commission and European Parliament.

Follow-up to the European Council of 20 and 21 October 2016

The presidency said it would aim to make progress on migration and trade between now and the December European Council. The presidency stated they had been
working to advance visa liberalisation (Georgia, Ukraine, Kosovo and Turkey), with a trilogue taking place on 16 November.

Preparation of the European Council of 15 and 16 December 2016

The draft agenda for the December European Council is migration, security, economic and social development and external relations. The Commission highlighted that they would like the agenda to cover external migration, with progress on reform of the common European asylum system, as well as strengthening external co-operation on security and defence.

European semester 2017

The European semester 2017 road map was presented and the annual growth survey was published on 16 November.

AOB

Italy presented its plans to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome in March 2017.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council (Defence)

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 14 November. He and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence attended the joint session of the Foreign Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council (Defence) on 14 November. The UK Ambassador to the EU Political and Security Committee (PSC), Angus Lapsley represented my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence at the Foreign Affairs Council (Defence) on 15 November. The Foreign Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council (Defence) were chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meetings were held in Brussels. Foreign Affairs Council


Turkey

The Council discussed Turkey in the light of recent developments in the country. The Council recalled the declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU of 8 November and agreed on the need to keep communications open with Turkey. No conclusions were adopted.

Eastern Partnership

Ministers exchanged views on recent developments in the six Eastern Partnership States (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine) and looked forward to the next EU-Eastern Partnership summit, to be held in November 2017 in Brussels. Conclusions were agreed. At the end of the discussion the Foreign Secretary debriefed Ministers on his recent visit to the Western Balkans noting that the EU and member states needed to be more visible and engaged in the region.

Syria

Ministers discussed the southern neighbourhood over lunch, focusing on Syria. Ms Mogherini informed the Council of her recent outreach efforts with key actors in the region, in line with the European Council mandate and in full support of the efforts of the UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura. The Council expressed its concern over the escalation of tensions in the region, and called for an end to the violence in Syria and support for the resumption of a political process. A further 18 Syria sanctions designations were agreed as a procedural point by the Council, bringing the total to 28 since the October Foreign Affairs Council.

Libya

Foreign Ministers discussed Libya, and considered how to support the Government of National Accord and implementation of the Libyan political agreement. Ministers underlined that building a safe, secure and prosperous Libya that is able to tackle with confidence the challenges in the region is in our collective interest.

Security and Defence Implementation Plan (SDIP)

Member states agreed conclusions on the security and defence implementation plan (SDIP), which will increase the effectiveness of common security and defence policy. The Foreign and Defence Secretaries restated the UK’s guiding principle that nothing should undermine NATO as the cornerstone of European defence, and this was reflected in the conclusions. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg joined the EU Ministers for a discussion on EU-NATO co-operation, which the conclusions will help strengthen. The Foreign Affairs Council (Defence) also agreed on the need to keep the European defence industry open and competitive.

Ministers agreed without discussion a number of measures:

Council conclusions on Iran.

Council conclusions on security sector reform (SSR).

Council conclusions on the upcoming fifth review conference of the convention on prohibitions on restrictions on the use of certain conventional weapons which may be deemed to be excessively injurious or to have indiscriminate effects (CCW).

The Council authorised the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to open negotiations on a comprehensive agreement between the European Union and Azerbaijan.

The Council agreed in principle on the enhanced partnership and co-operation agreement between the EU and Kazakhstan and requested the consent of the European Parliament.

Foreign Affairs Council (Defence)

Commissioner Bienkowska spoke about the European defence action plan (EDAP), which is due to be adopted by the College of Commissioners at the end of the month. The EDAP will focus on: funding defence research; fostering support for defence supply chains; joint financing of defence capabilities; and an internal market with a defence industry that is fit for purpose.

Member states agreed an increase to the European Defence Agency (EDA)’s budget in line with inflation, the first increase in six years. The UK agreed to maintain the level of the EDA budget in real terms because the EDA had made some progress on reform and performance, and, importantly, in recognition of the EDA’s future role in taking forward SDIP and EDAP issues that could benefit UK security and UK industry.

[HCWS270]

[HCWS271]
Written Statements

Monday 21 November 2016

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Social Housing

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): Social housing has a crucial role to play in supporting those in most housing need. To that end, powers were provided for in the Housing and Planning Act 2016 to introduce an income based rents policy, requiring local authorities to set higher rents for higher income council tenants.

Since the summer, the Government have been reviewing this policy. We have listened carefully to the views of tenants, local authorities and others and as a result, we have decided not to proceed with a compulsory approach. Local authorities and housing associations will continue to have local discretion.

The Government remain committed to delivering their objective of ensuring social housing is occupied by those who need it most. But we need to do so in a way that supports those ordinary working class families who can struggle to get by, and in a way which delivers real savings to the taxpayer. The policy as previously envisaged did not meet those aims.

This is why we are introducing the mandatory use of fixed term tenancies for new tenants in local authority housing. This will better enable councils to give priority to people with the greatest housing need. Councils will review tenancies at the end of each fixed term to ensure that tenants still need a socially rented home. The Government’s guidance to councils will make clear that they should take into account a household’s financial circumstances when looking at this, and that, except in exceptional circumstances, tenancies should be targeted on those on lower incomes.

We will also consider whether other options exist to ensure that high income tenants in social housing make a greater contribution to costs.

We are keen to work with local authorities to tackle housing tenancy fraud. In 2013, the National Fraud Authority estimated the cost of such fraud—largely illegal sub-letting and lying about circumstances to obtain tenancies—to be in the region of £850 million a year.

For most existing tenants, social housing represents a home for life at a rent well below market levels. The Government remain committed to ensuring it goes to those who need it most.

We have already announced for this spending period we are putting £8 billion into affordable housing delivery. Building more homes is central to this Government’s vision of a country that works for everyone. We will publish a Housing White Paper shortly, setting out measures to help us deliver this ambition.

[HCWS274]
Other business

The French delegation will present information on reform of the European copyright framework. This will be followed by the Croatian and Irish delegations on the European Capitals of Culture 2020. The Italian delegation will then present information on ‘Facing crisis in Europe: Investing in Culture’.

The Council will also be presented with information on the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) meeting in Glasgow (19-20 November). This information will be provided by the EU member states representatives in WADA: Belgium, UK and Malta. This will be followed by the French delegation on development and specific features of the organisation of European sport. Finally there will be information from the Maltese delegation on the work programme of their incoming presidency.

[HCWS272]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Housing Benefit and Universal Credit

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): One of the Government’s key commitments is to protect the most vulnerable. Supported housing supports hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable people across the country. A safe, stable and supportive place to live can be key to improving people’s lives, and for many it is a stepping stone to independent living in the longer term. The Government value the role supported housing plays and are committed to protecting and boosting the supply of supported housing and ensuring it provides value for money and works for those who use it as well as those who pay for it.

On 15 September I announced how from 2019-20 we will be introducing a new funding model for Supported Housing. This will ensure that the sector continues to be funded at the same level it would have otherwise been in 2019-20, taking into account the effect of the Government policy on social sector rents. From 2019-20, core rent and service charges will continue to be funded through Housing Benefit or Universal Credit up to the level of the applicable local housing allowance rate. For costs above the level of the local housing allowance rate, Government will devolve an amount of funding for disbursement locally. In England, we will devolve funding to local authorities to provide additional “top-up funding” to providers where necessary, reflecting the higher average costs of offering supported housing, compared to general needs. An equivalent amount will be provided to the devolved administrations and it will be for them to decide how best to allocate the funding. Until 2019-20 the application of the local housing allowance rate to supported housing will be deferred. This measure confirms the Government will continue to provide support for those who require supported housing and ensures providers can have the confidence they need to invest in new development.

I set out in my statement of 15 September 2016 my intention to consult on the implementation of this new funding model and committed to publishing a consultation. Today, along with my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, we are publishing a consultation document to develop the detail that will underpin the new funding model. We are also publishing the evidence review of supported accommodation in Great Britain, jointly commissioned by my Department and the Department for Communities and Local Government at the end of 2014. The review has provided a helpful insight into the scale, scope and cost of the sector.

Furthermore, I am able to announce today a simplification and alignment of the application of the local housing allowance policy for general needs accommodation, in light of the changes that have been made to supported housing. We propose to bring in the policy for general needs accommodation in the social rented sector in 2019, instead of 2018 as previously announced, to align with the changes to supported housing.

For Housing Benefit it will apply, as announced at autumn statement 2015, to tenants who have signed new or re-let tenancies from 1 April 2016 and their social sector rent is higher than the relevant local housing allowance rate. Those on Housing Benefit who took their tenancy before April 2016 will not be affected.

For Universal Credit, to ensure simplicity and a streamlined process, local housing allowance rates will apply to all new and existing tenants, again only where their social rent is higher than the relevant local housing allowance rate.

People moved by the Department from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit after April 2019 whose overall benefit entitlement is lower will be protected, in cash terms, under transitional protection arrangements. On reaching state pension age Universal Credit claimants flowing back on to Housing Benefit with tenancies signed before April 2016 will also be protected.

Additional discretionary housing payments were made available at autumn statement 2015 to protect the vulnerable and help people make the transition to the new rules.

[HCWS273]
Tuesday 22 November 2016

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Improving Planning Performance

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell):
An effective and strongly performing planning system is crucial to delivering our commitment to increase housing supply. We are clear that planning delays are bad for both applicants and local residents. They can slow down the building of new homes and also create uncertainty about the future shape of the community. Planning is a control on people making use of their land and is a quasi-judicial process, so any delay is denying them their legal rights.

We have a locally led planning system, which sets a clear statutory framework in which a local planning authority should make decisions. The existing designation regime had great success in delivering improved performance in local planning authorities. In the most recent quarter, 83% of applications for major development were decided on time, the highest figure on record. This is up from 57% in July to September 2012, when the designation regime was first announced. We are committed to ensuring this is reflected more widely across the planning decisions authorities make. Therefore we are extending the regime to further drive delivery against statutory requirements by including an authority’s performance in determining applications for non-major development. This was set out in recently laid regulations, which came into force on 21 October 2016.

Today we have laid before Parliament “Improving Planning Performance: Criteria for Designation (Revised 2016)”, which sets out revised criteria that the Secretary of State intends to use for designating a local planning authority as underperforming and the thresholds that authorities will be assessed against in the next designation round in the first quarter of 2017.

Speed of decision making for the purposes of the non-statutory identification scheme for on-shore oil and gas applications, as set out in the written ministerial statement of 16 September 2015, HCWS201, will be assessed by reference to the revised criteria, including the revised threshold for major development. The revised criteria will not apply to the final quarter of 2016 identification round: we will assess authorities on this basis from the first quarter of 2018 and annually thereafter.

Copies of “Improving Planning Performance: Criteria for Designation (Revised 2016)” have been placed in the Library of the House.

1The Town and Country Planning (Section 62A Applications) (Amendment) Regulations 2016 No. 944 and The Town and Country Planning (Section 62A Applications) (Hearings) (Amendment) Rules 2016 No. 955.

[HCWS276]
The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Today I have published a draft updated Charter for Budget Responsibility, a copy of which has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. Copies are also available in the Vote Office and Printed Paper Office. The draft sets out the new fiscal framework and changes to the operation of the welfare cap.

The draft Charter includes modified guidance to the Office for Budget Responsibility and has been published in line with Section 6(4) of the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act. This requires that if the Treasury proposes to modify the guidance to the Office for Budget Responsibility included in the Charter, a draft of the modified guidance must be published at least 28 days before the modified Charter is laid before Parliament. The updated Charter will be laid before Parliament, and a debate and vote scheduled, after the Christmas recess.

Further details on the measures listed above are contained in the draft legislation, explanatory notes and tax information and impact notes published on the gov.uk website.

As part of autumn statement 2016, the Government have announced that the legislation for the following measures will take effect before the introduction of Finance Bill 2017.

**Enterprise investment scheme share conversions**

The Government are introducing legislation to amend the qualifying requirements for the enterprise investment scheme and the seed enterprise investment scheme to clarify the application of the rules to share conversion rights. This change will be effective for shares issued on or after 5 December 2016. This is a wholly relieving measure to enable the Government to provide customers with certainty of treatment and enable the processing of a backlog of cases. Further detail on this measure will be contained in the draft legislation, explanatory note and tax information and impact note to be published on the gov.uk website on 5 December 2016.

**Hybrids and other mismatches**

The Government are issuing a technical note in relation to legislation that was passed as part of the Finance Act 2016, in order to improve the new hybrid mismatch regime. Following consultation with stakeholders, it was agreed that further technical modifications were required in two areas of the legislation. These were with regard to financial sector timing claims and the rules concerning deductions for amortisation. The technical note will set out the detail of the changes required and will be published on the gov.uk website on 5 December 2016. These modifications will take effect along with the new regime on 1 January 2017. Corresponding legislation will be introduced in Finance Bill 2017.

As part of the autumn statement 2016, the Government have made an amendment to public notice 733: flatt rate scheme for small businesses.

**VAT flat rate scheme**

To counter abuse of the VAT flat rate scheme (FRS), the Government are introducing a new 16.5% rate for businesses with limited costs. The new rate will be introduced by statutory instrument and will come into effect on 1 April 2017 with draft legislation published on 5 December 2016. In order to prevent forestalling, HM Revenue and Customs has amended public notice 733: flat rate scheme for small businesses.

Due to the requirement that seven days must pass between an employee receiving independent advice on an offer and becoming an employee shareholder, this will allow any individual who has received advice before 23 November 2016 the opportunity to finalise the outstanding arrangement. The effective date is to be 2 December where advice is received on 23 November prior to 1.30 pm. Existing employee shareholder agreements will not be affected.

As part of autumn statement 2016, the Government have announced that the legislation for the following measures will take effect before the introduction of Finance Bill 2017.

**Autumn Statement: Measures with Immediate Effect**

**Petroleum revenue tax: cutting administration costs for the oil industry**

The Government are introducing legislation to change the returns process for petroleum revenue tax (PRT) in order to reduce administrative burdens for the oil and gas sector. This will allow participators to opt fields out of the PRT regime completely. Operational changes will also simplify the reporting requirements for PRT. The changes will be effective from 23 November 2016 using HM Revenue and Customs’ collection and management powers. This will ensure participators can take advantage of the changes as soon as possible.

**First year allowances for charge point infrastructure**

The Government are introducing legislation to incentivise investment in ultra-low emissions vehicles (ULEVs). The 100% first-year allowance will allow businesses to deduct charge-point investments from their pre-tax profits in the year of purchase. The relief is designed to encourage the use of electric vehicles by increasing charge-point availability. The changes will take effect from 23 November 2016 to avoid delays to planned investments.

**Employee shareholder status**

The Government are introducing legislation to remove the capital gains tax exemption and income tax reliefs associated with shares awarded under employee shareholder status. This is in response to evidence suggesting that the status is primarily being used for tax planning. The legislation will have effect in relation to employee share-holder agreements entered into on or after 1 December 2016 in order to prevent forestalling, while allowing outstanding agreements to be finalised.
Written Statements

Thursday 24 November 2016

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Competitiveness Council

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): The Competitiveness Council is taking place in Brussels on 28-29 November. Baroness Neville-Rolfe will be representing the UK on 28 November (internal market and industry). I am expecting to represent the UK on 29 November (research and innovation).

Britain will in due course be leaving the EU. While we remain a member of the EU we will continue to participate in Competitiveness Council discussions and vote on legislative proposals, in line with our rights and obligations as a member state.

The Slovak presidency has yet to finalise the agenda for the Council. However we expect the following items to be discussed:

Day One

The Commission will be seeking a general approach on a proposed regulation to address geo-blocking and other forms of nationality-based discrimination. The UK will support the Commission’s initiative to end unjustified discrimination against consumers. There will also be a first reading of legislation on the approval and market surveillance of motor vehicles and trailers, enforcement of consumer protection laws, and three legislative proposals on copyright in the digital single market.

There will be a discussion on skills as part of the regular competitiveness ‘check-up’ which will be followed by an exchange of views; a stock-take on the single market strategy; and an exchange of views on the unitary patent and Unified Patent Court (UPC).

We expect a number of items to be presented to the Council for information including a notice from the Commission on the legal protection of biotechnological inventions; the SME Envoy’s report; and a report from the Slovak presidency on the outcome of the conference ‘Collaborative Economy’ held in Brussels on 15 November.

The Hungarian delegation will present information on the competitiveness aspects of the European pillar of social rights. The German delegation will present information on the importance of industrial inventions; the SME Envoy’s report; and a report from the Portuguese delegation on the bio-economy held in Bratislava on 17 October; and information from the Portuguese delegation on the development of a European infrastructure to promote north-south co-operation.

The day will conclude with information from the Maltese delegation on the work programme of the incoming presidency.

[HCWS280]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Justice and Home Affairs Council

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I attended the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 17 and 18 November in Brussels.

On the evening of 17 November, the presidency hosted a meeting for Ministers, focused on migration. The main focus of discussion was the future of the common European asylum system and “effective solidarity”, which included discussions on moving away from relocation being considered the only way for member states to demonstrate solidarity. Ministers agreed to take forward further work on developing solidarity, although this is not relevant to the UK as the Government have already decided not to opt in to the new Dublin IV regulation, and on upstream engagement with third countries. I reiterated that the UK does not take part in the EU’s relocation and resettlement schemes.

The Council on 18 November began with the presidency inviting the Commission to set out its new proposal on a European travel and information authorisation system (ETIAS). The Commission indicated that the proposal aims to provide for greater security and border management by increasing the amount of information on non-visa nationals entering the Schengen area. Negotiations on the proposals will be taken forward by the relevant official-level Council working groups. As the UK is not in Schengen, we will not participate in this measure.

The Council continued with a focus on IT and data-sharing measures related to border management. All member states agreed to continue implementation of the Dutch data-sharing road map agreed at the June JHA Council. The Commission set out its future priorities for work in this area, including: better training; improving data quality; and upgrading existing systems. The Commission also indicated that it would be bringing forward two legislative proposals, one in December and one in June 2017, to upgrade the second generation Schengen information system (SIS II). The Commission’s priorities for upgrading SIS II include fingerprint or palm-print alerts, facial recognition, counterfeit documents and effective Europol and European Border and Coast Guard
access. I reiterated the need for progress on systematic sharing of criminal information, building on the excellent work in the joint UK-Latvia-Netherlands serious offending by mobile European criminals (SOMEC) report on mobile criminality, and improving data quality.

Ministers then discussed the fight against terrorism, taking note of progress in implementing existing EU Council conclusions on this issue, and ongoing activities to prevent and disrupt terrorist activity in the EU, particularly around travel for terrorist purposes.

The Commission set out a number of principles that support EU efforts to fight terrorism. These included the need for secure borders, information exchange between member states, and implementation of the passenger name record (PNR), counter-terrorism and firearm directives. I stressed the UK’s role as leader in PNR implementation within the EU and our willingness to share lessons learnt with partners. I also reminded member states of the importance of aviation security and the need to build on the momentum of UN resolution 2309 with the adoption of a European strategy.

In relation to the EU internet forum, Ministers discussed how to increase collaboration between industry and member states to prevent radicalisation by means of the internet, ahead of a ministerial meeting of the forum in December.

In a break in the plenary session Ministers discussed how to ensure effective co-operation between the non-EU counter-terrorism group (CTG) and Europol.

**European consensus on development**

European Commissioner for International Co-operation and Development, Neven Mimica, will present the European Commission proposal on a new European consensus on development. The consensus is the comprehensive EU policy framework for development assistance and is being updated to be aligned with the main themes of agenda 2030 and the global goals. I will highlight the UK’s broad support for a comprehensive and integrated approach to development and push for better coherence across development and humanitarian assistance.

**Post-Cotonou**

Commissioner Mimica will present the European Commission’s impact assessment and policy document on the future framework for EU co-operation with the African, Pacific and Caribbean countries; an initial exchange of views from member states will follow. This is an initial discussion on revising the Cotonou agreement treaty that will expire in 2020. I will use this discussion to encourage the EU and member states to consider a differentiated approach towards partner countries at different levels of development.

**Migration and development**

High Representative/Vice-President Mogherini will present an update on the state of play on the proposed external investment plan. Ministers will also discuss follow-up to the Valletta summit as part of the EU’s migration agenda and planned events, including the EU emergency trust fund for Africa steering committee. The UK continues to work with European partners on migration, including assessing ways to better address protracted crises and co-ordinating approaches to other drivers of unmanaged flows.

**Energy and development**

Maroš Šefcovic, Vice-President of the European Commission with responsibility for the energy union, will join for a substantive discussion on energy and sustainable development. This will build on agreed Council conclusions on the same topic and look to focus on progress made through the EU-Africa energy partnership in the context of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development.

**Other agenda items**

Ministers will adopt Council conclusions on mainstreaming digital solutions and technologies in EU development policy, the Court of Auditors report on humanitarian aid to the great lakes region, energy and development, and the EU common position for the second high-level meeting of the global partnership for effective development co-operation.
Written Statements

Friday 25 November 2016

TREASURY

Double Taxation Conventions (Colombia and Lesotho)

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison):
Double Taxation conventions with the Republic of Colombia and the Kingdom of Lesotho were signed on 2 November and 3 November 2016 respectively.

The text of each convention has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses and made available on HM Revenue and Customs’ pages of the gov.uk website. The text of each will be scheduled to a draft Order in Council and laid before the House of Commons in due course.

JUSTICE

Courts and Tribunals

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald):
The Government published their vision for a reformed court and justice system, on 15 September 2016—to modernise and upgrade our justice system so that it works even better for everyone—for judges and legal professionals, businesses and individuals, families, and witnesses and the vulnerable victims of crime.

The Government are committed to investing more than £700 million to modernise courts and tribunals, and over £270 million more in the criminal justice system.

Alongside this reform it remains important to make sure that our courts and tribunals service is properly and sustainably funded now and into the future, so that access to justice is protected.

In 2015-16, the net cost of the courts and tribunals service to the taxpayer was £1.2 billion. This is unsustainably high and we think that it is right to reconsider the balance of funding between the taxpayer and those who use the courts and tribunals and can afford to make a larger contribution.

The Government’s general principle, as reflected in managing public money, is that where users are being charged for a service they should usually be charged at a level to recover the true cost to the Government of providing that service.

In line with this principle we believe it is right that those who use our courts and tribunals should make a greater financial contribution, to make sure that the system is properly funded to protect access to justice and to reduce the unsustainably high cost to the taxpayer.

As a result we have introduced a number of fee reforms in recent years, including the fees charged for proceedings in the civil courts, family courts and in some tribunals.

In the challenging financial circumstances faced by this country, we consider it is reasonable to ask users of tribunals to contribute to the running costs while ensuring that access to justice is protected.

Those who use our immigration and asylum system are not excepted from the need to make a financial contribution.

Consequently in 2011, the Government introduced fees for the first time in the Immigration and Asylum Chamber of the first-tier tribunal. These fees would be paid, where they could afford to do so, by those who make an application to appeal an immigration or asylum decision of the Home Secretary. At that stage those fees were set well below full cost recovery levels.

Consistent with our general principle we revisited those fees earlier in the year and launched a public consultation on 21 April 2016 proposing to raise fees in the Immigration and Asylum Chamber of the first-tier tribunal for those who pay to a level to recover the full cost of proceedings.

We also consulted on introducing fees for the first time for appeals in the Immigration and Asylum Chamber of the upper tribunal and for permission to appeal applications in both the first-tier tribunal and the upper tribunal.

In addition, we consulted on a proposal to add an exemption from fees based on the Home Office destitution waiver policy.

We responded to the consultation announcing our intention to proceed with the proposed fee measures. The higher fees in the first-tier tribunal then came into effect.

The fee increases introduced in the Immigration and Asylum Chamber of the first-tier tribunal are affordable for those who have to pay, taking into account the fee exemptions and waivers that apply, as well as the Lord Chancellor’s exceptional power to remit fees.

However, we have listened to the representations that we received on the current fee levels and have decided to take stock and review the immigration and asylum fees, to balance the interests of all tribunal users and the taxpayer and to look at them again alongside other tribunal fees and in the wider context of funding for the system overall.

From today all applicants will be charged fees at previous levels and we will reimburse, in all cases where the new fees have been paid, the difference between that fee and the previous fee.

We will bring forward secondary legislation to formalise the position as soon as possible. That legislation will come into force shortly, but in the meantime the changes will be effected through the use of the Lord Chancellor’s discretionary power to remit or reduce fees.

Alongside the fee changes introduced we extended the fee exemptions offered in the first-tier tribunal, to include:

those in receipt of a Home Office destitution waiver in respect of their initial application;

parents of, and those with parental responsibility for, children receiving support from local authorities;

children in local authority care; and

those appealing a decision to revoke their humanitarian protection or refugee status.
The Government believe that these exemptions are proportionate measures that protect some of the most vulnerable users of the tribunal. For this reason the extended system of fee exemptions will remain in place.

We also took the opportunity when introducing the fee changes to expand and clarify the guidance around the application of the Lord Chancellor’s power to remit or reduce fees in exceptional circumstances. This revised guidance is not affected.

The role of fees in the upper tribunal will also form part of the review. The focus of our work is now on carrying out that review. We will bring forward any new plans for tribunal fees, including in the Immigration and Asylum Chambers of the first-tier and upper tribunals, for consultation in due course.

The Government’s belief is unchanged that it is right that those who use our courts and tribunals should pay more, where they can realistically afford to do so, to ensure that the system is properly funded to protect access to justice and to relieve the burden on the taxpayer.
Written Statements

Monday 28 November 2016

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

First World War Centenary Cathedral Repairs Fund

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): I am today publishing the list of successful bidders to the First World War Centenary Cathedral Repairs Fund.

Cathedrals are powerful symbols of Britain’s shared history and are important not only for their architecture, history and religious learning but also as a place for local communities to come together. This fund is helping to ensure that they are in a good state of repair and preserved for future generations.

Decisions on funding allocations are taken by an expert panel, which considers the grant applications against the published criteria for the scheme and decides which cathedrals should receive funding. The panel is chaired by Sir Paul Ruddock and includes senior figures from English Heritage, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Church of England and the Catholic Church, as well as church architects, architectural historians and grant giving experts.

I am pleased to confirm that the panel has decided to allocate funding of almost £5.5 million to 24 cathedrals. These are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cathedral</th>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Award</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arundel RC</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>West front glazing and masonry</td>
<td>£20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackburn</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>West tower roofs repairs and transept repointing</td>
<td>£200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradford</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Repairs to bell tower</td>
<td>£25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chelmsford</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Song School roof repairs</td>
<td>£300,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chichester</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Quire roof repairs</td>
<td>£50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ely</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>South nave aisle roof and high-level repairs</td>
<td>£500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exeter</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Asbestos removal</td>
<td>£70,000</td>
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<td>Gloucester</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Drainage repairs</td>
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<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Lead pinnacles repairs</td>
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<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Concrete roof repairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liverpool Met</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Lantern repair research and access</td>
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<td>Manchester</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Tower emergency repairs</td>
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<td>Nottingham</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Safety upgrade to lighting</td>
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<td>CoE</td>
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<td>RC</td>
<td>Heating system</td>
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<td>RC</td>
<td>North porch access, masonry repairs and rainwater drainage system</td>
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<td>Shrewsbury</td>
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<td>East porch and stained glass repairs and associated work</td>
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<td>CoE</td>
<td>Quire roof and high-level masonry</td>
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<td>Southwell</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>North quire aisle and NE transept roof</td>
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<td>CoE</td>
<td>Nave clerestory and cloister and library roof repairs</td>
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<td>Roof repairs and rainwater goods</td>
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<td>Truro</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>South aisle and baptistery roof</td>
<td>£500,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wells</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Nave roof repairs</td>
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<td>CoE</td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
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TRANSPORT

Roads Funding

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Following the autumn statement on 23 November, I am today setting out further details of road investment.

This new funding of £1.3 billion over this Parliament will help support infrastructure projects on roads, with £1.1 billion for the local road network and £220 million to relieve congestion on the strategic road network.

For the majority of the £1.1 billion there are three goals, and those seeking funding for improvements must fulfil at least one of those goals:
I am also announcing funding for further development of business cases for six schemes from the large local major projects fund in addition to the six announced in the autumn statement, as well as approval to start construction of the Lincoln Eastern bypass.

The six schemes included in the autumn statement were:
- Suffolk Energy Gateway new road;
- A1079/A164 Jocks Lodge Junction;
- Shrewsbury North West Relief Road;
- Tees Valley East-West connections;
- Sheffield Mass Transit Scheme;
- Warrington Waterfront Western link.

A further six schemes will receive funding to develop business cases:
- Sheffield City Region Innovation Corridor;
- Manchester Metrolink airport extension to Terminal 2;
- Melton Mowbray Eastern Distributor Road;
- New Tees Crossing;
- A500 Dualling (Cheshire);
- South Coventry Link Road.

This means that development and feasibility work can proceed to the next stage. It does not mean every scheme is certain to go ahead and it remains a competitive process. However, many of these will be among the next set of projects that we build in this country.

Following the confirmation of the National Roads Fund, we are publishing reports on five strategic studies into major improvements on our national road network. On the back of these, the Government are committing to taking forward major improvements at three points on the national network:

- Upgrading the A66 to dual carriageway, creating the first new all-dual trans-Pennine link since 1971;
- Improving the M60 around Manchester—the second busiest road in the country;
- Building a new Oxford-Cambridge expressway, to link up three of England’s fastest growing cities.

Two further studies, into further upgrading of the A1 in the east of England and building a trans-Pennine tunnel, are also reporting. Further economic analysis is to follow, with particular reference to emerging housing plans, before taking decisions on next steps. A sixth study, on the M25 South West Quadrant, will report in 2017.

In addition to bringing forward major projects, we have also announced a £220 million package of smaller improvements, which will be quick to deliver and will tackle congestion in the here-and-now. This includes improvements to the A69, further enhancing trans-Pennine connectivity.

I am also announcing approval for the £95 million Lincoln Eastern bypass with a contribution from the Department for Transport of £50 million. This scheme will reduce congestion in the city centre and encourage planned housing growth in the area. Construction will start in the New Year.

In order to ensure that our road network is safer for all road users, £175 million of the additional funding for local roads will be used to upgrade some of England’s most dangerous roads, where the risk of fatal and serious collisions is highest. The Road Safety Foundation’s analysis of the safety performance of the country’s major road network highlights where investment should be targeted. Therefore, my Department will be inviting proposals from local authorities responsible for the 50 highest risk roads.

This demonstrates that the Government are serious about investing in the infrastructure the country needs to drive economic growth both locally and nationally and to ensure that all road users have a well maintained and safe network which is fit for the future.

Further information will be placed in the House Library setting out more detail and the breakdown of funding that the Department for Transport is allocating to local highway authorities for 2017-18.

It can also be viewed online at: www.parliament.uk.

[HCWS286]
Written Statements

Tuesday 29 November 2016

DEFENCE

Coalition Operations against Daesh

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon):
The coalition has today published its findings from an incident report into the coalition air strikes in Dayr Az Zawr on 17 September 2016.

While the report has concluded that the decision to identify the targets as Daesh military objectives was both reasonable and supported by the weight of information available at the time, post-strike analysis indicates it more likely than not that a Syrian regime aligned force was struck after being mistaken for Daesh.

The Ministry of Defence will always carefully examine any credible evidence that suggests we have struck a target in error. We have contributed fully to the coalition’s investigation into this incident.

The UK armed forces operate under strict rules of engagement, which govern the use of force, and we take all reasonable steps to avoid non-combatant casualties. All strikes conducted by the RAF are carried out in accordance with robust rules of engagement, UK interpretation of the law of armed conflict and rigorous targeting processes and are approved through a strict assessment process undertaken by a team including British military, policy and legal advisers.

Both the coalition and the UK are reviewing the report’s conclusions and we will act on any lessons identified in order to mitigate the risks of such an error recurring.

[HCWS292]

National Shipbuilding Strategy

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon):
Sir John Parker has submitted his independent report to inform the United Kingdom national shipbuilding strategy. He has consulted widely with Government, industry and the trades unions during his work.

I have today placed copies of the report in the Library of the House and it will be made available on the Government website, www.gov.uk.

The report is a balanced critique of the challenges faced by Government and industry in the naval shipbuilding sector in recent years. However, Sir John has identified a “renaissance” in a range of regional shipyards across the United Kingdom where he has found entrepreneurial attitudes and an enthusiasm to embrace change. His work the full consideration that it deserves. I have asked officials, working with others across Government, to examine the report and recommendations, and to discuss them with industry. The Government will then publish a full and considered response and implementation plan in spring 2017. This response will be the national shipbuilding strategy.

I would like to place on record my thanks to Sir John for providing such a thorough analysis of naval shipbuilding and recommendations for a new era of co-operation and drive across the shipbuilding enterprise.

[HCWS288]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

November Agriculture Council

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I represented the UK at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council on 14 and 15 November in Brussels.

Commissioner Vella presented a proposal for a Council regulation setting deep sea fishing opportunities for 2017 and 2018. Commissioner Vella noted there were challenges in setting total allowable catches (TACs). The UK, Poland, Sweden and Denmark stressed the need to protect stocks, although Denmark noted that the TACs should not be lowered too far or these stocks would become obstacles to fully implementing the landing obligation. A compromise text mitigated some of the proposed cuts, while still providing adequate protections, and was therefore unanimously agreed.
Commissioner Vella presented proposals for the North Sea multi-annual plan (MAP). The UK, Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Belgium and Poland expressed their general support for the proposal. However, the UK, echoed by France and Denmark had concerns that some of the additional controls would increase the administrative burden without any commensurate benefit.

Mr Cees Veerman, Chairman of the Agricultural Markets Taskforce (AMT), presented the report of the AMT and the main recommendations within it, which set the agenda for future work. They included strengthening market transparency, and setting out a framework including a list of prohibited, basic unfair trading practices (UTPs) which would carry the penalty of sanctions. The UK welcomed that the AMT largely based the recommendations for UTPs on the work of the UK groceries code adjudicator.

Commissioner Hogan and Vice-President Katainen presented the DG AGRI report on the cumulative impact of free trade association (FTA) concessions on agriculture. Commissioner Hogan stressed that it did not represent a projected outcome of the 12 ongoing or potential EU-third country FTAs within its scope. The report analysed the cumulative economic impacts of tariff liberalisation through two theoretical scenarios. Overall, the conclusions were balanced and confirmed potential for net trade gains. Vice-President Katainen set the report in the context of the EU’s wider free trade, jobs and growth agenda. The UK underlined its long-standing support for tariff-free access and reduced non-tariff barriers, but noted that agriculture goes beyond questions of simple economics.

Any other business items

The UK introduced an item on behalf of the North Western Waters regional group on the landing obligation. It drew attention to the good progress made so far in implementing the landing obligation, a key part of the last reform of the common fisheries policy (CFP), but also the potential problem of choke species had to be dealt with. The UK presented ongoing work in the regions on this issue and pressed the Commission to heed it. The UK points were supported by Portugal, Germany, Ireland, Denmark, Belgium, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Latvia and Sweden, with many thanking the UK for bringing this important issue to the table.

Greece voiced their concerns that the difference between customary names and standard names for geographical indication protected products undermined the EU system. The Commission pushed back by pointing out that the current legal wording ensures sufficient security.

Commissioner Andriukaitis announced that the Commission will establish and host the first meeting of the animal welfare platform, which will discuss best practice in this field, during the Maltese presidency. The UK’s support for this call and the need for a review of rest periods in line with current scientific advice was praised by several animal welfare charities via online media platforms.

Denmark raised concerns about the increased use of antimicrobials in the veterinary sector in some member states and called for immediate action. The UK, along with eight other member states supported this call.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

IBRD Loan to the Government of Iraq

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): I have today laid a departmental minute outlining updated details of a contingent liability of the US dollar equivalent of £360 million which the Department for International Development (DFID) has undertaken, in respect of the World Bank Group.

On 25 October, I laid a departmental minute setting out DFID’s intention to guarantee a portion of a forthcoming development policy loan from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) arm of the World Bank to the Government of Iraq, subject to finalising the details of the terms of the guarantee. Further consideration of the implications of the original arrangements for the treatment of the World Bank by credit rating agencies has led me to amend the element of the proposal relating to the treatment of any payments recovered from the Government of Iraq, in the event of a default and the guarantee subsequently being triggered.

The revised proposal entails the World Bank transferring the right to pursue and retain recoveries to the UK Government, should it wish to do so. This amendment to the guarantee arrangement will avoid undermining the Bank’s preferred creditor status, which is so critical to its ability to borrow at very favourable rates from the market and pass these on to its borrowers.

The change to the treatment of recoveries should have minimal, if any, impact on the probability of a default by the Government of Iraq. There remain strong incentives for Iraq avoiding entering into arrears as doing so would lead to the IBRD not agreeing any new lending, and not providing any lending agreed under existing loans; it would also entail the payment of penalty charges by the Government of Iraq.

In the event that a default did occur, and the guarantee is called, the UK would still provide compensation to the World Bank, in proportion to the UK’s guaranteed share of the overall IBRD loan. If this liability is called, provision for any DFID payment would be sought through the normal Supply procedure.

[HCWS291]

TRANSPORT

EU Transport Council

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I will attend the only Transport Council under the Slovakian presidency (the presidency), taking place in Brussels on Thursday 1 December.

The presidency is aiming for a general approach on the proposed regulation on common rules in the field of civil aviation safety and establishing a European Union Aviation Safety Agency. The proposed general approach embodies the principle of proportionality and encourages the use of performance based regulations. It also makes small but appropriate extensions to the scope of the European Aviation Safety Agency’s responsibilities.

The presidency is also aiming for general approaches on two proposals aimed to simplifying and streamlining existing passenger ship safety legislation.

The first of these is an amending directive on safety rules and standards for passenger ships. This directive sets harmonised safety standards for seagoing passenger ships operating on domestic routes throughout the UK.
and the proposed amendments look to simplify the current legislation. In particular, this deregulatory approach proposes that standards for passenger ships below 24 metres are better suited to regulation at national level.

The second is a proposal for a directive on a system of inspections for the safe operation of ro-ro ferry and high-speed passenger craft in regular service. The proposed revision updates, clarifies and simplifies the existing survey (inspection) requirements for ro-ro ferries and high-speed passenger craft, while maintaining the same level of safety and key delivery mechanisms.

There will be a progress report on a related proposal to amend two directives; one on the registration of persons sailing on board passenger ships operating to or from ports of the member states of the community, and one on reporting formalities for ships arriving in and/or departing from ports of the member states. Negotiations are at an early stage, and the presidency’s progress report summarises the discussions so far. Discussions on this proposal will continue during the forthcoming Maltese presidency in 2017.

The presidency has proposed a policy debate on the extension of the European fund for strategic investments (EFSI) and connecting europe facility (CEF) blending, which provides further funding for EFSI. The proposal will continue to enhance the financial case for projects and value for money from the EU budgets.

Under Any Other Business, the Commission will provide an update on the outcome of the 39th Assembly of the International Civil Aviation Organisation held in September and October 2016, combined with the latest developments in the International Maritime Organisation. The Commission will also provide information on the state of play on security in the transport sector, its planned package of road initiatives, road safety, developments in EU-type approval legislation and the progress made on the implication of the ‘emissions irregularities’. The Commission will update on the state of play on GALILEO, present its European strategy for low emission mobility, and provide information on its initiative on “Women in Transport”. The Cyprus delegation will provide information on the draft common aviation area agreement between the Republic of Turkey and the European Union and its member states. The Dutch delegation will then update the Council on co-operation in the field of connected and automated driving. Finally, the Maltese delegation will inform the Council on the work programme for their forthcoming presidency.
Written Statements

Wednesday 30 November 2016

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Homes and Communities Agency

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell):

Since 2010 the Government have delivered almost 900,000 new homes, including 293,000 affordable homes. However, we need to build many more homes if we are going to create a housing market that works for everyone, and the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) will play a vital role in this.

On 10 February 2016, my predecessor as Minister for Housing and Planning announced to Parliament the commencement of a tailored review of the HCA. I am pleased today to announce the publication of the tailored review.

The agency is the national housing, land and regeneration agency and the regulator of registered social housing providers in England.

The review concluded that functions exercised by the HCA are required, and, with the exception of social housing regulation, should continue to be performed by the HCA in its current form as a non-departmental public body (NDPB). The review recommends that the agency’s regulatory function should be established as a standalone NDPB, reaffirming the Government’s commitment to a strong, independent regulator for social housing. This is a purely administrative change that will not affect the regulator’s powers or operations. This change will result in no increase on existing Government budgeted spending. The regulator will also be part of plans for increased sharing of back office functions across the DCLG Group. DCLG will today launch a consultation on using a legislative reform order to establish the regulator as an independent body.

The review has also made a number of recommendations for improving the efficiency, effectiveness and governance of HCA. This includes changes such as improving stakeholder engagement, reducing bureaucracy and ensuring that the agency has the right set of skills. The Chairs of the HCA and the Regulation Committee have welcomed the recommendations. My Department and the agency are working closely together and have developed a timetable for implementation of the recommendations.

The tailored review has been carried out independently within Government and with the full and active participation of the HCA. I would like to thank the HCA and all stakeholders that have contributed to the review. The review is being deposited in the Libraries of both Houses and is available at:


[HCWS294]

SCOTLAND

Scotland Act 2016: Commencement Regulations

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell):

In March this year, Her Majesty the Queen gave Royal Assent to the Scotland Act 2016, marking an important milestone in fulfilling the UK Government’s commitment to deliver on the Smith Commission agreement, making the Scottish Parliament one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world.

Since Royal Assent, a number of important provisions in the Act have come into force, including new powers in relation to consumer advocacy and advice, gaming machines, equalities, transport, and welfare.

I can today inform the House that the UK Government have made the commencement regulations for the following sections of the Scotland Act 2016:

13: Power of Scottish Parliament to set rates of income tax
15: Consequential amendments: income tax

The regulations ensure that the transfer of income tax powers will occur, as agreed by the UK and Scottish Governments, from 6 April 2017, bringing into force substantial new financial levers enabling the Scottish Government to set income tax rates and thresholds for the earned income of Scottish taxpayers.

In addition, commencement regulations will be made on 5 December for the following sections of the Scotland Act 2016, to be commenced in April 2017:

20: Borrowing
21: Provision of information to the Office for Budget Responsibility
67: Destination of fines, forfeitures and fixed penalties

These commencement regulations represent another milestone in delivering the recommendations of the Smith Commission agreement, and it is a testament to the constructive work between the UK and Scottish Governments.

The two Governments continue to work closely together to ensure a safe and secure transition of the remaining powers in the Scotland Act 2016.

[HCWS293]
The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): The annual conference of the parties (COP) to the United Nations framework convention on climate change took place in Marrakesh, Morocco, from 7 to 18 November. The United Kingdom was represented by myself (Minister of State for Climate Change and Industry) who has been negotiating for the UK and promoting British business. The conference was described as an “implementation COP” focused on starting the process of turning the first global climate change deal, known as the Paris agreement, into a clear blueprint for action.

The UK aims for Marrakesh were to: (a) strengthen action and ambition; (b) make progress on implementing the Paris agreement; and (c) demonstrate the UK’s leadership on climate change. These objectives were achieved.

(A) Regarding strengthening action and ambition, there were two key outcomes:

The Marrakesh action proclamation underlined that the global commitment to tackling climate change is irreversible, calling for raised ambition and strengthened co-operation. Announcements made by Governments, businesses and other non-state actors further emphasised the global momentum and the action being taken. On behalf of the UK, the Minister of State pledged support for many initiatives that will support countries in meeting their emissions reduction targets as the world aims to achieve carbon neutrality in the second half of the century.

(B) Regarding progress on implementing the Paris agreement, consensus was secured on all of the areas where decisions were mandated, including the terms of reference for the Warsaw international mechanism for loss and damage, and the Paris Committee on Capacity Building. Further progress included:

- The first meeting of the countries who ratified the Paris agreement (CMA1);
- Discussions on detail of the rulebook to support implementation of commitments and setting a deadline to finalise by 2018 with a review in 2017;
- Agreement for an inclusive and transparent consultation on mitigation commitments ahead of the facilitative dialogue in 2018 to assess progress, in order to inform the next round of national pledges on mitigation;
- Agreement that the adaptation fund should serve the Paris agreement subject to decisions on governance and modalities to be taken at COP24 (in 2018); and
- Agreement to a five-year work plan on “Loss and Damage” which will start in 2017. This will include a review of the sources of finance for loss and damage but does not admit new or separate financial arrangements for loss and damage.

(C) Regarding demonstrating UK’s leadership and commitment, we:

Announced that the UK had ratified the Paris agreement.

This positive outcome from Marrakesh will help to implement what was agreed in Paris more effectively. It caps a year of continued momentum on climate change, including the rapid entry into force of the Paris agreement, and agreements on phasing down hydro-fluorocarbons under the Montreal protocol and offsetting the growth in civil aviation emissions at the International Civil Aviation Organisation. From Government and private sector commitments to reduce emissions, it is clear that the economic and political drivers behind the global transition towards a low-carbon future—as well as the commercial opportunities that transition affords—remain.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): On 9 November 2016 the Chair of the Horserace Betting Levy Board (the HBLB) informed me that the HBLB had been unable to approve a recommendation from the Bookmakers’ Committee as to the terms of the 56th Levy scheme. Under section 1 (2) of the Horserace Betting Levy Act 1969 (the Act), it therefore now falls to me to determine those terms. The Act allows me to determine a new scheme for the said period, or direct that the current scheme shall continue to have effect for that period.

In the March 2016 Budget, the Government set out a timetable for replacing the current Horserace Betting Levy by April 2017. It remains the Government’s intention to replace the current Levy scheme by this date. However, until such time as the legislation has passed, the existing statutory requirements remain. Therefore my determination for the 56th Levy scheme will only apply should the new Levy not be in place by April.

With this in mind, and having considered the arguments put forward by both betting and racing, I have decided to direct that the current Levy scheme should continue to have effect for 2017-18. In making this determination I have had regard to the offer made by the Bookmakers’ Committee and taken into account the racing members of the board’s reasons for rejecting this offer. Any discussions or negotiations about voluntary Levy contributions in respect of offshore remote betting operators are outside the scope of my statutory role in making this determination.

Having concluded the determination, I would like express my disappointment that the HBLB and Bookmakers’ Committee were not able to agree the Levy scheme and that it has been necessary to refer this matter to Government.

[HCWS100]
DEFENCE

Better Combat Compensation

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): Today I am publishing a consultation on proposals to provide better compensation for deaths or injuries sustained by servicemen or women in combat. Copies of the consultation are available in the Library of the House and on the www.gov.uk website.

The Government are proud of the armed forces compensation scheme which provides compensation to service personnel who suffer illness or injury attributable to their services or, in the case of those who have died, provides it to their families, whether or not anyone was legally at fault. Separately, the courts may award damages where the Ministry of Defence has been found to be at fault; however, that often leads to lengthy legal cases alleging battlefield negligence.

The Government have been considering options to provide relief for service personnel and their families who may otherwise have to pursue lengthy and stressful claims in the courts. In line with our commitment to the armed forces covenant, we plan to provide better compensation by introducing an enhanced scheme so that members and veterans of the armed forces and their families receive compensation for injuries or death in combat equal to that which a court would be likely to award if it found negligence.

As part of this reform, we intend to clarify in primary legislation the long-standing common law principle that the Government are not liable for damages as a result of injuries or deaths sustained in combat. This will address the “judicialisation of war”, whereby judges second-guess military decisions using criteria that are appropriate for civilian life, but not for the battlefield.

The Iraq Inquiry report by Sir John Chilcot underscored the often challenging circumstances which can contribute to deaths or injuries sustained on the battlefield. The Government are committed to learning the lessons and are reviewing ways in which we can better plan, equip and operate, so that deaths and injuries can be avoided, where possible, in future.

This package will provide relief for individuals and families who in the future will be awarded better compensation without having to pursue lengthy legal action. It will also ensure that the armed forces are able to take the rapid and high-risk decisions essential to operational effectiveness without being inhibited by the risk of future legal claims.

At A-level, we have worked with the exam boards to develop specific content for modern languages with smaller cohorts. The Government are today opening a consultation on this content, which will apply to A-levels (and AS) in Arabic, Bengali, Gujarati, Greek, Modern Hebrew, Japanese, Panjabi, Persian, Portuguese, Polish, Turkish and Urdu.

The content for modern languages with smaller cohorts is largely identical to the reformed A-level (and AS) content which applies to French, German, Spanish, Chinese, Italian and Russian. This was developed by the independent A-Level Content Advisory Board (ALCAB), appointed by the Russell Group to meet the expectations of higher education, and was published in 2015.

This content for modern languages with smaller cohorts addresses the risks associated with the assessment of smaller numbers of candidates, including the challenges of recruiting specialist examiners. The requirement to demonstrate speaking skills is not included in the proposed content, which is consistent with current AS and A-level qualifications in languages with smaller cohorts—with the single exception of Urdu (in which speaking skills are currently required). To secure a suitable level of rigour which is comparable for all modern languages, the Government propose a new requirement for modern languages with smaller cohorts. The proposed content would require students to apply language skills (reading, writing and listening) in combination, by responding to spoken and written sources addressing common subject matter.

The A-level (and AS) content for modern languages with smaller cohorts will apply to courses beginning in September 2018. The current specifications for these languages will remain available for courses beginning in September 2017.

I can also confirm today that A-level history of art and AS and A-level statistics will continue to be offered in England following the exam board AQAs decision not to offer these qualifications for new courses starting from September 2017. We believe there is value in having a broad range of high-quality choices available to A-level students and our intention has always been that there should continue to be A-levels available in these two subjects. I am therefore pleased that the Pearson exam board has confirmed that it intends to develop new AS and A-levels in statistics and a new A-level in history of art for teaching from September 2017.

[HCWS299]

EDUCATION

A-Level and AS Qualification

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): In April this year, the Government announced that GCSEs and A-levels in a range of languages with smaller cohorts will continue and therefore will be reformed in line with other GCSEs and A-levels. This fulfils a commitment made in 2015 to work with the exam boards to ensure the continuation of these qualifications.

The reformed GCSE content for modern foreign languages, published in 2013, is suitable for all the modern languages currently available, and the exam boards are developing specifications for these GCSEs.

[HCWS301]

Early Years Education

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): The Government have today published their response to the recent consultation on changes to the funding of the free early years entitlements for three and four-year-olds. The Government response can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/early-years-funding-changes-to-funding-for-3-and-4-year-olds

This includes the introduction of an early years national funding formula. This will provide a fairer funding system for nurseries, preschools and childminders.
We are delivering our manifesto commitment to double the free hours of childcare provided for working parents of three and four-year-olds, from 15 to 30 hours a week. Many parents want to go back to work, or work more hours, but cannot afford to because of the cost of childcare. This policy will make childcare more affordable and support parents to return to work, or to work more hours, if that is what they wish to do.

We are backing this with an additional £1 billion every year by 2019-20 including £300 million per year to increase Government funding rates. We are committed to allocating this record level of investment fairly and transparently so that early years providers can deliver free childcare on a sustainable and high-quality basis.

That is why we consulted on proposals to introduce a new funding system that is fair, transparent and maximises funding to providers. Our proposals to improve the way we allocate funding have been positively received and today, I can confirm our final funding policy. Key features are:

- a new early years national funding formula from April 2017 that will increase Government funding rates in 80% of local authorities;
- a minimum funding rate of at least £4.30 per hour for every local authority;
- a requirement for local authorities to pass 95% of their funding to providers;
- additional funding, worth £55 million per year, to support maintained nursery schools until the end of this Parliament (2019-20);
- a new disability access fund worth £615 per child per year to support disabled three and four-year-olds to access their free hours of childcare; and
- a requirement for all local authorities to have inclusion funds to channel additional support to children with special educational needs.

These changes will put early years providers in a stronger position to deliver the free entitlements on a sustainable basis. They will help to ensure that every child, whatever their background and individual needs, can access the high-quality early education they need to prepare for school and improve their life chances. And from September 2017, they will support the delivery of 30 hours of free childcare to nearly 400,000 eligible working parents, thus making it easier for them to get on and balance work with their family lives.

Education lies at the heart of this Government's ambition to make this a country that works for everyone—and today we are reaffirming our commitment by announcing this new, fairer way of funding our early years entitlement; and

The Hanoi conference was the third global conference on IWT, following the London conference in 2014 and Kasane conference in 2015. I was delighted to attend the conference on behalf of the UK, alongside His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge. The conference was successful, with 42 countries and the EU adopting the Hanoi statement by consensus and 23 countries, the EU and six international organisations pledging new and specific actions in the statement annex to deliver on their commitments from London and Kasane.

The UK played a key role in supporting Vietnam as chair and host, including direct financial support and seconding staff to the conference secretariat. Our contribution and leadership were widely recognised and commended by international partners. At the conference, I was able to announce an additional £13 million in UK funding for IWT and a number of new initiatives, including expanded British military training for African park rangers; a project with China to deliver joint training to African border forces; additional funding for Interpol to expand its work with key nations, tracking and intercepting illegal shipments of ivory, rhino horn and other illegal wildlife products; and up to £4 million to the International Consortium for Combating Wildlife Crime (ICCCW).

Finally I was also pleased to announce that the UK will host a fourth high-level meeting on IWT in 2018, to ensure that this urgent global issue stays at the top of the political agenda and that we continue to deliver on our manifesto commitment to lead the world in tackling IWT.

The UK was able to lead further progress in the margins of the conference. I hosted a meeting of ASEAN heads of delegation, attended by the Duke of Cambridge, where I pressed for enhanced collaboration in this critical region, particularly on enforcement. The Philippines, chair of ASEAN in 2017, agreed that IWT would feature on the agenda.

In my meetings with Vietnamese Ministers, I welcomed recent positive steps taken by Vietnam to tackle IWT, and encouraged them to intensify further demand reduction and law enforcement efforts, including in respect of specific cases recently highlighted by NGOs and the media. I made clear the UK’s commitment to ongoing practical co-operation between our two countries on these issues.

That so many countries and organisations came together once more in Hanoi to agree further action on IWT is a positive signal of ongoing political attention and also a consensus on the importance and urgency of the issue. We will remain focused on driving forward this momentum and ensuring the commitments made in Hanoi are delivered in the lead up to the next event in London 2018.
The proposal seeks to increase the EU’s attractiveness to highly skilled workers from outside the EU. It runs counter to the UK’s view that decisions on who comes to the country are best framed at national level in accordance with national assessments of economic need. It would also undermine our ability to reduce net migration.

[HCWS303]

Report of the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): In accordance with section 36(5) of the Terrorism Act 2006, David Anderson QC, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, has prepared a report on the operation in 2015 of the Terrorism Act 2000 and part 1 of the Terrorism Act 2006.

I am today laying this report before the House, and copies will be available in the Vote Office. It will also be published on the website: www.gov.uk.

I am grateful to David Anderson for his report. I will carefully consider its contents and the recommendations it makes, and will respond formally in due course.

[HCWS302]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

International Financial Institution: Contingent Liability

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): In 2015, the UK agreed to be a founder contributor of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). As set out in the summer Budget 2015, HM Treasury made an initial capital instalment of US$122,180,000, and committed to subsequent payments of the same amount by the UK Government over the four years from 2017 to 2020. The UK’s overall capital contribution will total US$3,054,500,000, of which these five payments together will make up 20% of “paid-in” capital contribution requiring a cash transfer. The other 80%, $2,443,600,000, is “callable capital”—the AIIB has the right to call for payment for these shares if there is a crisis affecting the bank’s assets or loans. As the paid-in capital is an investment, in return for which we get an asset of a share of the Bank, the Office for Budget Responsibility has forecast this payment as a financial transaction. Financial transactions do not add to public sector net borrowing.

Payment of the second annual contribution of $122,180,000 is in line with the authority provided by this House under the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Initial Capital Contribution) Order 2015. Parliamentary approval for this will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Department for International Development.

Further, the payment of the second instalment of the capital contribution incurs with it a contingent liability. In line with the AIIB articles of agreement, the contingent liability rises in line with the amount of callable capital paid. As such, the UK will increase its current contingent liability of $488,720,000, incurred when the initial capital instalment was paid by a further $488,720,000 to a cumulative total contingent liability of US$977,440,000. A Departmental minute to this effect was laid before Parliament on 1 December 2016 to give at least 14 sitting days’ notice of the intent to incur a contingent liability. The notice period will be completed on 9 January 2017.

Although the AIIB has the right to call for payment of this callable capital incurred when the initial capital instalment was paid, no such instance has occurred in any multilateral development bank in the past. If the liability were to be called, provision for any payment would be sought through the normal supply procedure.

In joining the AIIB the UK has demonstrated its support for China’s initiative to establish the AIIB to address the historic shortage of infrastructure investment in Asia. The AIIB will support economic growth in the region and drive up living standards. The UK’s membership will deepen economic ties with Asia and create opportunities for British businesses.

[HCWS305]

UK International Development

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): Our world is changing. So our approach to development needs to adapt and keep pace with it. DFID will champion an open, modern and innovative approach to development.

Today I am publishing “Rising to the challenge of ending poverty: the Bilateral Development Review 2016” and “Raising the standard: the Multilateral Development Review 2016”.

These reviews build on the Government’s UK aid strategy published in 2015 and set out how UK aid will be focused on ending poverty and tackling great global challenges like mass migration, disease and climate change. It demonstrates how investing 0.7% of national income in international development will meet Britain’s moral obligation to the world’s poorest and work in the UK’s national interest.

The bilateral development review sets out how DFID will respond to these global challenges and contribute to a more prosperous, secure and stable world. DFID will follow the money, the people and the outcomes to make our aid more effective, transparent, and accountable to the poorest people in the world and to the taxpayers who fund our programmes.

The multilateral development review builds on a systematic assessment of the performance of 38 multilateral institutions funded by the UK through DFID. The review sets out how the UK, as a committed champion of the multilateral system, will work with its multilateral partners and press them hard to take radical action so they continue to raise their performance. We will back high performers while also pressing them to improve even further.

A copy of these papers and an accompanying document can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-12-01/HCWS296/.
I will also place a copy in the Libraries of both Houses and make further copies available in the Vote and Printed Paper Offices.

[HCWS296]

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

Strathclyde Review: Government Response

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): On 27 October 2015 the Government commissioned Lord Strathclyde to lead a review into secondary legislation and the primacy of the House of Commons. Lord Strathclyde published his report on 17 December 2015. The Government have today published their response to the review and the four related parliamentary Select Committee reports, a copy of which can be found online. As I informed the House at business questions on 17 November 2016, Official Report, columns 395 to 396, although the Government found Lord Strathclyde’s analysis compelling and we are determined that the principle of the supremacy of the elected House should be upheld, we have no plans to introduce new primary legislation at this time.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-12-01/HCWS304/.

[HCWS304]

PRIME MINISTER

GREAT Britain Campaign: Machinery of Government Change

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Policy responsibility for the GREAT Britain campaign will transfer from the Cabinet Office to the Department for International Trade from 1 December 2016.

[HCWS298]
Written Statements

Friday 2 December 2016

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Payment Practices and Policies

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): Successful businesses create jobs, and are essential to economic growth. Late payment harms business cash-flow, hampers investment and in extreme cases can risk businesses solvency. This puts a strain on any organisation, but is especially difficult for small businesses. As of June 2015, the overall level of late payment owed to small and medium sized businesses was reported as £26.8 billion. This is why it is crucial for Government to take action to create a more responsible payment culture, which enables all businesses to thrive and develop.


The duty to report on payment practices and performance

Following consideration of views received from stakeholders, large companies and large limited liability partnerships (LLPs) will be required to publish information about their payment practices and performance twice per financial year on a Government web service. They will be required to report on the following:

Narrative descriptions of:

- the organisation’s payment terms. Including—standard contractual length of time for payment of invoices, maximum contractual payment period and any changes to standard payment terms and whether suppliers have been notified or consulted on these changes;
- the organisation’s process for dispute resolution related to payment Statistics on;
- the average time taken to pay invoices from the date of receipt of invoice;
- the percentage of invoices paid within the reporting period which were paid in 30 days or fewer, between 31 and 60 days, and over 60 days;
- the proportion of invoices due within the reporting period which were not paid within agreed terms.

Statements (i.e. a tick box) about:

- whether an organisation offers e-invoicing;
- whether an organisation offers supply chain finance;
- whether the organisation’s practices and policies cover deducting sums from payments as a charge for remaining on a supplier’s list, and whether they have done this in the reporting period;
- whether the organisation is a member of a payment code, and the name of the code if a company fails to publish a report as required, or publishes false information this will be a criminal offence, punishable by a fine on summary conviction.

I would like to draw Parliament’s attention to two matters:

Interest owed and paid

The regulations do not include a requirement to report on the amount of interest owed and paid, which the previous Government committed to include. Businesses have suggested that this metric could be difficult to understand and implement. The Government will keep this metric under review, taking into account any lessons that the introduction of similar metrics to public sector reporting can teach us.

Pay to Stay and Supplier Lists

During the passage of the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act through Parliament the previous Government committed that these regulations would tackle so-called ‘pay to stay’ practices. These practices include instances where businesses require payments either for joining or for remaining on a supplier list.

The Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act allows the Government to require reporting on practices relating to payment of suppliers. As such, the draft regulations require businesses in scope to report on whether they deduct sums from payments to suppliers as a charge to remain on their list of suppliers. This does not cover all payments required from suppliers for joining or remaining on a supplier list. The Government will keep reporting on ‘pay to stay’ under review. The Small Business Commissioner, who will be in post from next year, will be able to tackle such unfair payment practices.

The benefits

This new reporting requirement for the UK’s largest companies and limited liability partnerships (LLPs) will shine a light on payment practices. It will increase transparency and make payment behaviour a reputational boardroom issue. The large businesses already treating suppliers fairly and paying on time can use the data to highlight their track-record. Poor payment practices and performance will be exposed, alerting organisations to issues and encouraging them to improve.

[HCWS311]

CABINET OFFICE

Government Grant Standards

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): Today I am publishing new standards which will ensure the effectiveness of grant management across Government. These standards will be adopted by all Departments to make sure that taxpayers’ money, awarded through Government grants, is properly agreed and spent.

The grants improvement programme aims to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of grant making across Government. The programme includes incorporating recommendations from the Public Accounts Committee and Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee inquiries into Kids Company as well as reviewing grant programmes already underway.

The standards are a transparent, robust, and proportionate solution to manage risks in the Government grants process.
We need to make sure the UK taxpayer is getting value for money and grants are awarded with sufficient scrutiny and more accountability. The detailed work we have undertaken since February with Government Departments, research organisations and the voluntary sector has enabled us to develop these standards through a constructive and collaborative process. They will protect taxpayers’ money, while at the same time delivering key policy outcomes through our many partners.

The Government have engaged with a broad range of key partners, including those in the academic and research community, to understand the effect these standards will have on all sectors and to avoid any unintended consequences. Standards will also include a requirement for Departments to ensure that grant agreements provide a clear outline of what the funding is to be spent on and how this would be monitored. They would put an end to grant money being wasted on activities not specified in the grant agreement, such as political lobbying.

Government grants are an important part of the funding mix for many charities. These new grants standards will protect the role of charities to speak out on behalf of the communities and people they benefit, while ensuring public funds are used as intended. They will help create new opportunities for the sector to work in partnership with Government, increasing their social impact.

Copies of the associated documents will be placed in the Library of the House and published on the website: www.gov.uk, as well as any future updates to the guidance.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

London Borough of Tower Hamlets

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): On the 17 December 2014, my predecessor the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government confirmed that, having considered the report of the inspection by PriceWaterhouseCoopers LLP, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets was failing to comply with its best value duty. He therefore concluded that it was both necessary and expedient for him to exercise his intervention powers. A team of commissioners were appointed to exercise functions of the authority in relation to the making of grants, and the appointment of persons to and the removal of persons from the statutory offices of electoral registration officer and returning officer for local elections. The commissioners were also tasked with overseeing an improvement plan of the council covering steps to strengthen the council’s core governance arrangements, publicity, contracting, property disposals to third parties and organisational cultural change.

Almost two years on, a number of challenges remain but there have been areas of significant progress. Following receipt of the council's 36-monthly update against its best value action plan on 20 September and a report from the commissioners on 11 October, I am today proposing, on the recommendation of the commissioner team, my intention to return certain functions to the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

After careful consideration of the commissioners’ report, I am satisfied that the council is now able to exercise some of functions identified by the commissioners in compliance with the best value duty, and that the local residents of Tower Hamlets can have confidence that this will be the case. I am therefore considering exercising my powers under section 15 of the Local Government Act 1999 to return to the council functions in relation to grants making, although I consider it necessary for the commissioners to retain an oversight role over how this function is exercised for the remainder of the direction period. Establishing new oversight arrangements in relation to grants will enable the commissioners to advise and scrutinise the council without clouding where ultimate responsibility lies. Finally, I am considering exercising my powers under section 15 of the 1999 Act to end the role the commissioners have held in overseeing the council’s processes and practices for entering into contracts. Returning these functions represents a clear milestone on Tower Hamlets Council’s road to recovery.

The commissioners will provide oversight of the returned functions to ensure that they are exercised in accordance with the best value duty. In addition they will continue to oversee the council’s rigorous programme of improvement in relation to strengthening its core governance arrangements, publicity, property disposals to third parties, organisational cultural change and grants. I am inviting the council to make representations on the proposals, which will be considered as part of my final decision.


Local Newspapers

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): This Government remain committed to protecting the independent press from unfair competition. A healthy local democracy requires the accountability that comes from scrutiny of councils by the press and the public.

The Government have sought to take action against the practice, by a small number of local authorities, of publishing local authority newspapers, which given the frequency of their publication, can push out and undermine independent press. A small number of councils continue to breach the recommendations of the code of recommended practice on local authority publicity about the frequency of publication for council newspapers.

Further to the written statement of 10 March 2015, Official Report, Column 8WS we have warned a small number of local authorities about their continued failure to comply with the provisions of the publicity code.

Today I am announcing the conclusions to date of the review into the actions of three of those authorities: the London Borough of Hackney, the London Borough of Newham and the London Borough of Waltham Forest.

In each case my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is minded to exercise his powers under the Local Government Act 1986 to direct the local authorities to
comply by no later than 31 January 2017, with the provision in the March 2011 code of recommended practice on local authority publicity that: “Where local authorities do commission or publish newsletters, news sheets or similar communications, they should not issue them more frequently than quarterly”.

Accordingly, the Secretary of State is today issuing to each of the three authorities a written notice of the direction he proposes to issue in each case.

In deciding to take this action, the Secretary of State has carefully considered the representations each of these local authorities has made in response to a notice given to it on 10 March 2015 of a proposed direction relating to frequency of publication of council newsletters, news sheets or similar publications. He has also considered other information available to him about each of the three council’s publicity, and had regard to an equality statement about enforcing the 2011 code of recommended practice on local authority publicity.

Each authority now has 14 days to make written representations to the Secretary of State about the proposed direction. Following this, the Secretary of State will take his final decision in each case about whether or not to issue the local authority with a direction. Each decision will be taken on its own merits.

I will be placing copies of the documents associated with these announcements in the Library of the House.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Telecommunications Council

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): The Telecommunications Council will take place in Brussels on 2 December 2016. I will represent the UK at this Council. Below are the agenda items and the positions I intend to adopt.

The first item is a policy debate on the two legislative instruments and two communications that form the just published EU Commission’s Connectivity package—the European electronic communications code (First reading—EM 12252/16) and body of European regulators for electronic communications (First reading—EM 12257/16) and “5G for Europe: An action plan” (EM 12279/16) and “connectivity for a competitive digital single market—towards a European gigabit society” (EM 12364/16). My intervention will confirm that the UK supports the plan for a gigabit society and emphasise the importance of the connectivity package in stimulating investment by the private sector in fibre-based networks and 5G. I will also set out the UK’s other priorities for the electronic communications code, including respecting member states’ competence and retaining member states’ discretion over consumer protection and funding of the universal service obligation. The Council will then be invited to adopt a general approach on amending regulation (EU) No. 531/2012 as regards rules for wholesale roaming markets (First reading—EM). We will agree to the adoption of this general approach. The Council will then be provided with an update from the Slovak presidency on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on cross-border parcel delivery services (First reading—EM 9706/16). We do not expect a debate on this item and I do not intend to intervene.

Finally, member states will be invited to adopt a partial general approach on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending regulations as regards the promotion of internet connectivity in local communities (First reading—EM 12259/16). The UK intends to agree to the adoption of this partial approach. This will be followed by three items under AOB led by the Commission, the first being on fair use policy in the context of roaming services, followed by information on digital single market initiatives and finally under AOB, current internet governance issues. We do not currently intend to intervene on any of these items. Finally, the Maltese delegation will inform the Council of their priorities for their forthcoming presidency before Council adjourns until the next meeting in Q2 2017.

[HCWS312]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Rail Update - Southern

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): My Department has previously announced that ‘Delay Repay 15’ will be introduced first on the Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) franchise, and this will be available to customers from 11 December 2016. Passengers will be entitled to claim compensation if their train is delayed by 15 minutes or more, rather than 30 minutes as is now the case. This is recognised as one of the most generous compensation schemes in Europe, and this change means an even better deal for passengers. ‘Delay Repay 15’ will be included in the specification for all new franchises in future.

Southern passengers have suffered from unprecedented and sustained disruption to their journeys during 2016 through a combination of factors, including RMT industrial action, track and signal failures, and operator poor performance. In recognition of this unprecedented disruption, passengers will be able to claim one payment against their 2016 season tickets from early next year. This one-off compensation scheme recognises that passengers have suffered, and demonstrates that the Government are on their side. This will be administered by GTR.

Passengers with a Brighton to London annual season ticket, for example, will get £371 back. Quarterly, regular monthly and weekly season ticket holders will also qualify for a one-off compensation payment.

Annual, quarterly, monthly and weekly season ticket holders using any Southern routes will be able to claim through the following process:

- In early January 2017 Southern will contact all customers on its database it believes qualify for a refund to confirm the amount due and the method of payment.

- Pre-identified customers will need to login to a web portal to provide bank details, credit card details or web account details.

- Customers do not need to contact Southern directly at this stage.

- After customers who have been pre-identified have been contacted, a web portal will be made available allowing:
  - Pre-identified customers to confirm the method of payment they wish to use, and;
  - customers who believe they qualify to provide details for Southern to check and, if appropriate, make payment

[HCWS307]
Petition

Tuesday 15 November 2016

PRESENTED PETITION
Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of residents of Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P001980]
Petition

Monday 21 November 2016

OBSERVATIONS

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Change of use of Abberley Hotel

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council should not approve the planning application to change the use of the Abberley Hotel to a 32-bed house in multiple occupation (HMOs); further that there are too many HMOs in Walsall; further that Walsall Council’s Housing Standards objects to this application; and further that 194 individuals have signed a local petition on the same subject.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council to reject planning application 15/1266.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Valerie Vaz, Official Report, 27 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 520.]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell):

Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council is responsible for the day to day planning of its area. The Government’s policy is not to interfere with the jurisdiction of a local planning authority unless it is necessary to do so. This is because local authority Councillors are elected to represent the views of local people and, in the main, it is these Councillors who are in the best position to decide whether a development should go ahead. In determining a planning application the local planning authority are required to have regard to all material considerations including the development plan, national policies and views expressed by third parties. It is, of course, for local planning authorities to provide whatever justification that may be appropriate to give for their decisions and procedures.

The Government are committed to giving more power to councils and communities to make their own decisions on planning issues, and believe planning decisions should be made at the local level wherever possible.
Petition

Monday 28 November 2016

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Student season tickets on the Lakes Line

The petition of residents of the UK

Declares that Northern Rail has taken a decision to remove post-16 students from the student season tickets system on the Lakes Line; further that students face a massive increase in the cost of travel, which will mean that the journey to Sixth Form in Kendal will become unaffordable for many; and further that an online petition on a similar topic has received 308 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Northern Rail to rethink the decision to remove post-16 students from the student season tickets system on the Lakes Line.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tim Farron, Official Report, 19 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 922.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard):

The withdrawal of the 16-18 season tickets was a commercial decision made in the former Northern Rail franchise following a legal challenge on the Mid Cheshire line that Northern was discriminating against certain colleges/schools by not offering it to all. Since the new franchise started, Northern has maintained this stance. However, we acknowledge that the Lakes line has raised concerns about Northern not offering a discount to students, which was previously offered by First Trans-Pennine Express prior to the remapping of services to the Northern franchise.

There was a requirement to participate in a Cumbria County Council Educational season ticket scheme both in the previous Trans-Pennine Express franchise and in the current Northern franchise, but Cumbria County Council has withdrawn this scheme.

As the current definition of “child” for National Rail is anyone 5-15 years inclusive and using a 16-25 railcard is not permitted as there are rules regarding its use before 10am weekdays (except in July and August) it is up to each individual train operator to determine the commercial viability of post-16 year ticket products.
Petition

Tuesday 29 November 2016

OBSERVATIONS

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Symmetry Park Logistics

The Humble Petition of residents of Isham, Northamptonshire and the surrounding area,

Sheweth,

That the Petitioners believe that the proposed planning application for the logistics development site known as Symmetry Park, outside, but adjacent to the village of Isham—planning application—KET/2016/0606 is unacceptable, because it is twice the size of Isham, will very significantly increase the volume of traffic going through the village, increase noise, air and light pollution to unacceptable levels and is opposed by the vast majority of local residents.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Department for Communities and Local Government to encourage the Borough Council of Kettering to reject the current planning application.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.  {Presented by Mr Peter Bone, Official Report, 2 November 2016; Vol. 616, c. 1006.}

[PO01972]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell); received on 23 November 2016:

Kettering Borough Council is responsible for the day to day planning of its area. The Government’s policy is not to interfere with the jurisdiction of a local planning authority unless it is necessary to do so. This is because local authority Councillors are elected to represent the views of local people and, in the main, it is these Councillors who are in the best position to decide whether a development should go ahead. In determining a planning application the local planning authority are required to have regard to all material considerations including the development plan, national policies and views expressed by third parties. It is, of course, for local planning authorities to provide whatever justification that may be appropriate to give for their decisions and procedures.

Officials have been in contact with planning officers at Kettering Borough Council. If the Council is minded to approve the planning application the Secretary of State will carefully consider this case against call-in policy, as set out in the written ministerial statement by the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) on 26 October 2012. The policy makes it clear that the power to call in a planning application will be used only very selectively. The Government are committed to giving more power to councils and communities to make their own decisions on planning issues, and believe planning decisions should be made at the local level wherever possible.
Ministerial Corrections

Wednesday 23 November 2016

EDUCATION

Apprenticeships

The following are extracts from Questions to the Secretary of State for Education on 14 November 2016.

**Jake Berry** (Blackpool South) (Lab): To promote apprenticeships in schools, strong careers guidance is critical. However, this month’s cross-party verdict from the two Select Committee Chairs who have looked at this, the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), is that “Ministers appear to be burying their heads in the sand while careers guidance fails young people”.

Will this Minister—the third Minister to whom I have put this question—back the Select Committee’s recommendation to restore proper work experience in schools at key stage 4? Will he lift his head out of the sand?

**Robert Halfon** (Blackpool South) (Cons): I suggest the hon. Gentleman stops being a doom-monger and becomes an apprentice-monger. We are providing the National Careers Service with £90 million to boost career provision in schools, with £20 million for investment. The National Careers Service is getting £77 million to help people with careers. We have thousands of enterprise advisers in schools all over the country. This is what the Careers and Enterprise Company is all about. The Government are investing in careers, investing in skills and investing in apprenticeships.

The correct response should have been:

**Robert Halfon** (Blackpool South) (Cons): I suggest the hon. Gentleman stops being a doom-monger and becomes an apprentice-monger. **We are providing £90 million to boost career provision in schools, with £20 million for investment.** The National Careers Service is getting £77 million to help people with careers. We have thousands of enterprise advisers in schools all over the country. This is what the Careers and Enterprise Company is all about. The Government are investing in careers, investing in skills and investing in apprenticeships.

**Letter of correction from Robert Halfon:**

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) during Questions to the Secretary of State for Education.

The correct response should have been:

**Robert Halfon** (Blackpool South) (Cons): I suggest the hon. Gentleman stops being a doom-monger and becomes an apprentice-monger. **We are providing £90 million to boost career provision in schools, with £20 million for investment.** The National Careers Service is getting £77 million to help people with careers. We have thousands of enterprise advisers in schools all over the country. This is what the Careers and Enterprise Company is all about. The Government are investing in careers, investing in skills and investing in apprenticeships.

**HOME DEPARTMENT**

**Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse**

The following are extracts from the Urgent Question on the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse on 21 November 2016.

The inquiry has set up 13 strands of investigation, and made 250 formal requests for information from over 120 institutions, with 164,000 documents having now been submitted. It has referred roughly 80 cases a week to the police. It has rolled out the truth project, providing survivors with the opportunity to tell the inquiry what has happened to them. More than 500 people have so far come forward.

**Sarah Newton** (Blackpool South) (Lab): To promote apprenticeships in schools, strong careers guidance is critical. However, this month’s cross-party verdict from the two Select Committee Chairs who have looked at this, the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), is that “Ministers appear to be burying their heads in the sand while careers guidance fails young people”.

Will this Minister—the third Minister to whom I have put this question—back the Select Committee’s recommendation to restore proper work experience in schools at key stage 4? Will he lift his head out of the sand?
Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

Sarah Newton: To go back to my response to the urgent question, the fact that 80 cases a week are being referred to the police and that over 500 people have come forward to participate in the truth project shows how valuable the inquiry already is to those victims.


Letter of correction from Sarah Newton.

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant).

The correct response should have been:

Sarah Newton: To go back to my response to the urgent question, the fact that 80 cases a month are being referred to the police and that over 500 people have come forward to participate in the truth project shows how valuable the inquiry already is to those victims.

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

Sarah Newton: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question, and I pay tribute to her for the work she has done in campaigning so assiduously for justice for her constituents. I reassure her and everyone who is here that those lessons have been learned from the past. The inquiry is an incredibly important part of what the Government are doing to learn lessons from the past and make sure that we are doing everything that we can to keep children in our country safe. As a result of people coming forward to the inquiry, as I said in my response to the urgent question, more than 80 referrals a month are being made to the police.


Letter of correction from Sarah Newton.

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson).

The correct response should have been:

Sarah Newton: If the right hon. Gentleman or his constituents have any evidence whatever, they should go to the inquiry right now. We are not waiting for the end of the inquiry to take action, as I have said before; more than 80 cases are sent to the police every week so that action can be taken. It is really important that people engage with the inquiry and support their constituents in doing so, so that we can seek justice for the victims.


Letter of correction from Sarah Newton.

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd).

The correct response should have been:

Sarah Newton: If the right hon. Gentleman or his constituents have any evidence whatever, they should go to the inquiry right now. We are not waiting for the end of the inquiry to take action, as I have said before; more than 80 cases are sent to the police every month so that action can be taken. It is really important that people engage with the inquiry and support their constituents in doing so, so that we can seek justice for the victims.
Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 30 November 2016

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT
Historical Sexual Abuse (Football)

The following is an extract from the response to the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) during the urgent question on historical sexual abuse in football by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on 29 November 2016.

Karen Bradley: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the bravery of Andy Woodward. I understand that during the time I have been on my feet, over 250 reports have been made to the NSPCC helpline, of which 51 are in Cheshire alone.


Letter of correction from Karen Bradley:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) during the urgent question on historical sexual abuse in football.

The correct response should have been:

Karen Bradley: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the bravery of Andy Woodward. I understand that during the time I have been on my feet, over 250 reports have been made to the police, of which 51 are in Cheshire alone.
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SIXTH SERIES
OFFICIAL REPORT
SESSION 2016–17
VOLUME 617

14th November, 2016—2nd December, 2016

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